



MOIRA ROGERS

UNDERTOW

BUILDING SANCTUARY

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Being needed isn't half as desirable as being wanted.

Building Sanctuary, Book 2

Victor left behind a life of crime to focus on a new vision—helping his alpha build an island sanctuary for werewolves. Harsh experiences prepared him for the hardships involved, except when it comes to dealing with the young female refugees of the brutal Boston pack—especially Simone, who rouses his inner wolf like no other. A woman he must resist, or risk becoming just the latest man to make demands on her.

Born to wealth and privilege, Simone lost everything when she fell for the seductive whispers of the textile heir who turned her. Once adrift, now she is fired by a new sense of purpose—the chance to broker peace between werewolves and European wizards. Yet even as Europe beckons, her instincts—the same ones that led to trouble before—keep drawing her back to Victor.

During a sailing trip to the mainland for supplies, Victor finds it impossible to hold himself aloof from the warm, engaging Simone. And when a winter storm traps them together during a full moon, she breaks through his walls so easily and completely, the question is no longer how he'll stay away, but how he'll let her go.

Warning: This novella contains werewolves engaged in such improbable (but legal) activities as lobster fishing and sailing during nor'easters. The breaking and entering and instinct-driven sex on every surface in someone else's summer cottage is a little more criminal

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Moira Rogers

Dedication

Dedicated to Alisha Rai, Keith Melton and Vivian Arend, three amazing authors with amazing hearts, who know when to laugh, when to yell, and when to start a fake Twitter feud just to brighten an otherwise gloomy day.

Chapter One

Victor hated lobsters.

A month ago he hadn't given a damn about the things. They were decent enough eating when someone set one in front of him already cooked, but those days of leisure were long past.

Now he was on a boat. A boat that reeked of rotting fish, engine fuel and brine. Bad for a human nose but torment to his werewolf senses. Not even the cold could numb the unpleasant odor as Victor slammed the cover onto the bait container. "Does this have to smell so damn bad?"

"The lobsters like it," Guy answered matter-of-factly. The smell didn't seem to bother him, though Victor imagined no one would know if it did.

Victor bit back his instinctive response—*Fuck the lobsters*—and pounded his fist on the cover of the bait container once, just to make sure it was tight. At least the day's haul was respectable. In the month the pack had been on the island, they'd been scrambling to get traps into the waters Guy's family had fished for generations.

It wasn't much, but it was food. By the end of winter, Victor imagined they'd all be tired of clams, lobster and venison, but with their tiny little island overrun with deer and surrounded by prime fishing water...

Well, these days you ate what you could get.

Victor shifted his attention to the crate of lobsters as Guy steered the boat toward the island's only dock, a rickety old wooden walkway extending a good twenty feet into the ocean before ending in a floating platform. When spring rolled around, they'd have to rebuild it, and they'd certainly need to make it more permanent, but for now it served as an easy way to unload their catch.

They were still a hundred feet from the dock when two figures emerged from the path that led up into the twisting trees. Thick coats, scarves and hats obscured shape and features, but even at this distance Victor's body tensed in recognition. He'd agreed to spend his days on Guy's boat to get away from her, judging the rough work better than the uncomfortable way Simone scraped his control into tatters with only her presence.

"There's an easier way." He barely heard Guy's voice over the rumble of the motor. "Ask her to leave you alone."

The curse of spending too long with the same companions was their unappealing ability to understand those things left unspoken. Though if anyone had to pry into his business, he supposed it might as well be

Guy. Of all the men he'd worked alongside for so many years, Guy was the one who understood him best. He was the only other man who'd been born a werewolf, who'd lived with the same twisting instincts every day of his life.

Victor jerked his gaze from the shoreline and studied the dock instead. "I can't."

"Can't or won't?"

"Can't," he replied, lowering his voice. Sound carried so easily on the water, and Simone had a werewolf's hearing, after all. "Her instincts bring her back, even when I push her away. I don't have it in me to push hard enough to crush that. It would hurt her."

Guy snorted. "I think it's better to have done with it. She'll be fine."

Yes, her wizard beau would comfort her. Victor's fists tightened until his knuckles ached, but there was no fight to be had. His instinctive distrust of witches aside, he couldn't attack the only healer on their island just because his pride stung. "Stay out of it, Guy. It's not your business."

"Maybe not, but still." Guy lifted a hand in greeting, and the two women returned his wave. "Don't know much, but I know any woman would be mortified to discover she'd been making a fool of herself over a man."

Victor turned and leveled an unfriendly look at Guy. "That woman has a suitor. She's not interested in me. And when things settle down and these girls know they're safe from the corrupt packs, her wolf won't be interested either. So let it lie."

Guy met his glare with a mild look. "What if you're wrong?"

Then maybe he'd find some relief from long lonely nights bedded down in the only privacy the island offered—the tiny cabin on his sailboat. "Make up your damn mind. Should I tell her to leave me alone or try to stake a claim on a taken woman?"

One dark eyebrow shot up. "I wasn't aware you wanted to claim her. I was just saying a little blunt honesty is better than leading a lady on."

Shit. "I said to let it lie." They'd pulled close enough to the dock that further conversation was inadvisable, so Victor turned and raised his hand as well. The figures were more distinct now, clear enough that Victor recognized Simone's companion—Rose, a quiet, serious young woman who seemed capable of passing endless hours in total silence.

The two women had piled buoys on the dock, the paint so fresh he could smell it at a distance. "We heard the boat and decided to come down!" Simone called as Guy killed the outboard engine.

Victor climbed up on the side of the boat and made the hop to the dock as soon as they were close enough. "Got through all the buoys today?" Inane small talk, but it served as something to say as he waited for Guy to throw him a rope.

"These are from yesterday," she told him, nudging one with her boot. "The ones we painted today are hung up near the shed."

Because the paint hadn't dried yet, something he would have figured out if he'd bothered to think about it. Victor caught the rope Guy tossed toward the dock and waited for the other man to flip the bumpers over the railing before pulling the small skiff snug against the dock.

The now-familiar task left too much room to dwell on the way Simone's presence prickled along his skin. She wasn't a very powerful werewolf, but she had a gentle strength that soothed the wildest parts of him. Acrid paint covered most of her scent, but underneath he caught the hint of lilacs, a subtle smell that had begun to stir his body every time she approached.

Guy nodded to the women as he lifted the crate containing the day's catch. "Have either of you ladies seen Seamus and Joan? I've got a few ideas to run by them before the meeting tonight."

"They should be home. Joan said they're going to spend the afternoon going over the supply lists they gathered."

Which meant the alpha was planning to spend the afternoon making love to his new mate. Joan might still be the same prickly little alpha bitch who could shrivel a man's balls with a look, but Seamus, at least, seemed to be benefiting from whatever sexual escapades went on behind locked doors. Victor hadn't seen his old friend so content with life in decades, a fact that made his own suffering that much sharper.

Rose spoke up for the first time, her soft voice barely carrying over the lap of the waves and the creaking of the dock. "It might be best not to disturb them."

Guy's dark eyes twinkled, and he smiled at Rose. "I think you might be right."

The girl's cheeks were already pink from the biting wind, but Victor thought he saw a hint of a blush before Rose smiled shyly. "It's my turn to manage dinner for the workers. I hoped I could collect some of the catch and get an early start?"

"Right here." Guy jumped down to the dock with the crate. "I'll walk with you."

Simone waved at their retreating backs, a rueful expression on her face. "He's left you to deal with me *and* the boat. Which is a more daunting prospect?"

He wasn't entirely sure. "I think he's just sweet on Rose."

"You didn't answer my question." She winked at him. "But I'll overlook it, just this once, if you'll tell me when you plan to leave for Searsport."

The trip was a week overdue, but the first blizzard of the season had made it smarter to stick close to the island. "Tomorrow or the day after, probably. You still determined to come?"

"Yes." She flashed him a brilliant, already familiar smile.

Too damn charming—and not real. Oh, she was cheerful all right, the most aggressively optimistic person he'd ever laid eyes on, but she only laid it on thick when she thought someone needed encouragement—or to be worked around to her way of thinking.

Victor quirked one eyebrow. "Still trying your smiles on me?"

Her grin faded into a soft chuckle. "You're the only one who doesn't fall for it."

So she thought. That damn smile tugged at him every time she leveled it. “I should think you could toss a few more of them at your wizard and he’d magic you a boat out of thin air.”

Simone looked away, out over the water. “James isn’t *my* wizard.”

His wolf agreed, more than he could allow. Victor squashed that feral curiosity and kept his voice quiet. Gentle. “He hasn’t done anything inappropriate, has he?”

Her gaze snapped back to his face, disbelief clear in her widened eyes. “What? No. He’s a very decent man.”

He’s a wizard. Not a bias he could speak aloud, not when they owed the man too much. “Of course.”

She studied his face, somehow seeing what he didn’t say, and frowned. “James has sacrificed a lot to help us this winter.”

“I know.” He curled the rope from the boat around his hand tight enough to bite into his skin and let the pain distract him. “We all have our pasts. And wizards go bad too.”

An unexpected sympathy colored her eyes, but she blinked and it was gone. “I’ll let you get back to your work. Will you be at the meeting tonight?”

“Of course.” Victor stepped up onto the side of the boat, mostly to get away from her before he gave in to temptation and moved closer. “You’d best go rescue Rose. Guy thinks he’s more charming than he is.”

“Don’t we all?” she asked breezily. She took a step back and then turned toward the shore, her hands shoved in her coat pockets, shoulders hunched against the chilly wind.

He’d hurt her. In protecting himself he’d hurt her instead, and his feet landed on the floating dock before he realized he’d moved. He looped the rope around one of the cleats and tied it off in a sloppy knot, then caught up with Simone and touched her shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

She barely paused. “You have nothing to apologize for, Victor. I’ll see you later.”

He wanted to stop her. Touch her. Hold her. She wanted to leave. Victor had never had it in him to cage a woman who so clearly wanted to escape. “Have a good afternoon, Simone.”

“You too.” She hurried up the path, practically running now, and disappeared into the thick trees at the top of the rise, leaving Victor alone with a boat and an aching emptiness in his chest.

Chapter Two

The fish stew was thick and savory—one of her better efforts, thanks to Rose’s tutelage—but Simone laid her spoon beside her bowl anyway. “I suppose I’m not very hungry tonight, after all.”

James put down his spoon as well, a hint of worry in his eyes. “Has it been a long day, then?”

“A little tiring.” She dropped her hands to her lap and curled them into fists. Her pale skin bore calluses now, rough and unattractive, but she figured they were better than the blisters she’d suffered the first few weeks.

They’d been on Breckenridge Island for a month, and they’d all worked hard to ensure everyone would make it through the coming winter, safe and healthy. In some ways, she’d been unprepared for the harshness of life on the tiny coastal island. In others, it had been a dream.

A dream marred only by the vague sense of disquiet she couldn’t seem to shake, the feeling that their idyllic retreat was an illusion, and there was a trap still waiting to spring shut on her.

She smiled anyway, more out of habit than anything else. “Don’t fret, James. I’m fine. Everything is fine.”

For once, he didn’t smile in return. “If that were true, you wouldn’t have to spend so much time telling me it’s so. You don’t need to be fine, Simone. Simply be honest.”

“I’m worried about the preparations we’ve made,” she admitted finally. “Or, more specifically, the ones for which we’ve had no time.”

“We’re not completely cut off,” James pointed out carefully. “Trips to the mainland won’t be fun. But we’ll get by.”

An uncharitable voice in her whispered that James couldn’t possibly know what it was like to feel so acutely responsible for the lives of those weaker than oneself. She immediately felt terrible, because of course he did. He was their healer, the closest thing they had to a doctor. *Everyone’s* lives potentially rested on his shoulders.

She reached across the small, rough-hewn table and covered his hand with hers. “You always know how to restore my optimism.”

He twisted his wrist and clasped her fingers, rubbing his thumb across her knuckles in a whisper-soft caress. The magic inside him was different than her own, but it still pulsed gently whenever their skin touched. “I’d rather give you a bit of time when you don’t need to be optimistic.”

She lifted the teapot with her free hand and refilled his cup. “And what would that accomplish?”

“Don’t you grow weary of it?”

Sometimes she did tire of the expectation that she would always be cheerful, always bolster everyone’s morale, but she never put on an act. “If I feel less than chipper, I don’t pretend otherwise, James. I don’t wear an impenetrable, smiling mask under which I shed sad tears.”

He slipped his hand from hers and sat back. “I can’t tell as easily as a wolf could.”

Simone couldn’t blame him for assuming his humanity to be the cause for the lingering distance between them. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to be flippant. Your only concern is for my happiness.”

“Be flippant if it pleases you. We’re friends, first and foremost. Always.” His hair spilled over his forehead, and he didn’t push it back. “You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes.” A smile curved her lips. “And I’m glad to have a friend like you.”

The smile he offered her in return was gentle and warm, but it evoked nothing more than easy companionship. Her heart didn’t pound, and her breath didn’t catch. “You know I hope to be more someday,” he said, “but we have time. I’m happy to be your friend for now.”

For now. She’d already begun to suspect that no amount of time would stir her heart beyond friendship—or her body to desire his. Not when a single look from Victor already did both.

Don’t you dare, Simone. It was unforgivable to think of another while she sat with James, especially a man like Victor, quiet and severe, who took pains to avoid her at every opportunity and couldn’t hide his discomfort at her attention.

A smart woman would have taken the hint already, but she couldn’t seem to stop herself from seeking him out. At first, she’d thought perhaps he only needed time to get to know her—but, if anything, time had served only to increase his dislike of her.

“Simone.” Worry laced James’s voice. “I didn’t mean I wouldn’t still be your friend if that’s all you want from me. It came out wrong.”

“I understood what you meant.” And, since there was nothing more to say, she changed the subject. “I’m going to Searsport. Tomorrow, or perhaps Thursday.”

This time there was no mistaking the tension in his eyes. “With Victor.”

“Yes, despite his best efforts.” She lifted her cup with a surprisingly steady hand. “Rest easy, James. He’s done everything but forbid me to accompany him.”

He blew out an exasperated breath. “And why should it make me rest easy to know that he’s treating you unkindly? If this is a wolf thing, it’s beyond my understanding.”

“He isn’t—” Simone bit her lip. Most of the time, Victor treated her with polite distance. Even when he lost his patience and snapped at her, he was careful to apologize. “He isn’t unkind.”

“If bringing you to the mainland is such a trial for Victor, why don’t you wait until Guy has a free day? He can’t haul lobsters *every* day.”

So far, that hadn't been the case. Guy had been out on his boat every morning at dawn, hauling and resetting traps. "I can ask, see if he has some time."

Awkward silence filled the space between them, until James picked up his spoon. "The soup is very good. One of Rose's recipes?"

"Rose doesn't use recipes, much to my chagrin. She just *cooks*."

"She's good at it." He took another taste, then deftly steered the conversation toward safer ground. "How are the reading lessons going?"

James was one of the few people who knew exactly why she'd been spending so much time with Rose. "Very well. All she needed was for someone to acquaint her with the basics."

"I'm sure. She seems like a smart girl."

"She is." Just another of Edwin's later conquests, when he'd moved beyond concerning himself with the illusion of propriety. When he'd developed a taste for desperation.

Simone had seen dozens of them come through Edwin's bedroom, poor girls with no prospects. Some had been dazzled by his wealth in the face of the Depression gripping the rest of the country, or even dazzled by *him*, by his smooth charm and pleasant looks. But others, like Rose, had known exactly what they'd get out of serving Edwin in bed. All things considered, she was one of the lucky ones. She hadn't had her heart broken.

James slid his hand over hers, comforting this time, and proved he knew her well enough to guess the path of her thoughts. "He's gone."

His words startled her. "I'm not—I was never scared of Edwin. Not for myself."

"Isn't that almost worse? Being scared for others?"

Simone smiled over her teacup. "Perhaps you understand wolves better than you think."

He laughed and shook his head. "Just you. As much as I can, in any case."

"I'm not an enigma." She shrugged. "I'm a simple woman, really."

"Then perhaps I'm a dense man."

"Never." He was lovely, and another swell of guilt rose in Simone. Even if he claimed to have hopes for the future, not expectations, it would be cruel to let those hopes linger. "James..."

He changed the subject again, this time with a forced smile. "I received a message from England in the last batch of correspondence from the mainland. I've been waiting for a good time to tell you, but I suppose I had to think about it first. It's shocking, really. Do you know the wizards and wolves in England have reached a tentative truce?"

She was glad she'd already lowered her cup, or she might have dropped it. "They've been at war for centuries."

"I know." A smile played about the corners of his lips. "A fondness for werewolves must run in my family. My uncle is heavily involved in the negotiations, and one of my cousins as well. They've been asking me to join them, as I have some understanding of the benefits of an alliance."

Her chair fell back as she rose to round the table and throw her arms around his neck. "James, that's wonderful!"

His arms came around her, steady and warm. "I've already told Joan and Seamus. I'm leaving in the spring. I hadn't mentioned it before because...I want you to go with me."

She'd suspected that, if their relationship deepened, he would want her with him when he left, but she'd never imagined it would be for such a reason. To accomplish such things.

Then Victor's face flashed through her mind, his lips set in a firm frown. "I don't know if I can. They might need me here."

"They'll need you this winter." James's hand settled at the small of her back. "You make them feel safe, make them believe that the hard times will pass. And the hard times *will* pass, here."

"But not magically, once winter lifts. Spring will be harder, in some ways."

"Perhaps," he acknowledged quietly. "Though I asked you for reasons not entirely selfish."

What could those possibly be? She bit back the question. "Why, then?"

He leaned back. "Things are dire in Europe. They're building a sort of...refugee community. Wizards and wolves who can't fight anymore. Who want to try to live together."

Simone pulled her chair around the edge of the table and sat. "To set an example?"

"To prove it can be done." James nodded to her. "You're proof. *We're* proof."

"Breckenridge Island, you mean?"

"And what you were doing out at Adam's," he murmured. "Wolves, a vampire...and a witch."

Realization dawned. "You're talking about Astrid."

"Yes." He brushed her hair back from her face with gentle fingers. "Her father is the senior wizard involved. While he didn't exactly approve of what she was doing here, they corresponded. She often wrote to him, telling him about her friends and her activities."

Astrid had been a dear friend, a cheerful girl whose ready smile had hidden a core of strength on which they'd often relied. "She told him about me?"

"About your gift."

"Astrid told him I had a gift?"

His hand grazed the side of her neck and withdrew. "The way you make people feel at ease. It's not a trait Gunnar—Astrid's father—had ever associated with wolves, and it intrigues him."

"It's not magic, James. Not like what you do. It's just about...talking to people."

"Sometimes that's a magic all its own."

Even if the wizard had only asked for her because of her connection to his dead daughter, her treasured friend, there was still much she could do. “I don’t know.”

“It isn’t important that you decide now. Think about it. And if your people still need you in the spring...” He shook his head. “I couldn’t have come to care for you so quickly if you were the sort of woman who would abandon those depending on her.”

The complimentary words were enough to make her squirm with conscience. He looked as if he knew her reasons went beyond those she was willing to share, but he didn’t push.

Perhaps he’s afraid of what you might say. It made sense—too much sense. After all, wasn’t that exactly why she had yet to press the issue with Victor?

Suspecting that you were unwanted was not quite the same as knowing for certain.

The only thing Victor hated more than lobsters were the meetings.

The alphas had instituted them as a way to bring everyone together in the one building large enough to hold them all, a sturdy but unadorned structure filled with rough tables and benches that managed to be less comfortable than sitting on the ground. Gathered together, their pack numbered nearly sixty, five times the number they’d planned for when Seamus had originally proposed laying low on the island. The weight of so many wolves crammed into such a small space was enough to make magic crackle through the air in damn near visible arcs.

Sixty werewolves, and over half of them were women. Girls, in some cases, wide-eyed and frightened and totally out of their depth in the uncivilized wilds of Maine. Some of them had been abused, some brutalized. Some were just city girls who’d never known life without electricity and the creature comforts it provided. Victor supposed that made the evening gatherings important. None of these refugees knew about pack and protection, and their new alpha had every intention of teaching them that safety came with submission—and responsibility with dominance.

The knowledge that it was important didn’t make the battering press of their terror any easier on Victor’s nerves.

Simone was the bright spot. As an alpha, Joan did all right, but Seamus’s mate was steely determination and reassuring strength, not warmth and comfort. Simone was the one who drifted through the crowd as the meeting broke up, knowing somehow when to hug and when to smile, knowing who needed an encouraging pep talk or a scolding or just a few friendly words. Joan and Seamus might be building a sanctuary, but Simone was the heart.

“Simone asked Guy to take her to Searsport.” Seamus spoke casually, and a quick glance at his alpha’s face told Victor he’d been caught staring.

He shouldn't be jealous. The last thing he needed was to be trapped with her in close quarters for the long ride to the mainland, not while she was another man's woman. "Good. Guy likes her just fine."

"Guy can't spare two or three days." Seamus sighed. "If it's such a problem, tell her she can't go. Tell her I said to give you a list, and you'll take care of it."

That was cowardice. Defeated by a woman's disregard, or admitting himself the sort of monster who couldn't be trusted to keep his wants and needs to himself. Brooding about it had been more enjoyable before Seamus offered an out that made him feel like a boy. "I'll get it done. We're all doing what we have to, this winter, and I have to deal with my instincts."

Seamus nodded. "Then I trust you'll handle the situation as best you can."

Victor watched as the last of the wolves filed toward the door, trailed by Simone, arm in arm with curly-haired little Rose. Only Joan remained, but she seemed fixated on the jumble of papers spread out on the table in front of her, more of her damnable lists. Victor considered lowering his voice, but it would be pointless—anything Joan wanted to know, Seamus would tell her. "Nothing will help but time. For *both* of us. Her instincts aren't settled yet either, but for all I know she doesn't know how."

The alpha shook his head. "Simone's been a wolf for long enough. Almost ten years."

"Instinct can be warped. You know that as well as anyone. She may not be damaged, but she's still..." *Hurt*. His wolf raged at the thought, but it didn't make it less the truth.

Seamus turned away from Joan and pitched his voice low enough to keep his words from his mate's ears. "Do you need to talk about it?"

"No. They'll realize they're safe here, and they'll get better."

"You're right." Seamus handed him an envelope. "You remember what time to meet Slim?"

"Don't be insulting." Victor tucked the envelope into his vest pocket and grinned. "Old bastard is making a fine living off of us."

"With the number of times his brother hid us from the police over the years, he deserves it."

"Can't argue with that. I was planning on leaving tomorrow, just in case I needed an extra day. Don't want to stay long after meeting up with Slim—I don't like cutting the full moon too close."

"Understood." Seamus clapped a hand on his back. "If I don't see you before you leave, have a safe trip."

"I will." Victor raised his voice. "You can stop pretending you're not listening, Joan."

Joan flipped over a page without looking up. "You're not nearly as enthralling as you think, Mr. Bowen. Your manly posturing was amusing for a time, but the pouting is less interesting."

Seamus choked on a laugh. "Not very subtle, love."

"He's not a subtle man."

Victor couldn't even muster up a reasonable level of outrage—Joan wasn't a woman whose company he enjoyed, but her pointed comments occasionally struck home. "No, I'm not a subtle man. I've been a werewolf all of my fifty-three years. In five decades, you won't be so damnably refined either."

Joan actually laughed, and it made him dislike her a little less. "You may be right. I feel at least ten percent less refined already. Seamus? Are you almost ready to leave?"

"In a moment." He shoved both hands in his pockets. "I'd like to tell Simone about the trip, Victor. If you don't mind."

Victor hadn't been looking forward to the task, but long familiarity with Seamus made him suspicious. "Don't fuck around in my affairs, Whelan. I don't need a nursemaid."

"And I don't fancy myself one."

"As long as we understand each other."

"Clear as crystal." Seamus beckoned to Joan. "Come on. We have a few more things to do."

Joan shuffled her lists into order and rose, then destroyed any tender feelings she might have engendered in him with a slashing look. "Don't play games with my friend and her heart. She deserves better than that." She didn't have to continue, because her unspoken words hung like ice between them. *Better than you.*

The barb struck its mark, as she must have known it would, but Victor refused to let her see just how much. "If you're worried about the state of your friend's heart, best check with the wizard she's given it to."

"Joan, stop." Seamus closed his hand around her elbow and drew her toward the door. "Victor is more of a danger to his own heart than Simone's."

Friend or not, *alpha* or not, Victor was going to punch Seamus in the face for saying it out loud. Later. "You two tend to your own hearts and leave mine and everyone else's alone. We have better things to do on this damn island than matchmake. Things like survive."

Seamus ushered Joan through the door, then turned and faced Victor. "We *will* survive, but we also have to consider life beyond that. I don't want everyone on this island alive but miserable. Especially not my friends."

Victor would worry about life beyond survival when he knew survival was assured. "One miserable winter isn't going to kill anyone. Not even your friends."

"Suit yourself." Seamus ducked his head with a nod. "I'll see you in the morning. If not, when you return."

"Have a good night, Seamus."

His old friend followed Joan into the night, leaving Victor to make his way down the path toward the dock and the solitary row back to the privacy of his sailboat. The winter was cold already, even now when

it had barely begun. A long, miserable winter indeed, and something told him the cold wouldn't just come from the outside.

If he'd been a different sort of bastard, he might have been willing to take advantage of the bevy of young women whose instincts drove them toward the stronger wolves. Plenty looked at him with hungry eyes, and he flattered himself that not all of that hunger was for safety and protection. A selfish man might pick one of those sweet, pretty girls and while away the winter in a less lonely bed.

Too bad the sharp edge of responsibility cut both ways. Any safety he could offer would be a lie. Taking one of the girls before she'd found her footing would be abusing the instincts he'd been born with, instincts their corrupt Boston alpha had brutalized until none of them knew the power that came with the gift of their trust.

They'd learn. Even if it meant Victor had to beat every last man on the island to give them the space to do it.

Every man except the one he longed to test his strength against. Victor's hands clenched, and he forced himself to relax them as he rose. He might like the idea of chasing the wizard around the island, but James wasn't using anything against Simone but his too-damn-pretty smile.

Simone felt pulled to Victor because his wolf could meet hers. Protect hers. No instincts drew her toward James. In fact instinct very likely demanded the opposite, proof enough that she cared for the man in all the human ways that mattered. Human ways Victor would respect, even if it killed him, day by day.

Maybe it wasn't too late. Maybe Victor could give her someone to connect to—show her a man instead of a wolf. Maybe he could try the radical fucking experiment of talking to her.

It was worth a try. If it didn't work, there'd be plenty of time for a slow death by honorable retreat.

Chapter Three

Simone had never noticed how small Victor's sloop really was. It looked huge compared to the boat Guy used to fish, but it seemed to shrink with each passing minute as they sailed toward Searsport.

Victor brushed by her again to adjust a length of sail here, or to secure a rope there. She tried to stay out of his way, but it seemed there was no such thing on a boat. Every time she moved to a new spot, that was where he needed to be.

Finally, she broke the uneasy silence. "Is there someplace where I can be less of an inconvenience?"

He hesitated, his gaze flicking to the cabin door, which remained closed. After a brief moment, he nodded to it. "If you're cold, you can go down below. I should have offered before. I'm sorry."

"I'm not cold." She'd worn extra layers in preparation for the trip, but so far the weather had been surprisingly pleasant. "What I am is in the way, as I'm sure you've noticed."

For once, Victor smiled, and it lit up his brown eyes. "A little, but not as much as you think. Not unless I'm bothering you."

"No." Certainly not enough to go below deck to his cabin. She already knew he slept there, and envisioning him between the sheets, waiting for— "I'd like to stay up here."

"Fair enough." He eased past her, brushing her arm with his. "We've got another two hours of sailing, at least. Maybe we could come up with something to talk about."

Simone blinked. "You want to talk to me?"

He actually winced. "Christ, am I that much of an inadvertent bastard?"

"No," she insisted immediately, but she couldn't think of anything else to reassure him. Instead, she stared up at the clouds overhead and struggled for an inoffensive topic. "We could talk about the weather."

"We could. See anything interesting in the clouds? Dragons, monsters...pretty ladies?"

He was flirting with her. She couldn't stop the smile that curved her lips any more than she could stop her teasing response. "No. I do see a handsome but forbidding man, though."

"Well that rules out Guy. The man couldn't forbid water from running uphill."

"He does carry a certain ease about him," she agreed. It was an ease Victor lacked, but it hadn't kept her from being drawn to him. "Forbidding doesn't always mean bad things. The sea is as forbidding as it is beautiful."

"I love the sea." It sounded like an admission, quiet and a little self-conscious. "I grew up in the west. On the plains. The prairie goes on for miles."

“Really?” This tiny glimpse was more than he’d ever willingly shared before. “I traveled through once. On the train, going to California. With all that grass, it felt like being out in the middle of the Atlantic.”

“Mmm.” He did something with one of the ropes that inched the sail to the side, and the canvas snapped under the strong wind. “I was a cowboy for a while. Not the best job for a werewolf, but at least I healed fast.”

The urge to close her eyes and imagine him roping calves, covered in dirt and sweat, was almost overwhelming. “Did you like it?”

“Wasn’t quite as glamorous as the stories make it sound, but it was a job. My nephew still owns the ranch, though it’s not much to see right now.”

She wondered if the ranch was like the rest of the drought-plagued land she’d heard about, dust-dry and overworked and blowing away in the wind. Maybe it was whole, dead but still rooted together and waiting for rain. “Bad times come and go,” she whispered. “They can’t last forever.”

“No, they can’t.” His voice held sorrow. Exhaustion. “Werewolves have long memories, though...and times are pretty bad.”

What had happened to put that look in his eyes? What had driven him from his home, all the way to New England? Maybe he would share it, in time. For now, Simone felt as though the slightest push too hard could shatter the fragile truce they shared.

So instead of questioning him, she smiled gently. “You’ve been a cowboy and a bootlegger. What else have you been, Victor Bowen?”

“Farmer. Smuggler.” He returned her smile, a hint of mischief sparking in his eyes. “Gambler. That was fun. More fun than lobster fisherman.”

He had a beautiful smile, one that shocked the truth out of her. “I’ve never been anything.”

Both of his eyebrows crawled toward his forehead in an expression of polite disbelief. “You and Joan have done quite a bit.”

“Joan has.” She hadn’t meant to sound so lost. Ashamed. “I just follow along after her.”

“That’s what makes them alpha,” Victor replied, tone firm. “She and Seamus both. Being strong or dominant or just stubborn, none of it matters compared to that spark. They want to lead. No shame in following someone like that.”

“Perhaps you’re right.”

“No perhaps about it, doll. Guy may be easygoing, but he’s a strong wolf. So am I, and a lot of the men who follow Seamus. Doesn’t say anything bad about us, just good things about him.”

What he couldn’t know was that Simone had been the same way before meeting Joan. She’d allowed herself to be swept along, with no real control over her own life. “Right.” She tilted her face to the sky and the clouds again. “There’s one that looks like a ball gown.”

He didn't try to change the subject back. "My brothers would have counted that as a pretty lady."

She couldn't resist a wink. "Because it curves in all the right places?"

"Like all the best things in life."

Sometimes, like now, he looked at her like he wanted her, after all. Like she belonged in his arms. "Too bad I'm not wearing a fancy dress. You could be my Prince Charming."

"A prince with a dubious past, maybe." He looked away from her, reluctantly enough to light a warm glow of hope inside her. "You don't need a beautiful dress. You make trousers and paint spatters elegant."

I want you to kiss me. An ill-advised plea, because it would only renew the uneasy tension between them. "Thank you."

A gust of wind snapped the sail again, filling the suddenly awkward silence. Victor studied the horizon, then cleared his throat. "I think we might have a squall headed this way. Might be best for you to go below and stay out of the rain."

Before she could argue, a fat drop of rain splashed on her cheek, followed by another. Simone laughed and rose. "Consider me convinced. Yell if you need me."

The area below deck was small, just shy of cramped. A sleeping berth occupied much of the available space, its width smooth and neatly made up. She sat on the edge of the bunk, unable to resist the urge to run her fingertips over the coarse blanket.

It was warm, but too rough. Victor needed a quilt, something heavy enough to hold off the chill but more comfortable than the loosely woven wool. The blanket would make decent batting, though, and perhaps she could talk him into letting her sew something—

A dangerous train of thought, far more so than her earlier imaginings of him naked in this very bed. One was about sex, pleasure, and the other...

Intimacy. The small cabin heated quickly, and Simone peeled off her coat. A wooden crate wedged beside the bunk held books, and she lifted them one by one, curiously examining the titles.

The crate held everything from travel journals to several works of Shakespeare. A crisp ten-dollar bill had been placed in a battered copy of *Macbeth*, and she opened the book to the scene, late in the play, of soldiers marching on Dunsinane Castle.

Had he put the bill there for safekeeping, or did it mark his place? She laid the book back in the crate, and it brushed free a photograph which had been tucked behind a slat.

It featured a large group—a family, judging by the resemblance—bearing the careful smiles and stilted poses of a studio photograph. The father and mother were easily identifiable, and she counted thirteen children, with ages ranging so widely that some were no longer children at all.

Like Victor, who stood tall at the back of the group, looking only a few years younger than he did now. Simone studied his face, even drew her fingers across it before snatching her hand away.

These were Victor's personal things, his *private* things, and she had no right to be rifling through them. He'd offered her the hospitality of his cabin. She couldn't repay it by nosing around in his belongings.

Simone replaced everything and stretched out on the bed. The warmth of the cabin combined with the movement of the boat lulled her, but even more comforting was the way she could smell Victor on the blanket and pillow.

As she drifted off, she had to admit that his scent, more than anything else, was what soothed her into sleep.

They sailed into Searsport harbor under an overcast sky. Victor had a feeling that Simone had drifted to sleep, cocooned in the warmth of his bed, but that was an image so stirring he didn't dare give fantasy the weight of reality. It would be bad enough to return to sleeping there with her scent wrapped around him, a scent that wouldn't fade for days.

A part of him—and not a small part—warmed in anticipation.

Slim had come through with the first part of their deal, at least—securing a slip for him in the busy harbor. Victor docked without hassle, tying off with the help of a young, hungry-looking boy who probably expected a few pennies and went wide-eyed when Victor pressed two quarters into his small, dirty hand. The boy folded his fingers over the treasure before anyone else could catch a glimpse, and Victor hid the ache in his chest beneath a smile.

The boy shoved the coins into his pocket, murmured his thanks, and departed so fast the wooden dock trembled under his tiny worn shoes. Victor hopped back onto the boat and spent a few moments steadying himself with the boring minutiae of tying down sails and checking lines, using the comforting routine to find his balance.

Guilt intruded, just as it always did. All too easy to see a cousin or nephew in that young boy's place, hanging around docks or city street corners, desperate for any job that might put a few cents more in the family pocketbook. The last word from the family farm had been more desperation, more poverty.

He'd sent more money than the place was worth over the past few years. The first three times he'd had it returned, his proud, upstanding family unwilling to accept money earned in a life of crime. Then the crops had failed in 1930, and the next letter he sent came back only with stiff gratitude. Proof of the depth of their desperation. Proof of *everyone's* desperation.

In his darkest moments, he could almost understand how so many of the werewolf packs had gone so bad, so fast. Maybe civilization among wolves had always been the dream, and this was what they were meant to be. Savage, desperate beasts, fighting over the scraps the weak were unable to protect.

Instinct revolted. He fisted both hands and dragged in a deep breath, tasting rain—or even snow—on the biting, salty air. Brooding could wait until he'd gotten Simone into town, hopefully ahead of the coming storm. With his head full of plans for finding an inn and making the most of their time on the mainland, Victor almost forgot what would be waiting for him when he eased open the door.

Simone was stretched out on his bed, looking sweet and comfortable, like she belonged there. Her scent had already twined with his, marking this place that had been his sole domain since he'd purchased the boat.

She groaned and rolled over, curling her body into a ball to ward off the chill of the air. "Not now, I'm sleeping," she murmured.

Victor slipped into the small cabin and pulled the door shut. "Sorry, darling, but it's time to get a move on. We're in Searsport."

Wide blue eyes blinked open, and Simone struggled to prop herself up on her elbows. "Damn, I slept the whole trip."

The movement arched her body, lifting her breasts, and inconvenient arousal stirred. How easy it would be to slide over her, to sink home into the cradle of her hips, feel her long legs wrapped around him. He could make her arch like that out of ecstasy, show her the pleasure to be had when a strong wolf set about claiming his mate.

His mate. Tripping over the words returned sense before he made the painful mistake of giving into need. She wasn't his mate. She wasn't *his* anything. Disappointment and confusion deepened his voice, made it rougher than he wanted. "Not a problem. But now we'd best get going."

Her eyes clouded with uncertainty, but she only nodded. "We have a lot to do."

He was doing it again, taking his frustration out on her. Victor dragged his temper under control and moderated his tone. "Yes we do. I'll wait up top."

Victor didn't wait for a response, just turned and fled, damning himself as a coward.

Simone flipped over the creased paper in her hand and marked off two more items on the list as she took careful inventory of the purchases remaining on the bed.

Most of the crates contained fabric, and she'd arranged for more bolts to be delivered to the dock the next morning. They could spend the winter making clothes and linens enough to supply them all.

One less thing to worry about. Still, she dropped her pen and rubbed at the knot that had formed between her shoulders. There were so many things she'd never considered being without until she'd had to make practical arrangements for just that. Come spring, they'd have time to dig more wells and build real houses, all with the appropriate amenities and fixtures. Until then, they had to make do.

It was exhausting.

The creak of a squeaky board outside her room warned her a moment before a soft knock sounded against the door. “Simone?”

She tensed, then told herself she was being a ninny. “Come in, Victor.”

He stepped inside and closed the door gently behind him. “How was your afternoon?”

She wished—for the thousandth time—that looking at him didn’t make her chest squeeze tight with longing. “Productive and expensive. Yours?”

“The same.” He moved toward the bed, gaze fixed on the fruits of her shopping excursion. “What is all of this?”

“A little bit of everything. Fabric for clothes, some kitchen gadgets, incidentals. All very boring but necessary.” She climbed off the bed and smoothed her skirt, cursing the vanity that had led her to dress nicely. He’d probably think she’d dolled herself up for him, and the hell of it was that he wouldn’t be entirely wrong.

He brushed his fingers over a cream separator, his attention still fixed on the bed. “What’s this?”

The last thing she wanted to talk about was the latest in dairy equipment. “It’s for the goats’ milk. It doesn’t separate well, but we can use this to—” He looked up at her, and her breath caught.

Hunger. In the split second before he glanced away she saw it plainly in his eyes, along with a very male appreciation. He dropped the separator back to the bed and cleared his throat. “Would you like to find some dinner with me? It might be your last chance to go to a restaurant for a while.”

Even sharp disappointment couldn’t overcome practicality. “I ate a late lunch, but thank you for thinking of me.”

“You sure? I clean up all right, for a farm boy.”

“A tragic understatement, I’m sure.” She straightened his collar, stupidly grateful for the chance to touch him. “I don’t know if my poor little heart could take it.”

The muscles in his shoulder tensed a moment before his hand shot up, curling around hers. Rough, warm fingertips brushed her skin, urging her heart into a staccato rhythm. “I’d be gentle with your heart.”

“Would you?” Perhaps he’d been trying, though every short word and cross look had stung.

He closed his eyes, though his fingers kept up their slow, maddening stroking. “You gave it away before I had a chance to know how much of what you feel for me is instinct and how much is real. I’m not the kind of bastard who’ll take what was never offered.”

She blinked at him as she tried to process his words. “Are you talking about *James*?”

Victor tensed. “Who else would have a claim on you?”

No one—not even James. She jerked her hand away. “You’re an ass if you think I’d look at you the way I do after giving myself to another man. An *ass*, Victor.”

"Plenty of your girls look at me," he ground out, frustration vibrating in his voice. "They look at the other strong men too. They can't help themselves. No one has taken care of any of you the way they should, and your instincts are starving."

Her hand itched to strike him, and her eyes burned. "Believe what you want. *Do* what you want, but don't say I never offered you anything, because it just isn't true."

Victor surged forward and caught her shoulders. "Tell me it's not true, that you're not fighting your instincts."

If only it were that simple, and her attraction to him was solely instinctive. "Of course I'm fighting them. I don't want to pant after a man who runs in the other direction when he sees me. It's humiliating."

He bit off a curse, and in the next heartbeat his mouth crushed against hers, hard and open and so very hot.

She should have pulled away. She should have *slapped* him, especially after he'd all but accused her of not knowing what the hell she really wanted. Instead, she clung to him as pleasure mounted.

More pleasure than should have been possible from a single kiss, except that he tasted like heaven and felt even better. Simone touched her tongue to his and moaned helplessly.

A lifetime later he lifted his head with a groan, both hands sliding up into her hair, cupping the back of her head. "I shouldn't do this. I shouldn't—" He bit off a curse, and his fingers tightened. "I want you beyond reason," he whispered and claimed her mouth again. Slower this time, his tongue teasing apart her lips as he tilted her head back.

Simone leaned against him, her head swimming. This was what she'd always glimpsed in the moments before he turned away from her, and she wanted more. So much more.

Her fingers tangled in the front of his shirt, fumbling with the buttons. "Victor."

He caught her hands and took a tiny step back. "No, too fast. Dammit, Simone, you may think it's foolish, but it's the way I was raised. You've been through hell these past few years. A good alpha protects."

He was doing it again, making assumptions about her state of mind. "Some of the women on the island have had a hard time, but *I'm* fine. Please stop presuming to know how I feel and why."

Doubt clouded his eyes. "You didn't say you hadn't had a hard time."

"Haven't *you* had a hard time? Hasn't everyone? I don't know what you want me to say." His hesitation was insidious because it stemmed from such genuine concern that she almost forgot how dangerous it was. It would be too easy to tell herself that he only had her best interests in mind—and let him walk all over her.

She took a deep breath. "It's one thing to protect, or to want to take things slow, but it's another not to trust me to know my own feelings."

"And the wizard? Does he know your feelings?"

“Yes. Unlike some people, he’s bothered to ask.” Lingering guilt sharpened her tongue. “Why do you persist in bringing James into every conversation? This has nothing to do with him.”

Victor’s expression of disbelief might have been comical, under other circumstances. “You spend your time with him. You share meals with him. The whole pack thinks you’re a couple, and you haven’t been quick to dissuade them.”

Because it hadn’t mattered, not with Victor doing his best to avoid her. “I enjoy spending time with James. I wish I enjoyed it more,” she admitted, sick with misery. “All he wants is to love me, and I hate that I can’t give him that.”

“Simone, this isn’t—” He closed his eyes and rubbed one hand over his face and stubbled jaw. “You may know your mind and heart, but if you would play games with your instincts, then you don’t understand them at all.”

She crossed her arms and rubbed them to ward off the chill that shook her. “I’m sure you’re right.” She didn’t understand anything, least of all why instinct would lead her to torture herself by seeking Victor’s reluctant attentions. “Can you see yourself out, please?”

He backed toward the door, then turned with his fingers curled around the knob. “This isn’t a game to me. I was born a wolf, and I don’t know how to play. Not about this. A woman is a warm body, or she’s everything. You’re more than a warm body, but if even part of you wishes you loved a wizard, you’re not ready to be everything.”

It was too much to bear. He’d done nothing but push her away, and now he was blaming her, *punishing* her, because she’d allowed herself the comfort of a friendly face. “How could I be ready to be anything to you when you act like you hate me?” she whispered.

His voice dropped. Gentled. The infuriating tone of a man trying to manage an irrational woman. “I don’t hate you. You know I don’t hate you.”

It would be so easy to give in and rage at him, but it would only cement his conviction that he was right. “How am I to know that, exactly? From the way you glower at me? Perhaps your strict policy of avoidance at all costs.”

“I don’t—” His jaw tightened, and his irritation evidenced itself in a dark wave of power with guilt riding hard on its heels. “It wouldn’t be fair to you.”

“I’m not asking you to fuck me, Victor.” Her own hurt and anger lent her voice a steely edge. “I’m asking how I was supposed to know your mind on any of this.”

He winced at the blunt language. “I wasn’t referring to sex. It’s not fair for me to be around you when I can’t control myself. I’ll influence you without meaning to.”

“I’m not weak-willed or feeble-minded. I can make my own decisions!”

A growl filled the room. Victor stalked across the intervening space, and magic came with him. Wild and oppressive, the sense of *him* filled the room. Strong. Dominant. He stopped a few inches from her and growled one command. “Sit.”

She didn’t *want* to. She wanted to face him, to stand strong and tell him that she was her own woman, no matter what alpha control games he wanted to play.

Stand, Simone. Don’t give in. But her body moved anyway, and she couldn’t choke back an angry sob as she dropped to the bed.

He stumbled back a step, then swore. Power vanished so fast she thought her ears might pop. “God damn it, Simone, I shouldn’t have—I didn’t mean...”

Looking at him hurt, so she dropped her gaze to the floor. “You’ve made your point.”

Fingers touched her shoulder, tentative, as if he feared being slapped away. “It’s a point I shouldn’t have made. I’m truly sorry.”

“No, you were right.” She swallowed miserable tears. “I thought I could trust you.”

An anguished noise escaped him, and his touch vanished. “You should be able to trust me. But when I’m around you, I don’t trust myself.”

“That’s all you had to say.” Simone wiped her eyes and looked up at him. “I haven’t been trying to torment you. I just...” *I wanted you so, so much.*

“I know.” He reached for her again, his fingers soft at her jaw. “You’re not responsible for making me control myself. You’re not responsible for my actions, and you shouldn’t have to worry about being safe with me. My failure, Simone. My fault.”

No matter whose fault it was, they had both lost. “You should go. We have an early day tomorrow.”

Regret filled his voice as he backed away. “If you need anything...I’m just next door.”

“I won’t.” His obvious guilt drove her to speak, and she stood and squared her shoulders. “This has only proven that we—we can’t be reasonable about one another, Victor. I won’t be coming to you for the things I need. *I can’t.*”

He looked like he wanted to fight, but something held him back. “If you feel you can’t, then I’ve truly let you down. Perhaps, some day, I’ll prove myself again.”

Except that she might be leaving come spring. “What if it’s too late by then?”

A sad, lonely smile curved his lips. “Then I’ll hope you don’t hate me too much while you’re living the happy life you deserve.”

She couldn’t hate him, even if he broke her heart. “Good night.”

He didn’t move. His hand came up, then froze, as if he didn’t dare touch her. So she took his hand and guided it to her cheek.

“Simone.” Her name was a whisper, twisted with longing.

“I’ll be all right.” The only thing she could give him, a desperate reassurance.

"I know." He stroked her cheek, his callused thumb rough. "Believe me, I know. You're strong. You've been through so much, and you're still strong. Someone just needs to keep you safe until you realize it. Not just want it to be true. Until you believe it's true."

Even through the pain and the doubt, her body responded to his touch. "I don't feel strong."

"You should, darling. You stand right back up, even when an alpha snarls in your face and knocks you down."

"I suppose." Though she wouldn't have to if she could just *stand* in the first place.

He tilted her head back. "Tell me one thing."

There was so much she wanted to say, and so little that he would—or could—hear. "What is it?"

"Will you give me another chance to prove you're safe with me?"

"I don't question that. I trust you with my life."

For a long time he stared at her, his dark eyes intense. His gaze traced her face until she felt sure he was memorizing her features. Then he smiled. "It's a start."

Simone choked back the pleas, the promises. "We can discuss it further when we get home."

His smile widened. He leaned in, his dark hair spilling over his forehead as he tilted her head back a little more, just enough to meet a soft kiss. "Good night, Simone."

When we get home. The words echoed in her head as he left, closing the door quietly behind him. They had been anything but a warning, and she was ashamed of herself. She owed him the truth, not something that sounded like a promise, even if it was a promise she desperately wanted to give.

When we get home.

When they got home, she had to tell him she might be leaving. That it might not *be* her home for long.

Chapter Four

Victor eyed the blood-red horizon and slanted a look at Slim, who stood next to him on the dock. “What’s that they say about a red sky in the morning?”

He scratched the side of his wrinkled face and squinted up at Victor. “Keep your ass off the water, that’s what they say.”

If only it were that easy. The pack needed the supplies. It was the only reason he’d risked the trip in the first place, especially this close to the full moon, but coordinating the delivery of the supplies with their own travel needs and Slim’s schedule had already proven a logistical nightmare. He needed to be as flexible as possible.

He also needed to get himself and Simone back to the safety of the island instead of trying to find a safe place to change and run. After his lapse in control, he wouldn’t blame her for dreading the prospect of spending the most primal days of the month trapped with a man she shouldn’t trust. “It’s a short sail, and I’m reasonably skilled.”

“Don’t have to convince me, skip.” Slim shrugged and hefted another crate. “I’ll be at home by a cozy fire. Talk to your first mate.”

Victor’s gaze slid to the cabin, where he could hear the faint sounds of Simone rearranging supplies. No safely tucking her below decks and out of his way on the return voyage—they’d survive a drenching in a cold winter storm, but some of the supplies might not. “She’s a tough girl. We’ll get through.”

“Don’t doubt it.” He settled the crate on the deck, where one of them could stow it below. “That’s the last of it. Tell Seamus and his pretty little wife I asked after them, will you?”

Victor choked on a laugh at the thought of prim little Joan consorting with someone so obviously connected to the shady side of life. Then again, the woman did sleep with Seamus every night. “Sure. I’ll even leave off the pretty, just for you. Our alpha is mighty possessive of his new mate. Take care, Slim.”

“You too.”

Simone emerged from below, just far enough to toss a wave at Slim. “Stay warm.”

He laughed. “Follow your own advice, sweetheart. You need it more than I do.”

Victor hopped onto the boat and waited for Slim to toss him the lines. Maneuvering the small boat out of the slip was easy enough, and the sun balanced on the horizon as he navigated the busy harbor, mostly full of fishermen getting out onto the water. Concentrating on that gave him an excuse to ignore the effect Simone’s close proximity was having on his self-control.

She was quieter this morning, almost subdued as she sat, gazing out over the bay. “Will we run into a storm?”

“Maybe. We’re not quite sailing into the wind, but we probably won’t make the island much before the weather rolls in. If it gets bad, you can squeeze down into the cabin, even if it’s a little uncomfortable.”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine.” She smiled a little, a world of sadness in the expression. “I won’t melt, and I won’t break down and weep if the wind musses my hair.”

The thought was absurd. “Doesn’t mean you should want to be miserable if you don’t have to be.”

“You’re right, of course.” She fell silent again.

He’d said the wrong thing. Again. “I don’t think you’re fragile. Just don’t see the point in both of us being uncomfortable.”

Simone didn’t answer, not at first. When she did, her words had nothing to do with the impending bad weather. “I wish you’d told me. *Talked* to me.”

There hadn’t been time, though the excuse was weak. He wouldn’t have done so even if they’d been trapped together with all the time in the world. *Which we might as well be now.*

He had to say something, so he cleared his throat and adjusted his grip on the tiller. “I’ve never been much good at talking. Not when it matters.”

“What was wrong with the truth?” She turned to face him, something lost and hopeless in her eyes. “I would have waited, for as long as you needed me to.”

An impossible tangle with no end. She had become friendly with the wizard because she’d assumed he didn’t care. He’d guarded his feelings because he’d assumed she was already taken. But the way she spoke... “I’m telling you the truth now. Are you already promised to him?”

“No, not like you think. But...he’s going to Europe in the spring, to help settle things between the wolves and wizards. And he... He—”

Ice flooded his veins. “You’re going with him.”

“Astrid’s father—you never met Astrid. She died when we—” She twisted her hands together. “It doesn’t matter. Her father has asked me to come with James. To help.”

“I see.”

Simone stared at him, her eyes wide and pleading. “It’s *peace*, Victor. If I can help make that happen...”

He wanted to tell her that the wizards and wolves had been fighting for generations and would battle for more to come. That it was hopeless. That breaking her own heart against the wall of other people’s hatred would accomplish nothing.

Selfish arguments, when he couldn’t promise her heart any more tenderness. “That is a great responsibility. A great...honor.”

“Yes, it is.” She bit her lip. “I’m not sure when I’ll be back. I would try, though, if I had a reason.”

As if he could compete with dreams of saving the world, however far-fetched. “You need to go where your heart leads you, Simone.”

“Sound advice,” she whispered. “Thank you for understanding.” Once more, she turned away, putting her face to the wind.

Her pain trembled through him, even if she was too proud to show it, and it hurt. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t.”

“Do you want me to tell you to stay?”

“No.” She breathed the word, her voice hoarse and weary. “You can’t give me what I want.”

The more they talked, the more twisted it became. Action suited him better, but the wind had already picked up, sharp with the scent of rain. He had to stay alert to keep them both safe. “If you followed your heart and it led you to me, I’d do my damndest to make you happy. That’s all I have to offer, and maybe it’s not enough.”

“I don’t know *what* to do anymore,” she confessed.

So tired. So hurt. Victor held out an arm without thinking and left it there, knowing she’d likely reject him. He still had to offer. “Come sit down.”

She came, sliding to sit beside him. “Can we not talk about it? Not right now, at least.”

“Of course.” He slid his arm around her and tucked her close against his side. Comfort instead of romance, the casual touches of a pack, even if the feel of her pressed against him excited him. “What should we talk about?”

“The weather?” She laughed a little. “Perhaps I shouldn’t have insisted we go back today.”

“Even if you hadn’t, I would have. Neither of us wanted to spend the full moon in Searsport.” Though with the bite of the wind taking on a mean edge, they might soon wish they’d risked it, no matter their personal trouble. “This will only be our second full moon together as a pack. The girls need you.”

“Yes, I suppose they do.”

Maybe she thought he was trying to remind her how much she was needed now that he knew she might leave. “It’ll grow easier in time. Once they become accustomed to the men.”

“You sound like Joan.” Simone tilted her head up and studied his face. “Why do you dislike her?”

Dangerous ground indeed. “It’s not...dislike.” Not quite a lie. “I’m wary of what Joan is, not who she is.”

“And what is she?”

“So alpha it makes my head hurt.”

“So is Seamus.” She shrugged under his arm. “Why should that bother you?”

“It’s a man’s duty to protect his family. His pack. It’s a responsibility but, in the end, we’re expendable. Female wolves are precious. You shouldn’t have to fight. Not saying Joan had a choice—but maybe now I wonder if she’ll know how to stop.”

Simone's brows drew together, and her back stiffened. "We're precious because we have babies and that's that?"

"You're vital because you have babies," he retorted. "You're precious because you're the reason life's worth living."

"I—" She stopped and sighed. "I can't even be irritated with your attitude when you say things like that."

Victor hid a smile. "I was born a wolf. Raised this way by a mother who would have thrashed me within an inch of my life if I implied her only worth was having babies."

Simone laughed. "I think I would like your mother."

His mother would probably like Simone too. "Maybe you'll meet her some day. She's liable to start talking to me again, now that I've given up my life of crime."

She touched his hand where it curled around her arm. "You're estranged?"

Another topic best left alone, though he found himself answering. "For the last decade or so. Maybe a little longer. So bad they'd barely accept money from me, even with the crops laying dead in the fields."

It took her a moment to speak. "It isn't pleasant, is it? Being cut off from everything you once knew."

"No, it's not." The wind was picking up now, blowing ominous clouds toward them. Snow or rain, either one would make for a miserable sail. Distracting her from it might be a blessing. "You speak like someone who knows."

"Yes." She snuggled closer, though she gave no outward sign of noticing the chill. "That's how I wound up with Edwin Lancaster. I was his mistress. His first."

Victor stiffened, his arm tightening before he could stop it. Edwin Lancaster had been a bastard—a selfish, self-absorbed ass of the highest degree. Money had given him the power to rise above his place in the pack, and he'd used that power to make women into wolves to serve as his playthings.

That Simone had been one of them shouldn't have been a surprise. Most of the women on the island owed the destruction of their lives to Edwin's womanizing. But Simone...

Protectiveness rose, and for a moment he regretted that Joan had killed the bastard. She'd probably let it happen too quickly. "I thought Joan was the first," he managed, mostly to have something to say. "Isn't that why he hated her?"

"No, Joan was the last. She defied Edwin, and she changed everything. *I* was the first." Her mouth twisted in a shaky smile. "I'm the one who let it happen, to myself and the rest of them."

That sad little smile couldn't hide her pain, and his wolf raged uselessly. There was no one left to challenge, no one to hurt for the discomfort she'd suffered. "You can't be held responsible for the ways you've been mistreated. The man was evil."

"You're excessively kind. The fact remains that I should have done something, if only for the other girls Edwin began to...collect."

“What could you have done? Fought him?”

“I don’t know. *Something*.” Simone shivered. “Things worsened so gradually. He used to be different, you know. Not good or noble, but not as bad as he was in the end.”

Most people didn’t go bad overnight. He leaned down and dropped a soft kiss to the top of her head. “Times have changed many a man and wolf. And you went with Joan. She may have the will, but while she and Seamus were off fighting Lancaster, you were making those girls feel safe. That’s what they need now, more than a warrior.”

“Thank you.” She stared up at him, her heart in her eyes.

If she’d looked dazed or worshipful, he could have resisted. If she’d looked young or lost or innocent—if she’d looked like *anything* other than a beautiful woman who saw something she wanted...

He saw heat. Respect. Desire. He saw that he needed to stop worrying about guarding her heart and start paying heed to his own.

Distant thunder rumbled as he lowered his lips and found hers open and ready. She kissed him eagerly, her fingers clenching in his vest, and murmured something against his mouth.

The tiller jumped under his hand, and he tightened his grip and willed the weather to hold. Just long enough for him to kiss her, to ease his tongue past her lips and taste the sweetness of her mouth. A groan rose inside him as he licked the tip of her tongue, demanding she respond.

Instead of letting him in, she pulled back and blinked away the rain that had splashed down and gathered on her lashes. “We bet against the weather and lost, I guess.”

He’d never been so distracted by the taste of a woman that he’d failed to notice rain, and not a tiny drizzle. Fat drops landed on his head and slid down his neck, bringing an icy chill with them. Rain—for now. All too easy to imagine snow following if the temperature stayed cool. A sharp cold snap could ice the sails and rigging.

That was absolutely the worst-case scenario, but he still eased back from Simone. “You should see if you can tuck yourself down below. I’d feel easier with you out of the weather, and if it gets worse, I’ll need to concentrate on getting us safely home.”

She didn’t argue, but she did pause before opening the cabin door. “If you need me...”

“Then you’ll be wrestling with rigging in the freezing rain, whether you like it or not.” He smiled at her. “Go, darling. I’ll call for you.”

She ducked below, then stuck her head back out. “Take care, Victor.”

“I will.” With her on the boat, he couldn’t do anything less.

Chapter Five

After nearly an hour below deck, Simone's discomfort and fear had grown to epic proportions.

At first, she thought Victor might be able to pull them around the gathering storm. But the wind and waves mounted until even her limited and distant experience with sailing told her it couldn't be safe.

The boat pitched and rolled, and she had to press the back of her hand to her mouth and count to ten to quell her nausea. Her anxiety combined with her worry for Victor made her nervous, and she jumped every time a close crash of thunder shook the hull.

Water seeped under the cabin door, and she scrambled to block it. The door fit tight in its casement; how much water had to be dashing against it for any to make it inside?

Wind howled above her, and she pitched sideways, crashing into a crate as the boat lurched under her feet. A second later, Victor's voice rose from above deck. "Simone!"

She started to open the door, but it whipped out of her hand. Rain drenched her in seconds, and she blinked to clear her vision. "What can I do?"

Victor gestured her toward him with a wave of his hand. "Hold the tiller!"

He was shouting, and still barely audible over the pounding rain and driving wind. The deck rolled sickeningly under her feet as he caught her hand and tugged until her fingers touched the smooth wood. He leaned close, putting his mouth next to her ear. "If we were both more experienced sailors, we could try to ride it out. But there are too many of these damn tiny islands and I'd rather pick which one we run into." He lifted his free hand and pointed straight ahead, where a dark line of trees was faintly visible through the rain. "It's big enough, if we can get there."

Lightning split the sky overhead, and Victor pulled away, leaving her to tussle with the tiller as he swooped down and snatched up something that looked like it had started life as a tin bucket. Holes had been drilled in the bottom, and a cord attached to the handle. It hit the water with a faint splash, and Victor let a few hundred feet of rope slide through his hands before securing the end. Then he set to work on the sails, his movements hard to follow with freezing rain driving into her face and dripping into her eyes.

The tiller jumped and jerked in her grip. Victor had angled the sailboat toward the wind and into the waves, but the closer they got to the shore, the choprier the ocean became. Water slopped over the sides and covered the deck, and she could only imagine the damage to the supplies below deck.

She wouldn't think what could happen if Victor lost his footing and went overboard. She'd have to abandon the boat, jump after him, and even then she'd be lucky to find him at all in the roiling water—

No.

The sickening swells gave way to rough, breaking waves, but they weren't quite as tall as they'd been a few minutes ago. The sea was calmer on the windward side of the island. A small sand cove beckoned, edged in wide sharp rocks but offering an oasis of relative calm.

Close. So close.

Victor paused in his work—just for a moment—and smiled at her through the rain. “We’re going to be—”

A sharp gust of wind swallowed the words and tore the rope from his hands. The edge of a sail snapped out of his grip, and he swore and lunged just as the tiller lurched under her hand. She tensed instinctively, clutching it with all her strength.

Too much strength. Wood splintered as the handle snapped off in her hands. The boat heaved and rolled beneath her as it gave in to the demands of the wind, blowing away from the beckoning sand, straight toward the jagged rocks barely visible above the crashing waves.

“Simone!” Victor staggered, crashing into her as the deck tilted. He bore her to the wet wood, sheltering her under his body as he curled one hand around the side of the boat to hold them steady.

Even the wind couldn't drown out the sound of the hull being gutted.

It was over in three of her frantic heartbeats. The boat went eerily still beneath them, though waves still crashed against the side and washed over, icy brine mixing with the rain.

Victor lifted up, just enough to give her space to breathe. “We’re not so far from shore. Can you swim?”

“I can make it.” Her hair hung in her eyes, heavy and wet, and she dashed it away. “We’ll help each other.”

He shook his head and rose to his knees. “Once you’re far enough away, I need to try to pull the boat free and get it beached. God knows how long we’ll be here, and we may need the supplies to survive.”

She wanted to argue, but he was right. Their survival could depend on salvaging the supplies, and that would be impossible if they lost the boat. “Be careful.”

He dragged her to her feet, kissed her once, roughly, and stabbed a finger toward the water. “Go. I’ll be right behind you.”

Simone dove in, grateful she wasn't wearing a skirt that would tangle around her legs. It was difficult enough to navigate the cold water, even for a strong swimmer like her, and Victor would no doubt have a hard time wrestling with the crippled boat.

When she neared the shore, she turned to check on his progress. If he needed her help, then she'd give it, and he could yell at her later.

He'd tied no fewer than three lengths of rope to the front of the boat, and he swam with them crisscrossed around his body. He twisted and struggled with the load, and Simone almost started back in.

Before she could, he must have put feet on the rocky bottom, because he heaved toward the shore with a roar. Just like her swim, a human never would have been able to do it. Even with the strength of a werewolf, he fought and strained until the ropes had to have cut into his skin.

Finally, she trudged out to help him guide the boat, remaining carefully outside the snarl of ropes in case he slipped or the waves began to drag the boat back out to sea. Together, they hauled it onto the stony beach.

Simone stumbled back, panting. "What do we do now?"

He knelt and slid free of the ropes, his chest heaving. In answer, he gestured wordlessly toward a small boathouse down the shore.

It sat at the head of a short dock in bad repair, but the boathouse itself looked sound. The windows were intact, and a solid-looking door was securely latched on the side facing the shore.

Simone shoved her sopping hair from her face again. "Can we fit ourselves *and* the supplies in there?"

"If there's a boathouse, there's probably an actual house too." Victor straightened too carefully, every movement slow and precise. "The tide's still on its way in. We need to get everything we might need off the boat."

He was hurt, but pointing that out would be useless. It would invite argument and accomplish nothing. He would never let her move all the supplies herself, much less go in search of a dwelling while she did. "Let's hurry."

They worked quickly in spite of Victor's injuries, and Simone took pains to reserve the most cumbersome crates and packages for herself. The first one earned her a sharp look and a grumble, but he was clearly too exhausted to argue. By the time they had unloaded half of their cargo, the howling rumble of the storm had grown loud enough to drown out conversation, and he *couldn't* complain.

Victor stashed the last bolt of fabric onto the top of the growing pile of packages in the sturdy little boathouse and nodded to the tiny space left, just large enough for a person to squeeze in out of the storm. "I'll see if I can find a house. It'd be a help if you could fill a crate with things we might be able to use. Food, blankets, whatever you think best."

"All right." Moving and possibly having to unpack and repack supplies would be more of a strain on him than searching the island, and she was glad to do it. "I'll listen out for you."

"Good." Lightning split the sky overhead, and thunder made the ground rumble beneath them as Victor leaned in and kissed her once, hard. "Stay safe."

Simone latched the door to keep it from banging open in the wind and began gathering supplies as best she could. She packed two crates, including a lighter one for Victor, and scrambled about to find his box, the one he'd already had stowed in his cabin.

He'd left it behind.

She cursed and shoved open the door. It wasn't as though they couldn't save a picture and a few books, not if they were precious enough for him to keep in the first place.

The rain had worsened, and Simone dashed her hands across her eyes more than once to clear them. They'd left the cabin door open in their haste, and she splashed through ankle-deep water to retrieve Victor's personal effects.

Whatever lay in the bottom of the box was ruined, but some of it could still be saved. She hoisted it in her arms and shivered her way through the rain, back to the boathouse.

He emerged from the tree line, moving a little faster, as she reached the door. He waved an arm and called something, but the wind stole the words.

In a few seconds, she managed to consolidate the two packed crates and balance Victor's on top of it. Her muscles burned, but she didn't have far to go, and she kept even footing all the way up the small hill. "Did you find something?"

He reached for the small crate on top with a frown. "You shouldn't have risked going back for this. None of it will make life easier for us."

Only a few days before, his severe tone would have hurt her feelings. Now, she shot back, "This is important to you, and that makes it important to me. Besides, you can't replace it."

A noise escaped him, something between a snarl and a laugh. "You're irresistible when you're snapping at me."

Her cheeks heated. "You must be a glutton for punishment."

He just smiled and urged her along the narrow path as the wind whipped through the pine trees around them. "Up ahead. I broke in and lit a lantern—can you see the light from the window?"

She could see it, a small but steady glow through the gale. By the time they reached the cabin, she was drenched anew and trembling from the cold.

Simone dropped her burden on a dusty table, her teeth chattering. "Would a summer home like this have laid in a supply of firewood or coal?"

"There's some firewood here." Victor crossed to a wide, flat hearth and knelt. "I'm not sure how long it will last, though. I think we need to shift instead."

Simone studied the room for a moment—including the lone bed. "We can make a den, of sorts. If we draw that bench over and turn it on its side beside the bed, then mostly block the space under the foot there... With the two of us together, it should keep us warm."

Victor glanced over his shoulder to study the bed, then nodded and set aside the log he held. "If we lay out our clothes and blankets, they'll dry well enough on their own. We'll save the firewood for later, then, in case we need it."

"Good idea." She kept her silence as she unfolded several blankets.

The only problem with their plan was the fact that she'd have to strip out of her clothes in front of Victor. If the change had ever come easily to her, her nakedness would last a matter of moments. But she wasn't strong, never had been, and might end up grasping for that primal flicker of magic for long minutes.

With sufficient bedding spread out to dry, Simone bit her lip and hesitated with her fingers on the top button of her shirt. "How do you... I mean..."

His lips curved into a gentle smile as he turned his back on her. "I won't peek."

"Well, I figured you wouldn't—" The words hung in her throat as Victor's shirt slid from his shoulders to reveal dark, angry lines, a patchwork of bruises covering his back and sides.

She stepped closer without thinking, lifting her hand to hover over his battered skin. "Are you all right?"

"They'll be gone by tomorrow," he whispered. "But perhaps dragging a sailboat bodily to shore is a task even a werewolf shouldn't undertake."

"But you saved me." She touched him once and pulled her hand away. "Saved us both."

"And a few bruises are well worth keeping you safe, darling."

His voice had dropped to a low rasp. Simone knew she could touch him again, mold her palms to his flesh and shake his self-control. They could spend the day in bed, warming each other even under the scant covers.

Exactly what he'd told her he couldn't do.

She turned away. "Do you want to go first? I can hang your clothes and mine to dry."

"If you like." The soft slide of fabric followed, and the thump of his boots hitting the ground. Magic swelled, a dizzy rush of power that filled the cabin.

He'd accused her of being drawn to that strength out of necessity and instinct, like so many of the other women on the island. If it were true, perhaps she could have contented herself with a number of Seamus's other friends instead of wanting Victor so desperately.

The magic had the potential to make her feel safer, but it couldn't make her feel *needed*. It couldn't do what his hoarse voice and covetous stares did.

Simone swallowed hard and tugged the buttons on her shirt free, one after another, and spoke while she undressed. "We can rest and warm up. Our clothes may not dry quickly but, if we get hungry, we can wrap up in the blankets that were already here and make something to eat. And then—"

Then, they could pass the rest of the day and the night curled together in the tiny den under the bed. It would be a torment all its own, not sexual in the strictest sense, but something even deeper—the trust that came with *pack*, mingled with the emotional attachment she'd already formed.

Emotional attachment. She shook her head as she gathered their clothes. It was just a harmless, pretty way to say she was falling in love with him, and there was nothing harmless about that.

By midday, rain had changed to sleet. Before dusk, it became a blizzard.

Victor ventured out as a wolf, braving the fat snowflakes coming down so hard they seemed to blow sideways, even through the sparse pines. He ran to the beach first, eying the wreckage of his sailboat with a sense of loss that seemed out of place in its depth. It was just a boat, after all, but it had been his home for the past month, his little scrap of privacy on an island bristling with too many wolves.

The rising tide had rushed through the gash in the hull and filled it with water. It lay mostly on its side, sail flapping in the stiff wind where one of the ropes had snapped. Even with supplies, it would take a skill he didn't possess to repair the damage.

Which meant they were well and truly stranded.

He circled wide on his way back to the cabin, scouting the area for signs of danger or intruders. The island was too small to hold a community, though he did find a second cabin. Rising on his back legs gave him a glimpse through the darkened window, but the building was even smaller than the one in which they'd taken up residence.

Still, the cabins meant that rescue *would* come, even if Seamus couldn't use magic or wits to find them before spring. Humans would return to check on their summer cottages. He and Simone simply had to make do until then.

He trotted back to the cabin and scratched at the door until Simone eased it open for him.

She closed the door quickly, clutching her blanket more tightly around her bare shoulders. "I found a kettle in that cupboard over there and started...something." She knelt by the hearth. "How's your boat?"

It was almost a relief to still be a wolf. He didn't have to answer the difficult question right away. Instead he walked to the far side of the room and did his best to shake off without getting anything important wet. Then he crouched low and started the painful process of shifting.

This close to the full moon, it wasn't easy. Embracing his wolf became effortless as the moon grew heavy in the sky, but reclaiming humanity turned into a battle. He rode out the pain as his bones realigned and fur vanished. Minutes later found him kneeling naked on the cold wooden floor, panting for breath as the fire lingered in his bruised body.

"All right?" she asked quietly, her gaze still focused on the contents of the iron kettle.

"I'll manage." Moving slowly, he wrapped up in the other blanket she'd laid out. It was dry, at least, through meager protection against the cold. "What are you cooking?"

"Soup?" A shy smile curved her lips. "If I sound uncertain, it's because I am."

The firelight cast intriguing shadows on her features, turning her beauty into something haunting, and not touching her was a trial. "We'll learn to make do. I know a few things about rough cooking. No fancy kitchens where I grew up."

Finally, she turned her head and looked at him. “Rose has been teaching me to cook. I need a considerable amount of instruction, I admit.”

“So that’s why the two of you spend so much time together.” He grinned to cover the way her voice stirred his body. “Perhaps she should be teaching all of us.”

“You could attend her lessons, if you cared to learn.”

“Maybe I will, once we get back to the island.”

“You never answered my question.” She tilted her head. “The boat?”

The answer probably showed in his eyes, but he shook his head anyway. “I think I’ll be buying a new one in the spring.”

She sighed and sat back. “We’ll be fine here, but I worry about the others. Not knowing what happened to us, I mean.”

There was nothing to be done about it, unless the wizard could work a spell to conjure them out of thin air—or, more likely, one to find them. “Maybe James will have a way of knowing.”

“I had thought of it,” she admitted, “but I don’t believe he’s acquainted with spells of the sort.”

Of course not. The one useful thing the wizard could have provided, and he was incapable. Perhaps not a fair thought, but the man *was* a rival.

A rival with a distinct disadvantage. Victor had Simone to himself for the foreseeable future, after all. “Well, we’ll do our best, and so will they. Seamus and Joan will take care of everyone.”

“I know.” She rose slowly. “What about you, stuck here with me? Do you think you’ll make it?”

Her voice was light, teasing, but he couldn’t summon an equal levity when she was so close. Days stretched out before him, just the two of them trapped in forced intimacy, and he *knew* his resolve would break. He could already feel it cracking.

“Now, that isn’t fair,” she murmured. “There should be a rule, you know. You aren’t allowed to look at me like that if I’m not allowed to be encouraged by it.”

He made himself look away. God only knew how much longer he’d have *that* much will power. “I think the rules are changing.”

“So you’ve decided I’m not fragile and misled after all?”

Frustration rose as fast as desire had, a common enough occurrence around her. “I never thought you were either. I think you’re reeling. I think we’re all reeling. Or maybe you can’t imagine the hell *my* instincts have been in with a dozen bruised girls looking at me like they might be considering fucking their way to safety.”

“I’m sure I can, now that you mention it.” She crossed the room to test some hanging clothes for lingering dampness.

“Is that so? What, exactly, do you imagine it’s like?”

"I imagine you want to take what they're offering." Simone propped her hands on her hips. "Not because you want to fuck them, but because you know it will make them feel better, at least in the short run."

Close enough to be uncomfortable, though it fell far short of describing the true agony of being caught between the demands of his wolf and his conscience as a man. Instinct wanted to soothe the girls, to give them whatever they required to reassure them they were safe. Decency made him recoil at the idea of taking a traumatized young woman to his bed. And young they were, some of them sixteen or seventeen, too young for bedding, and far too young to be bartering with their bodies.

Given his choice, he'd bring Edwin Lancaster back from the dead and kill him again.

Victor dragged his temper under control with several steady breaths. "I think about what could make a sixteen-year-old girl ready to give herself to a stranger. I think about what pain, what neglect and abuse must have broken their spirits. I even think about the ones like Rose, who are older and quieter but flinch if you move too quickly, and I wonder how any of us can do right by you. How any damn thing we do won't be wrong somehow."

"So it's better to play games with us." Her eyes flashed. "Better to lie."

She was infuriating. "Lie? About *what*?"

"About the way you *felt*." She folded her arms around her body. "You lied every time you turned your back on me, and it hurt, Victor. Even if you had the best of intentions."

"When I turned my back on you, it wasn't a lie. And by the time it would have been one, I didn't need to turn my back. You'd turned yours. I was too late."

Instead of arguing, Simone bit her lip and sank to the bed, her shoulders sagging. "I'm sorry I brought it up. It doesn't matter anyway."

Defeat. She looked defeated, and it wiped away his frustration and anger, leaving behind the soft ache of failure. He had failed her, even if he hadn't meant to. "It matters to you."

"No." She breathed a soft noise of frustration. "You've explained your motivations, and it wouldn't be fair to expect more."

"Maybe not. But I never intended to hurt you."

When she looked up, it was with painful vulnerability. "*I* should have lied. Told you that you didn't have the power to hurt me."

Victor had to go to her.

He moved slowly, and her vulnerable expression gave way to wariness as she shook her head. "I don't need you to coddle me. It's silly."

She was wary, but she hadn't pulled back. "I'm hoping you'll coddle me a little bit, even if I don't deserve it."

After a moment, she unbent enough to favor him with a trembling smile. "You're doing this to humor me, I know you are."

"Then you don't know nearly so much as you think." He stopped just short of the bed and held out a hand. "I'm sorry, Simone."

Her humor faded, and she slowly laid her hand in his. "So am I."

She wanted him. It wasn't a new realization, but it was a thousand times more dangerous now that they were trapped alone, naked, with the moon singing in their blood. By tomorrow morning he'd be climbing the walls, horny and riled and in desperate need of a good run.

Or a good ride. How tempting it was to just give in and let instinct take the blame.

Tempting, and unacceptable. So he lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles. "Forgiven?"

Her gaze was soft and serious, and she answered in a wistful whisper. "Always."

Her sweet acceptance soothed the harsh edges inside him enough that he felt safe settling next to her and looping one arm around her shoulders. "We've both had a long day. Perhaps this isn't the time to be discussing serious issues."

"Or it's the very best time," she mused quietly. "We can't run away from anything."

"And we're too exhausted to be diplomatic?"

Simone laughed gently and leaned her head on his shoulder. "Sometimes I think trying to be diplomatic only gets us in trouble."

He loved the feel of her curled trustingly against him. "Trying to *talk* gets me in trouble. This is more than I've said in a month."

"That settles it." A pretty blush colored her cheeks. "We're truly opposites, in nearly every respect."

"Nothing wrong with that. I like listening to you talk." He brushed his thumb over her cheek. "We're going to be all right, darling."

"We're both smart and resourceful. Of course we will be."

"And they're going to be all right without us."

She barely hesitated. "If they can muddle through without the supplies, yes."

It wouldn't be easy, or they wouldn't have taken the risk of meeting Slim in uncertain weather to begin with. "Seamus has done more with less in the past, and Joan seems plenty stubborn. They'll make it."

"Then we only have to worry about ourselves." The back of her hand grazed his thigh through the blanket. "Tomorrow's the full moon."

That fast, he was rock-hard and aching with the need to touch her. "It is," he agreed, and even to his own ears his voice sounded hoarse.

"Things happen," Simone told him slowly, "and I need you to understand. To tell me it's all right. Because I wouldn't push you, Victor, not for anything, but tomorrow..." She swallowed hard.

The loss of control would be unforgivable—for him. But he couldn't put the responsibility for his actions on *her* shoulders. He cupped her cheek and kissed her forehead, ignoring the way her sweet, clean scent called to him. "Whatever happens, we'll manage. I'm not uninterested, it's simply not the way I would choose to be with you. It's less than you deserve."

"That isn't—" Her words melted into a growl, and she bit his jaw.

Jesus Christ. Her hair had dried in auburn tangles that knotted around his fingers as he fisted his hand in the disheveled mass. He dragged her mouth from his skin and nearly groaned at the sight of the smooth line of her throat, pale and vulnerable in the firelight. "It's less than we *both* deserve. Believe me, Simone, if you end up underneath me, I'll take you. I'll take you so completely you'll never forget the feel of my cock. And if you think I've been an asshole so far, you don't want to see me fighting to convince my wolf that you don't belong to me. This is not a game."

Her eyes fluttered shut, ginger lashes coming to rest on her cheeks. "So you keep reminding me. Do you think I would make light of something like this?"

"No. But last time I hurt you by not telling you why I pushed you away. Unless you've changed your mind about possibly leaving in the spring..."

She tensed under his hands and opened her eyes. "Making that decision now, based on this attraction, would be horribly selfish of me. Then again, so is this, isn't it?"

If it was, he was every bit as selfish. Arrogant ego whispered that he should stretch her out and show her just how good he could make it. Addict her to the pleasure of his touch, to the things he would do to her. With instinct riding her, they would wallow in animal need. He could almost taste her on his tongue already.

"Not selfish," he whispered, struggling to banish an image of firelight on her naked breasts as her hips lifted desperately toward his mouth. "Human. But it can't happen, not if we can help it."

She exhaled, one single shaky breath. "How big is this island?"

"I'm not sure." He loosened his fingers. "Large enough that there might be some game. Rabbits, at least. Maybe deer."

"Then we can go hunting tomorrow."

A different sort of chase. Safer, and necessary. "We can."

Her tremulous smile steadied. "Ready to try the vegetable soup?"

"Past ready. I'm hungry enough to eat Guy's cooking."

She affected a shudder and rose. "I figured you'd eat your shoes before going that far."

"They'd taste better." And he'd make jokes about eating his shoes all night if it kept that beautiful smile of hers alive. "Anything I can do to help?"

She waved him away. "You must have a hundred other things to do if we're going to be here for a while."

At least that many. Victor rose and stretched carefully, testing sore muscles. The hours spent resting as a wolf had accelerated his healing, which meant the bruises he'd earned getting them safely to shore would certainly be healed by morning. One look out the window, however, put to rest any ideas he'd had about braving the storm in search of more firewood. The wind battering the cabin walls showed no signs of abating and, even under the relative shelter of the trees, snow accumulated with impressive speed.

It would be a few days at least before Guy could risk taking his boat to the mainland. The island Victor and Simone had ended up on was just enough off the easiest course that rescuers from Breckenridge weren't likely to find them without magic. A trip to Searsport, then, and a phone call to Slim, who would have returned to Boston by now. Guy would realize they'd left the morning of the storm, and then...

Magic might be their only hope of being found before spring. At least their wizard would be highly motivated. Not the most pleasant thought, but Victor pushed down jealousy and possessiveness in favor of practicality—and protectiveness. It didn't matter who got the job done, as long as Simone was returned to safety. Whole. Happy.

His.

Victor's fingers tightened on the window frame until the wood creaked under his punishing grip. *Not* his. And somehow he'd find a way to remember that.

Chapter Six

The sun passed its zenith and began to sink in the west. Simone and Victor had spent the morning and afternoon of the second day trying to prepare the small cabin for a stay of indeterminate length, but they'd ended up snapping and fighting more often than not, even after their tentative truce.

It had to be the pull of the moon in her blood. It left her with immediate, unthinking reactions that were more animal than human, and her wolf wasn't comfortable with Victor's. They shared a bond, but it didn't hold the same ease she shared with the rest of the pack, all because they'd been too busy struggling not to give in to the greater intimacy they both desired. And uneasy wolves in their situation usually ended that wariness in one of two ways—sex or violence.

Fucking or fighting.

Victor hefted the rock he'd been using as a makeshift hammer and held out a hand. "Nail?"

She passed him one of the nails he'd pried from a chair. "Do you need another strip of wool?"

He stretched the fabric they'd salvaged from the wreck tight against the wall and nodded. "This is the least sheltered window."

And they couldn't spend all their time as wolves, especially her. When there was no moon, she could barely shift even if she *had* to. "How well-built is the other cabin?"

"It looked less sturdy than this one, but it did have a lean-to with firewood. Some of it might be drier than what we have here."

Worth checking, though maybe not tonight. It wasn't yet five, but the moon had already risen in the sky. If the gentle magic pulsing through her body felt like a flame, then Victor's must have been like a wildfire. "We'll have to stop soon."

"I know." He drove the nail through fabric, wood and wall with three swift blows, the hard muscles of his arm and shoulder straining against his shirt. "I can't hold on much longer."

Her first thought was to soothe him with her touch, but then she remembered that such a thing would only rile him further. "Do you mind if I get a head start?"

He shook his head, then thrust out a hand without looking at her. "Let me have the last few nails. I'll finish this up."

His control was clearly tenuous, and it made her feel better about running out on him. "I'll stay close," she promised, backing toward the door.

"No—" The rock hit the floor with a thump, his shoulders going tight. "Change in here. Please."

A growl escaped before she could stop it. "I don't think that's the best idea."

"You're vulnerable while you're trying to change. If you're not staying in here, I'm going out there."

She was more vulnerable near him, and if he hadn't figured that out... "Fine." Two buttons popped off her shirt as she tore it open, and she balled up the fabric and threw it at his head. "I'll do it right here."

The metallic sharpness of fresh blood filled the air. Victor opened his fist and the bent nails clattered to the floor. He drew in a deep, shuddering breath and let it out on a growl.

Then he moved.

His bleeding hand slapped against the door beside her head. Wild, heady power filled the cabin, more and more, until the walls seemed too flimsy to contain it. He lowered his mouth to hover over hers, stealing her breath and giving her his own. "You'll do it right here." A quiet whisper.

Another command.

This close, this *intense*, and still he held his body carefully away from hers. *Make me*. When she tried to say it, her tongue refused to move.

He smiled and licked the corner of her mouth, and she gasped as pleasure tingled through her. "So much fire in you, Simone. Even when you hold your tongue it burns in your eyes."

Sheer frustration drove her answer. "You don't know *how* hot I burn."

"Not nearly as hot as I could make you." The hand not against the door landed on her side, fingers warm against her skin. "Would you like that? If I slipped my fingers between your legs and showed you how to melt?"

Simone choked on a moan and scrambled to open her pants. "Touch me, Victor. Feel me."

He snarled and caught both of her hands, jerking them away from her body. For a moment she thought he intended to pull away, to leave her, but instead he guided her arms up, pressing her wrists against the door on either side of her head. "No going back," he whispered hoarsely. "Still want me to touch you?"

"Silly man." The truth was terrifying, and she gave it to him anyway. "Whether you take me or not, I'm yours. I belong to you."

All of the tension drained out of him in the space of a heartbeat. Victor pressed his forehead to hers and closed his eyes. "We'll change. Run. I don't want to be distracted trying to ignore the moon's call, because what I plan to do to you will take hours."

This close, she was loath to release him. "Kiss me, just once."

"Not just once." His lips curled into a smile before he pressed them to hers. Warm. Gentle, but unyielding.

Heaven.

Simone opened her mouth, straining toward him in absolute, utter need. Different this time, because she felt something new, something she'd only glimpsed in him before.

Possession.

He took his time kissing her, as if every moment before had been stolen and now he knew he could explore her at his leisure. His tongue swept along her lips, teasing one moment and strong the next, learning every inch of her.

She didn't realize she'd tried to move her hands until his fingers closed tight around her wrists. She bit his lower lip, a giddy sort of joy bubbling up inside her.

His chest vibrated against hers, a low growl she felt more than heard. He tugged away only to close his teeth on the edge of her jaw. "Accept me, sweetheart. Let me in, and I can help the change go easier. I have power to spare."

It burned inside him, a warm glow that drew other wolves like moths to a flame. "That isn't why. You know that, right?"

"Why what, honey? Why you want me?"

"Yes." She felt suddenly shy.

He smiled slowly, and it lit up his usually severe face. "I'm starting to believe that."

Her chest ached, this time with the words and promises she had to hold back. "Run with me. And tonight..."

"And tonight." He kissed her once more, then stepped back and closed his eyes. "Tell me when you're ready. I'll help you change."

Her pants hung open around her hips, and she pushed them to the floor with shaking hands. "I'm ready."

Soft power curled around her like a comforting blanket. It whispered to her wolf, coaxing her to life, and the readiness with which she responded surprised Simone. She barely had time to kneel before the spark of magic in her flamed and grew, bringing the change in a rush of heat and power.

In what seemed like moments, she stood on four legs, pawing impatiently at the floor. When he joined her, they could run, hunt.

Strong fingers stroked her head and the fur at the back of her neck, and Victor chuckled as he reached for the door. "Run. I'll catch you."

He didn't have to tell her again. Wherever she ran, he'd find her, sniff out her scent and chase her down. She almost lost her footing at the thought, then launched herself past the tree line and into the woods beyond the small clearing.

Almost immediately, gentle rustling and the scent of rabbit perked up her ears. She could stage a chase of her own, procure a gift for her future mate.

And then they'd hunt together, make this tiny island their own as the full moon strengthened in the darkening sky.

Victor ran them both hard.

Part of it was the need to explore the boundaries of their new home. The island was large enough to support animals and a dense forest—good news for them in case they ended up having to stay until spring. The thick layer of snow on the ground made running a challenge, but it also made tracking fresh game laughably easy.

They hunted under the full moon until Simone's energy began to flag. She was a beautiful wolf, small and graceful and full of boundless enthusiasm. Satisfaction flooded him every time he looked at her, every time she came close and licked his chin or butted her nose against his jaw.

She was his, and she knew it.

Shifting back to his human form too soon would leave him feral and edgy, but staying a wolf too long would exhaust her. After a few hours, Victor began to herd her back in the direction of the cabin, willing to deal with his own discomfort to spare hers.

She caught on, but stopped short with a yip, and he had to nudge her on before she moved again. She paused again as soon as they cleared the trees by the cabin, watching him carefully.

He huffed and nipped at her flank, and she danced away and bounded to the door. He'd propped it open before shifting, so she had only to push it wide and run inside.

Magic rippled through the air as he ran in, and he found her already kneeling by the banked fire, her pale skin glinting in the dim light. "We'll have to stir this up."

Victor nudged the door shut and let her see to the fire. She had the advantage now. Freed from the call of the moon, she wouldn't fall victim to it again unless fear or pain brought the wolf to the surface.

He had a harder battle to fight. The moon hung heavy overhead and dug claws deep into his soul. The wolf struggled, demanding another chance to run and revel, to be free and wild.

Long minutes passed before he knelt trembling on the floor, sides heaving with rough pants.

"You didn't have to come back in," she murmured. "You could stay out. I'll be fine."

"So will I." *Eventually*. "I wanted to come with you."

The flames jumped and crackled as the fresh logs caught, and Simone stood slowly. "Can I help?"

She was naked. Beautiful. His to take. Even with pain lingering in his body, his cock stiffened. "That depends. Do you still want me?"

She tilted her head, and a coppery curl fell over her cheek. "I can't remember a time when I didn't want you."

The answer was everything he needed. He rocked to his feet and crossed the space between them, stopping a foot away to admire the wicked curves of her body. Full breasts, flared hips, soft, pale skin... "You're so beautiful."

She closed some of the distance, her fingertips skimming his arms as her gaze drifted down his body. “So are you.”

He had to make it worth the wait. He had to make up for every moment of pain he’d caused her, erase it all and leave pleasure in its place. The bed was close enough to the fire to benefit from its warmth, so he swept her up into his arms and carried her to the rumpled blankets.

When he laid her on the bed, Simone bit her lip and held out her arms. “Seems silly to be nervous, but I am.”

Victor had no idea if Simone had taken a lover after Edwin, and had no intention of bringing the bastard up now. Instead he slid onto the bed, into her arms, and kissed her softly. “Nothing to be nervous about, darling.”

“It’s easy for you.” She wrapped her hands around him and pulled him closer. “Every time you kiss me, I turn to mush.”

“Just because I’m getting harder instead of softer doesn’t mean you’re not turning me to mush.”

Some of the nervousness faded from her smile, and she teased one hand down his side. “An interesting point. One I’ll have to bear in mind.”

He would kiss her first, he decided. Kiss her until she’d forgotten what nerves were, then trace every inch of her with his tongue. She deserved a slow seduction. Worship. He’d claim her by pleasing her.

Her mouth opened under his, soft and needy, and she made quiet noises of pleasure. Before long, her body arched to his, hot and seeking.

The feel of her soft skin under his fingers drove him half-mad. He spread his fingers wide on her abdomen, sweeping his thumb up and down until she nipped at his chin, then gave in and swept his hand up to cup her breast.

Her gasp echoed in the quiet of the room as her nipple hardened under his palm. “Yes.”

“You like this?” He teased his thumb over her nipple and delighted in the play of pleasure across her face. “Would you like my tongue? My teeth?”

Her breath caught, and she slipped her own hand to her other breast and echoed his movements. “Both.”

So he gave her both, teasing licks giving way to soft nips as his fingers traced her hip and her waist and the soft curve of her belly—anywhere but the beckoning heat between her thighs.

As Simone’s pleasure grew, so did her confidence. She smiled wickedly and rubbed her thigh against his erection. “Can I touch you?”

He couldn’t deny her anything with that light filling her eyes. “Any damn place you want.”

Her hand skimmed his stomach and his hip. “Here?”

If she wrapped her fingers around his dick, he’d explode. It might be worth it. “*Anywhere.*”

"Anywhere," she echoed softly, the back of her hand grazing his hard flesh. "It's been a long time, Victor."

An answer to the question he hadn't asked, and all the more reason to take things slowly. She'd tamed the feral edge of the wolf with her first hesitant smile, and it made it easy to roll onto his back. He tugged at her hand, pulling it up against his chest. "All the time in the world to get it right."

She sat up, kneeling over his thigh. "You won't hurt me."

The fact that it was almost a question made him want to hurt *someone*, but he refused to bring anger to bed with them, no matter its object. "Not in a thousand years."

Simone released a soft breath, one he doubted she knew she'd been holding, and bent over him until her lips met his bare shoulder.

It felt good—it felt fucking *fantastic*, but lying passively was its own sort of torture. He let himself thread his fingers loosely through her hair but didn't try to guide her. Instead he channeled the need trembling inside him into words. "I'm going to spend hours touching you. So many places I want to kiss."

"Here?" She kissed the center of his chest, then lower. "Or here?"

He tightened his fingers in her hair and lifted her head, giving her a deadly serious look. "I'll let you lick my cock like an ice cream cone if that's what you want, but you look me in the eye first and tell me *you* want to."

Again, that gentle smile. "I wouldn't if I didn't want to, but I do. I want to taste you."

Christ, he really *was* going to come like an overeager boy. And he didn't care, as long as she let him keep touching her. "Do I get to return the favor?"

She laughed and nibbled at his stomach. "Absolutely."

He was tempted—more than tempted—to drag her hips around and show her just what he could do with his tongue. Let her ride his mouth while she went down on him, see who lost it first. Tempting—but he didn't want any distractions when he made her come the first time. Not for him, and not for her.

Simone stroked his cock, lightly at first and then harder, her eyes locked with his. "I like the way you look at me."

"How am I looking at you?" It came out as a growl, but she didn't seem to mind.

"As if there's no doubt at all," she whispered. "Like you *want* me." She touched her tongue to the head of his cock, licking delicately.

No power in hell or on earth could have kept his hips from jerking up toward the heat of her mouth. "Like I'm imagining how good you'll look riding me?"

Her blue eyes darkened with passion. "Like you can't wait to sink into me."

"I can't." Victor drove his teeth into his lower lip to keep rougher words from tumbling out. He wanted to fuck her with his tongue until she was limp and trembling. Slide into her cunt before she finished coming. Watch her face when she realized she was *his*.

Her fingertips brushed his mouth, freeing his bitten lip, and she watched him closely. "Tell me what you'll do. What you want."

He caught her finger between his teeth with a low growl and teased at the tip of it with his tongue before releasing it. "I want to drag you up here and let you cling to the headboard while I taste you."

Simone froze, save for her deep, ragged breaths. "You want me on your mouth?"

It hadn't even occurred to him that no one might have bothered to see to her pleasure before, but she didn't seem nervous. "I want you everywhere," he replied, keeping his voice low. "But right now, I want you on my mouth."

She climbed higher on his body, her movements surprisingly graceful in spite of her haste. "You have to show me."

He caught her hips in his hands and held her there as she straddled his waist. "Depends on how you want to do it. Facing the headboard? Or stretched out on top of me with your head on my hip? You can touch me that way..." And the distraction would be worth it.

"My head on your *hip*?" She rocked against him.

Imagination conjured the feel of her lips around his cock, and he groaned. "Or do whatever the hell you want."

"That's what I want." She turned and stretched out over him, her nipples brushing his stomach.

The view of her ass, legs spread wide on either side of his chest, was almost too much. He smoothed one hand up the back of her thigh and dipped his fingers between her legs, groaning at the slick heat that greeted him. "It sure seems to be, darling."

She moaned and wrapped her hand around his cock again. "I don't know how many times I touched myself, thinking of you."

There was a thought to keep a man warm at night. "How do you like it? Slow and soft? Faster?"

"Slow, but not soft."

He gave her what she asked for, a slow, firm touch, letting the fitful movements of her hips guide him. She jerked and rocked, whispering his name, then lowered her mouth and slid her lips down around him.

Not even the need to make this the best damn sex of her life could keep him in control. He curled both hands around her thighs and guided her back until he could replace his fingers with his tongue.

Simone had been trying to get Victor in her bed for what seemed like forever, and now she wasn't sure what to do with him.

She enjoyed the taste of him on her tongue, musky and male and arousing as hell. It had to last, but she wasn't sure how long she'd be able to concentrate on teasing her tongue over his hard flesh, not with *his* tongue doing wicked things to her.

And wicked they were. He seemed determined to drive her crazy, taking his time exploring her and murmuring encouraging words, his hands never still.

She threw back her head with a moan, her whole body awash with dizzy pleasure. “Right—right there—”

Clever fingers pushed their advantage mercilessly, centering in on the spot that made her wild as his tongue licked and coaxed until she was shaking uncontrollably.

Bliss hovered just out of her reach, and she dug her nails into his hip. There was one thing she needed more than anything, so she pulled away and turned, positioning her hips over his. “Now?”

He caught her around the waist and flowed into a sitting position, fast and deadly graceful. His chest pressed against hers, his lips found her chin, and he moaned and coaxed her down, inch by inch, pushing into her. “*Now.*”

The seconds slipped by too quickly as he thrust up and she rocked down. Simone struggled to hold on to those moments, desperate to capture every second of his claiming. To burn it into her memory. “You’re perfect.”

“Only with you.” He licked her shoulder and marked her with his teeth. “Because you’re mine.”

The need to hold his mouth to her skin left her clutching his head, tugging at his hair. “Again.”

He curled his fingers in her hair and forced her chin up, ignoring her urgings in favor of licking a path up her throat. “Again, what? Tell me, darling. Let me hear it.”

There was no room for shame or embarrassment. “Bite me again.”

“Like this?” A soft nip as he dragged her down against him.

She couldn’t speak, not right away, but she moaned her approval and scratched her nails down his back. “Harder.”

He closed his teeth on her neck and growled. The possession inherent in the sharp caress sent her spiraling out of control, and she ground down against him.

“Just like that.” He spoke the words against her skin, low and so hungry. “Perfect. We’re perfect like this, when you’re mine.”

Perfect. Being with him was better than she’d hoped, an exact fit that made her want to weep because they’d wasted so much time already—

The thought evaporated like mist on a summer morning, swept away by the certainty that *this* was where she belonged. Where she needed to stay. “Always yours,” she whispered.

His hands tightened on her hips, rough fingertips digging in as he urged her to move again, urged her to ride him, their sweat-slick bodies sliding against each other. The room filled with the sounds of their loving, skin on skin, and his rough, rasping pants and his voice saying over and over again, “I know.”

Do you? She couldn’t ask, could only moan as pleasure closed tight around her.

Every rock pushed her higher, faster, until she couldn't have resisted if she'd wanted to. The sweet clench of orgasm seized her, primal and explosive, shaking her in his arms.

He came in the next moment, as if he'd been holding himself back by willpower alone. His guttural groan echoed off the cabin walls, the basest sound of satisfaction she'd ever heard.

It went on and on, an unceasing ecstasy intensified by the way Victor held her, as if he never wanted to let go. Simone gasped and shuddered as her tremors subsided into slow, easy waves of pleasure.

His fingers stroked down her spine. Soft. Worshipful. "You're perfect."

She felt full, complete. "Do you need to run again, or can you stay?"

"I can stay." He dropped his forehead to her shoulder, and she thought she felt him smile. "I feel downright tame."

"Tame enough to sleep?"

"As long as you sleep with me, darling."

"Nowhere else to go," she teased. "And nowhere else I'd rather be."

"Good." Both of his arms tightened, keeping her cradled against him as he fell back onto the tangled blankets. "That's all I need to know."

Sleep beckoned, and Simone snuggled closer. "Think we can keep each other warm tonight like this?"

His rumbling laughter made his chest vibrate beneath her. He shifted to the side and dragged at the blankets until they were both covered, and the edges tucked tight around them. "Sleep."

"Until I wake up, horny and groping you again?"

"Like I said, darling. You put those pretty little hands anywhere you damn well please."

"A waking dream."

"Uh-huh. Don't think you're so much waking as dreaming now, my gorgeous girl."

"Mmm." True enough, but he was warm and comfortable and everything about the world was...
"Perfect."

Chapter Seven

By the time they made their way down to Victor's boat two days later, it was—in a very literal sense—utterly destroyed.

Simone picked up a jagged piece of broken wood and bit her lip, unsure of what to say. The boat had been his home, a private place on an island that had far too few of them. "I'm so sorry."

"It was a boat." His voice sounded tired. "I'll buy a new one."

She dropped the wood and turned to him. "It wasn't *just* a boat. It was yours. Part of you."

"So was my car," he retorted, and this time at least the words held a little bit of humor. "That's my baby Slim's driving around in now. We have things. We lose them. You don't live this long without learning things never matter."

"Not like people matter," she agreed, smoothing her hand over his collar. "You're safe, and that's what's important."

"We're safe." He leaned down and kissed her forehead. "I'll just buy an even nicer boat to make myself feel better."

"What do we do with this one? Anything?"

"Salvage what we can. The sails. Maybe the lumber." He picked up the piece of wood she'd dropped. "Too bad we didn't have an ax on board. Chopping down trees is going to be a challenge, if we need more firewood."

They could check over the other cabin, see if there happened to be even a handsaw. They could always cut up trees that had already fallen. "We'll figure it out."

"Without a doubt. Though if we could turn our minds toward some way of attracting attention to this island, it couldn't hurt. Guy will be out looking with his eyes, even if magic won't do the trick."

She should have been eager to find ways to hasten their rescue, but what had happened between them was so new it felt like one more misunderstanding, one wrong move could bring it to an end, and it left her wistful, wishing for more time.

Simone shook herself. "How familiar is Guy with these islands? If he comes out looking, will the smoke from the chimney catch his attention as something odd?"

Victor's shoulders bunched up in a half-hearted shrug. "Can't say for sure. I'm not willing to waste wood making more smoke, though. Not when we don't know how much of the winter we'll be spending here."

“Could we use part of the sail as a signal? Fly it from a tree out at the edge of the cove?”

“Maybe.” Another shrug, this one accompanied by a smile that seemed almost a little conspiratorial. “We’ll spend a few days thinking about it, hmm?”

Relief made it easy to wind her arm around his and smile up at him. “A few days, at least. I’m sure we can formulate a brilliant plan.”

“With your brains and my appreciation of your brains? Absolutely.”

“I do my best thinking in bed.”

His lips twitched. “And here we finally got out of it for a little while. Miss it already?”

“How could I not?” Something about lying in his arms made it easy to forget everything else.

Victor tossed the wood toward the water line, turning his back on her. His shoulders were broad. Stiff. “We need to talk. Or we need to decide not to talk.”

It was far from unexpected, and Simone steeled herself for the discussion. “All right. Which would you prefer?”

He stared out at the ocean for a long time before looking at her. “Never was much good at talking, and seems like we’ve got enough to worry about for now.”

She nodded slowly. “We don’t know how long we might be here.” Hurt feelings could only complicate that.

Something in his stance relaxed, and his easy smile returned. “I think the first thing we need to do is move the supplies up to the cabin. We may have to rearrange things, but having them on hand and in a sturdier shelter will be good.”

It wouldn’t take them long in fair weather and good fitness. “Can you show me the other cabin after that? I’d like to look around.”

“Sure thing. Once we’re situated, I think I’ll go hunting. See if I can’t find something for the stew pot.”

“More rabbit would be helpful.” She had no idea how long anything larger would keep with daytime temperatures hovering well above freezing.

He swept her a jaunty bow and affected a too-thick drawl. “I reckon I can rustle up a pair of bunnies for my lady’s pleasure.”

She couldn’t help but laugh as she reached for him again. “You’re insane, and I have to kiss you now.”

“That was the point, darling.” Then he kissed her, long and hard enough to make it clear that moving the supplies could wait.

Victor had lost track of the days.

He thought it had been six days since the full moon. Maybe a week since they'd crashed, except he couldn't be sure because he'd honestly forgotten to count.

Or maybe he didn't want to count. Sometimes, at night, with Simone curled against his side and her steady breathing lulling him towards sleep, he worried. About Seamus, trapped on an island with already traumatized wolves who would be frantic about Simone's disappearance. He worried about Guy, trying to decide between hauling traps and rescue missions, and sweet little Rose, who rarely seemed to talk to anyone but Simone.

Hell, he even worried about Joan, prickly Joan who must be sick with concern over her best friend.

Mostly, he worried that not even guilt could make him worry the rest of the time.

Day and night blurred together. He and Simone hunted and cooked and plotted increasingly outrageous and unlikely ways to draw searchers' attentions to their island. He made love to her in front of a roaring fire and spent hours trying to burn the pleasure of his touch into her skin. If he was enough...

No. Thinking wouldn't do him any more good than talking had ever done them both. He couldn't give her the words she needed. They twisted in his mouth and came out wrong, made her frustrated and angry. Instead he'd give her actions, he'd *show* her what he was. What he wanted to be.

He almost hoped rescue waited long enough for him to prove he would love her.

Next to him, Simone stirred. Victor rolled onto his side and drew her back against his chest, savoring the soft brush of her skin against his. "You awake?"

She chuckled low in her throat. "Not yet, but that could change."

"Too early." He loved the way her hip fit under the curve of his hand. "I was just thinking."

She lifted her arm, fingers brushing his cheek. "About what, darling?"

"Maybe it's just because I'm old, but living this way... It's not so bad."

Simone rolled to her stomach and propped up on both elbows, her tangled hair falling over her brow. "Living the rustic lifestyle, or the fact that it's just the two of us?"

His fingers itched to touch her hair, to smooth it into place—or muss it further. "The company certainly helps, but yes. I expected to miss the city more. Cars and electricity and telephones and the radio. I thought Seamus and Guy were mad when they proposed we hide on an island."

She smiled. "Those trappings of civilization turned out to be pretty empty, did they?"

"I wanted them all when I was young and poor and they were new and exciting." He gave in and brushed her hair back. "Now I just want a quiet life. A woman. Peace."

Simone's smile gentled, and she kissed his shoulder. "I think that sounds lovely."

So stay with me. Words he didn't dare speak. "Did you imagine you'd grow up and move to a near-deserted island in the Penobscot Bay?"

“Never.” She laid her cheek on his chest. “I always imagined I’d grow up to be my mother. Marry a rich industrialist who was mostly content to leave me to my life while he led his own, and have several children I could mostly ignore, unless they happened to be making my life difficult.”

As strong as his wolf had taken to her, he barely knew the first thing about her. “I guess I knew you’d grown up rich. Didn’t think much about it. You’re not as...” he searched for a polite word and settled for a less offensive one, “...prickly as Joan.”

“Perhaps it’s because I’m older,” she suggested, lifting her head. “Or because I dislike you far less.”

“Good to know.” He coaxed her cheek back to his chest and let himself stroke her hair. “How old were you when you became a wolf?”

“I had just turned twenty-one.” She laughed again, almost solemnly this time. “A very misguided twenty-one, easily seduced by pretty words of devotion, regardless of their veracity.”

Fucking Edwin Lancaster. “He must have had his share of pretty words. None of them should have been pretty enough to keep his alpha from kicking him into place.”

“If it had just been Edwin, it never would have happened. He wasn’t my first lover, Victor. Far from it.” Simone sighed and sat up. “My parents sent me to college because they couldn’t marry me off, not with my reputation, and they’d grown tired of trying. They figured I would graduate and go on to marry some rich but low-born man who needed the legitimacy of the Cabot name but couldn’t afford to be too choosy.”

Edwin would have fit the bill, since the Lancaster fortune was only a generation old. “So you found Edwin?”

“My parents did, yes. And by the time any of us figured out he didn’t plan to marry me at all...” She shrugged. “It was easier for them to wash their hands of me. And I—” For the first time during her explanation, she looked uncomfortable. “I didn’t have anywhere else to go. So I stayed and became his mistress.”

“I’m sorry.” Inadequate words, but the best he had to offer. “It shouldn’t have happened the way it did. Once you were a wolf, the alpha should have protected you. You should have had a place to go.”

She shook her head. “It’s in the past. It brought me here, and that’s the only reason it even matters anymore.”

It would always matter to him. The pack he’d grown up in had been small—a ranch and a farm and the workers and kin who made their living on both—but the rules had been beaten into him as a boy by his uncle. Dominants protected. It didn’t matter who the weaker wolf was, or who they should belong to. Humans ruled the world with their rage and fear, and wolves needed to help each other survive.

Like you’re doing now. Breckenridge Island was a dream, the dream of safety. Sanctuary. “Nothing like that will happen to you again.”

Her gaze softened even as it heated, and she stroked her hand over his cheek. “I know that.”

Nothing soothed him like her trust. Not even her touch, sweet though it was. “Good. Just like I’ve been saying all along, darling. You’re safe.”

“I feel safe here, with you.” She teased one hand through the hair on his chest. “Tell me about your family.”

It had been years since he’d seen them, but memories still came easily enough. “There were a lot of us. That can happen, when both partners are wolves. I was one of the oldest, but my ma was still having babies when I was damn near thirty.”

She bit her lip. “I saw a picture in your box of things. I was... I suppose I was snooping.”

He found himself oddly pleased that she’d been interested enough to snoop. “The one of all of us together? Ma had the second set of twins after that was taken, but that was the lot of us, otherwise. More hands to work, but more mouths to feed when things went bad.”

“The crops. I remember.”

“I was already gone. I’d been gone a couple decades.” Considering what she knew of his bootlegging days, it shouldn’t have been so hard to admit the truth. But smuggling liquor was a far cry from murder. “I’d had trouble with the law.”

She must have felt his tension, because she made a soft noise and rubbed her cheek over his skin. “You don’t have to tell me.”

He didn’t, but it might explain some things. “There are some sweet-talking wizards too. Local preacher was one. We mostly left him alone, until I found out he’d sweet-talked my baby sister into all manner of unnatural things.”

She slid her arm around him suddenly and hugged him tight. “What did you do?”

“Shot him. Three times.” In broad daylight, because rage had wiggled its way under his skin so fast and hard he couldn’t choke it back. “She was barely more than a kid, and he’d twisted her up with dark magic. Took ten years before she’d venture outside without one of our brothers at her side.”

“That’s horrible,” she whispered. “I’m sorry.”

He held her closer, because the press of her skin made it easier to deal with the unpleasant memories. “My family hid me. Got me out under the nose of the law. They didn’t turn their backs on me until later.”

“Until you started working with Seamus?”

“That’s the way I was raised. Killing to protect your pack—that’s justice. Breaking human laws for money is evil.”

She touched his face, her fingers trailing over his stubbled jaw. “Even if it’s a stupid human law, I suppose.”

He summoned a smile for her. “My mother’s thoughts on liquor fall more in line with Joan’s than mine.”

Simone clucked her tongue. “Liquor doesn’t give men the capacity for evil. It doesn’t have to.”

A fact his mother should have known—but he supposed everyone had prejudices. Even werewolves. “Ain’t that the truth. Maybe I’ll bring you out there sometime and let you set her straight.”

She laughed and punched him lightly in the shoulder. “Don’t tease.”

He hadn’t been. It was so easy to imagine a time after life on the island had settled, when he could bring her ashore and take her to the plains. Easy—and dangerous. For all he knew, she still wanted to go to Europe in the spring.

He’d ask her, if he wasn’t so much of a damn coward.

She hummed softly and climbed over him, touching her tongue to his chest and then his shoulder. “I’m not the sort of woman you take home to your family.”

It was so contrary to the path of his own thoughts that it shocked him into a laugh. “Oh, honey, you’re the sort of woman I’d take anywhere you damn well pleased.”

“Really?”

“Truly.” And because it hurt to think such a promise could surprise her, he dragged her down into a long, languid kiss, determined to banish conversation with the sweet pleasure of making love to her.

On the tenth night, Simone dreamed of James.

He stood across a wide, dark chasm, calling her name, and her first instinct was to hide. She wasn’t ready to face him or anyone else on Breckenridge Island, not when she still had so much to say...

The world spun, shaking beneath her feet, and she almost fell. Strong, sure hands closed around her shoulders, holding her up, but it wasn’t Victor.

“James.”

“*Finally.*” His voice echoed around them as he dragged her close. “I worried you were dead.”

“No, I—” It wasn’t a guilty dream at all. *Magic*, she thought fuzzily. “I’m fine. I’m all right.”

“I couldn’t reach you, but I’m not good at this. I’m not a dream—” His voice faded, though his lips continued to move. A second later sound returned. “—where you are?”

She should have asked Victor to draw a map of some sort to show her, or at least explain it to her. “I don’t know. We had to sail off course because of the storm.”

His fingers tightened on her shoulders, heat radiating through her clothes to her skin. “You’re on one of the islands?”

He shouldn’t have been touching her, but she didn’t know how to tell him, or even if she should. “An island, yes. There are two summer cabins and a boathouse, if Guy recognizes that.”

“How large is it?”

She'd run it from end to end, but always distracted by the call of the waning moon or the thrill of the hunt. The thrill of being chased by her mate. "I don't know. Smaller than Breckenridge, but larger than others."

"I can't—" His body faded, though the heat of his hands on her shoulders burned now. He came back stronger. "I can follow the magic back. I'll come with Guy, we'll find you. I promise we'll find you."

"Even if you can't, we'll be fine. Tell Joan, and Seamus."

"I will. You can—"

He vanished, leaving only the ghostly burn of phantom hands.

She jerked awake, panting, her bare skin so painfully warm she expected to see blisters, or at the very least an angry red imprint of James's fingers.

Instead she found Victor, half sitting up and one hand extended as if to touch her. "Simone?"

It took her a moment to speak. "They found us. James came to me."

"I know." The words were edged with darkness, rough and unsteady. "I can feel him."

James had marked her with magic, the kind that would grate against Victor's instincts under normal circumstances, without his personal experiences complicating the situation. "He did it so they could find us."

His fingers touched her shoulder, and he hissed out a breath. "It's twisted all around you. Is it hurting you?"

She shook her head. "No, it's— They'll find the island. They'll come here."

He snatched his hand away and rolled onto his back, glaring up at the ceiling. "I shouldn't hate it. But I do."

"Victor." She caught herself before reaching for him. "It's a means to an end, that's all. I still—" Her voice broke. "I still belong to you."

In a flash he was stretched out over her, pressing her back against the bed. "Say it again."

Need had tightened his voice, and Simone fed that need readily. Eagerly. "I belong to you. Always, remember?"

Victor pulled back and gripped her hips, urging her over to her stomach with a rough growl. "Again," he whispered, a moment before his teeth closed on her shoulder.

The caress filled her with instinctive satisfaction, the purest sense of belonging tangled up with the desire of a woman for a man. "Yours."

"Mine." Agreement. Confirmation. His fingers tickled against her skin as he gathered her hair, twisting it around his hand until her nape was bare.

Then he bit her again.

She tried to say his name, but her voice failed, turning the sound into a low, helpless moan.

“Do you want this?” He sat back and stroked his hands down her back until they curved around the flare of her hips. “Do you need it?”

“*You*, Victor.” She pushed her hands against mattress, arching her body back toward his. “With every breath.”

This wasn’t the man who had seduced her with single-minded intensity over long nights. That man had never lost control, not even with instinct driving him. Now, his control seemed to shatter as he urged her hips up, then slid one hand between her thighs. “Prove it. Let me feel it.”

She trembled but managed to stay on her knees. His touch stoked a fire in her, one that stole her breath and threatened to shake her apart already. “I’d give you anything.”

“Anything?” He slicked his fingers against her, then inside, thrusting deep, using everything he’d learned of her body.

Pleasure built quickly as he coaxed her toward orgasm. Her head began to spin, and she clutched at the blankets until they tore. Her voice rose, hoarse pleas that she barely recognized as her own because nothing mattered, nothing beyond the way he fucked her with his fingers.

He pushed her harder, pushed her until she came, shrieking his name, then thrust home while she still trembled. His hands hit the bed on either side of hers, his chest hot against her back, his breath against her ear. “I can feel you, clenching around my cock. Coming for me.”

Simone gasped and shuddered, alight not only with lingering pleasure but with contentment at the yearning in his voice. “It’s so much better than anything else, knowing how you want me.”

“Under me.” He caught her hands and pinned them to the bed before rocking into her again. “Around me. Screaming for me.”

She was helpless to escape, completely at his mercy. It should have scared her. Instead, it catapulted her beyond thought.

Beyond sanity.

She turned her head, growled and bit his jaw. “Harder. *Make* me scream.”

Teeth closed on her shoulder. Her neck. He marked her again and again, growling each time, thrusting deeper until his hips inched hers up the bed with every powerful movement.

This was claiming, and she never wanted it to end. But nothing could hold release at bay, not with the way Victor moved, every thrust rubbing his cock against a perfect spot inside her.

She came again, screaming this time, and he followed her with a satisfied snarl, driving her hips down to the bed with the force of his final thrust. His head dropped against her shoulder, his body trembling over hers, and one word fell from his lips, low and rasping. “Simone.”

She touched his hair, curved her palm to his cheek. *My love*. Would he believe her? And would it matter if he didn’t?

After a quiet moment he eased to the side and collapsed, his arm still slung across her back. “Are you all right?”

“Mmm.” She could barely move, but she opened her eyes and smiled at him. “Never more right.”

He didn’t smile back, not right away. His eyes held shadows, an uncertainty. “I wasn’t as gentle with you as I’d have liked to be.”

The notion that he could have hurt her was so absurd she almost laughed. But he seemed deadly serious, so she chose her words carefully. “You don’t always have to be perfectly gentle with me. You couldn’t break me unless you tried, and you would never do that.”

“I have to be careful. I have to be in *control*.”

“Victor...” She turned to him. “You didn’t lose control.”

His fingers brushed over her neck, presumably where the mark of his teeth lingered. “Didn’t I?”

Simone caught his hand. “You didn’t hurt me.”

“This time.”

“No.” She framed his face with her hands and forced him to look at her. “The guilt has to stop, or you’re going to make me feel very bad about something that was beautiful.”

He closed his eyes and nodded once. “No guilt. It was—” He had to clear his throat. “You’re beautiful, Simone. You always are. You’re everything.”

Her hands trembled. “Then why do I feel like I did something wrong?”

“Shh.” His stiff posture broke, and he slid his arms around her and gathered her close. “Sorry, sweetheart. Shouldn’t be taking my problems out on you.”

“Yes, you should,” she argued. “I don’t want to be coddled. I want to understand.”

“You’ve been hurt, Simone. You’ve been mistreated. The fact that you’re all right doesn’t excuse me losing control to begin with. Strong wolves don’t have the luxury of indulging our whims carelessly, no matter how satisfying it can be.”

“So you’re never allowed to let go, not even with me?”

“Not this soon. Not for the wrong reasons.”

It was too pat, too neat, but she had no choice but to accept his explanation. The alternative was to press him into an argument, and that would only end in tears—or worse.

So she yielded, just like always. “All right.”

He wasn’t stupid. He knew she wasn’t content, she saw the truth of it in his eyes. But whatever haunted him must have been worse, because he pulled her closer and settled the blankets over them. “We need sleep, then. I suppose Guy could be showing up any day now.”

Simone closed her eyes, but she couldn’t relax into his embrace. He reminded her of the pond at her parents’ home in Massachusetts. On the surface, it looked placid, still, and it always iced quickly in the

winter. But it was fed by a spring, with currents down in its depths, and that layer of ice remained fragile well into the season.

Victor didn't want her to see what lay below the surface of his emotions. She'd give him time—it was no less than anyone deserved—but, sooner or later, the ice would break.

Chapter Eight

It was wrong to regret being rescued.

Victor stood at the water's edge and watched Guy toss an anchor overboard. The boat floated a good ten yards out into the water, as close as Guy probably wanted to come without knowing what lay under the surface.

A smart move, with Victor standing next to the gutted remains of his sailboat.

Guy waved both arms, but he wasn't the one who jumped right into the chilly water and began swimming.

It was the wizard.

Victor had soothed Simone because it wasn't fair to force her to carry the burden of his own inner darkness, but that darkness stirred as he watched his rival cut a path toward the shore while Guy still struggled with the anchor.

No. Not a rival. His human half.

Hunt, replied the wolf.

He heard Simone coming down the path, heard the moment her steps halted in shock. "Victor."

"I was just about to come get you." Amazing how calm his voice sounded. A faint splash told him Guy had hit the water, probably worried about his wizard friend and the reception he was likely to meet at Victor's hands. Guy *should* be worried, even if Victor managed to keep his tone casual. "I hadn't considered the problem of not having a decent dock. We're going to have to come back later to fetch the supplies."

"I..." Her voice trailed off. "They should be secure in the cabin."

She sounded dazed, and that angry part of himself was all too ready to lay the blame on the wizard now standing shoulder-deep in the surf. He'd wrapped magic around her. Weakened her.

Or maybe she was pleased to see him.

Or maybe you're a bastard who's losing his mind.

Her hand slid into his. "Will we be able to get everything back to Breckenridge before the winter worsens?"

The touch grounded him enough to reply. "I'll talk to Seamus, and we'll send some of the men back. They can make quick work of it."

James struggled onto the rough shore, panting but steadier than Guy, probably owing to who-knew-what sort of magic. Even his voice grated on Victor's nerves. "Simone, thank God! I didn't know if we'd be able to find you, after all."

He reached for her, and she held up a hand even as she stepped back. "James, don't."

It was too late. Victor's temper snapped. His hand closed around the back of James's vest and hauled him back so hard he spilled into the water.

He emerged with Guy's help, sputtering and dripping. "What the hell?"

"Don't touch her."

"Victor, stop." Simone clutched his arm.

James froze in the midst of brushing back his wet hair and stared at Victor. "You bastard."

Even knowing the words were true didn't provide adequate leash to his rage. He crowded Simone back a couple steps and fought to breathe, to *think*. A touch shouldn't unhinge him to the point of violence.

Or maybe it should. He'd never been in love before.

Guy spoke to James, drowning out the wizard's low, angry tones. Simone raised her voice over all of it as she gripped Victor's arms and turned him, her shoulders set and tense. "This is completely unnecessary. It's silly."

It was only in that moment that Victor realized the depths of foolishness his own cowardice had driven him to. In refusing to talk to her, by avoiding the final confrontation that would make her his, he'd left himself unsettled. Wounded.

Everything was about to change, and he didn't know if she'd choose him.

One thing he did know—she wouldn't much care for him if he beat a defenseless man into the ground. "I'm fine," he grated out and prayed it wasn't a lie. "I'm under control now."

"Are you?" She lowered her voice. "Be sure, because we both have to get in a boat with him soon."

"A dunk in the Penobscot Bay will cool my temper plenty."

Simone grasped his face with both hands and studied him intently. Finally, she said, "You still have no idea how I feel about you, do you? None."

His chest hurt. "We can talk about it later. When you're back on Breckenridge Island. Safe."

This time, he wasn't sure she'd give in. But she did—finally, silently—as she folded her arms around her midsection and turned away.

She might as well have slapped him. It would have hurt less.

He would have deserved it more.

Rose shoved another steaming tin cup of broth into her hands. Under Joan's watchful eye, Simone had no choice but to take it. "I'm not cold anymore, really."

"You took a swim in the Atlantic. In November." Joan braced both hands on her hips, her stern expression not nearly strong enough to counteract the worry in her eyes. "James is getting the same treatment."

He'd need it even more. He had magic to protect him, but he'd made the swim twice, to and from the tiny island where she and Victor had been marooned.

Just thinking Victor's name elicited a stab of pain, and Simone closed her eyes. "And Guy? Surely he needs more care, if he's been sailing all over creation, searching for us."

Joan made an amused little noise. "Guy's tucked up with a pot of Rose's best stew and probably has more attention than he wants or needs."

Guilt assailed Simone anew. In her darker moments, she almost resented the tenacity of Guy's rescue efforts. It was, by far, the most selfish and horrible thought she'd ever had. "Has it been terrible without the supplies?"

"We made do." A chair scraped next to her, and Joan sat with a soft sigh. "Necessity is the mother of invention, as they say."

Simone would never be able to look her friend in the eye again if she didn't tell the truth. "I half-hoped we'd have to stay there," she whispered. "With just the two of us, it was..."

Joan's arms came around her. Warm. Strong. "With just the two of you, there was no hiding."

"No, there wasn't." And if he hadn't been forced into such close company with her, things might never have changed. "I can't go back to having him ignore me because he doesn't know what else to do, Joanie. I won't make it."

"I know." Sympathy stood clearly in Joan's eyes, and a more subtle warmth surrounded them both, the comfort of pack. "Don't let him. Dominant wolf or not, he's still a man. And men are cowards. Stand up to him and make him deal with you. It's better than not knowing, isn't it?"

"It's not *me* he has to deal with. It's more complicated, and I have no idea how to help him."

"Do you think it's a man thing or a wolf thing? Because I don't understand men, but I understand strong wolves."

Victor's past hurts were dark and far too personal for her to share with Joan. "It's both."

"Well, then." Joan pulled back and crossed her arms over her chest. "It pains me to give Victor this much credit, but it *is* the truth. He can't choose whether or not he wants to protect you. None of us can. We could cut out our own hearts trying to stop and we'd still fail."

"I know." That instinct had driven Victor to rage before, to kill. "I need to talk to him."

"When you've rested." Joan stood and tucked the chair back under the table. "Rose will stay with you. I'm going to make sure everything's settled and see who can be organized to retrieve the supplies."

"Thanks." As her friend began to turn away, Simone stopped her with a hand on her arm. "You and Victor don't give each other enough credit, Joan. You're more alike than you think."

“No, we know exactly how alike we are.” Joan glanced over her shoulder, one eyebrow raised. “Or have you never noticed how little credit we give ourselves?”

“Perhaps I have.” Nothing would make either of them more uncomfortable than peering into a mirror—and not liking what they saw.

Joan nodded in silent acknowledgement before slipping on her coat and bundling out into the crisp evening wind.

Rose remained at the stove, as if she hadn’t heard a bit of the conversation. For all Simone knew, she hadn’t. “Thank you for cooking, Rose.”

“I don’t mind.” The younger woman turned and wiped her hands on the thick, rough apron tied over her slacks and sweater. “I missed you. We all did. We were so worried, Simone.”

She smiled over the rim of her cup. “But you managed, right?”

“We managed.” Rose poured herself a mug of tea and took Joan’s abandoned chair. “The men were...surprisingly comforting. I wasn’t sure how they’d be without Victor here to glare at them for flirting.”

How much of Victor’s glaring had been due to his own harsh judgment of himself? “I assume they behaved.”

“For the most part. There was a bit of a scandal with Mary and Thomas, but... Well, you know Mary. And Seamus took care of it quick enough.”

Simone’s smile faded a little, though she tried to keep it in place. “Sounds like you all got along just fine without us.”

Rose’s eyebrows drew together. “We managed,” she repeated, a little more forcefully this time. “If you think we weren’t missing you every day, you’re mad.”

“No, I—” She set her cup on the table and propped both elbows beside it. “I had a lot of time to think.”

“About what?”

She took a deep breath. “I wouldn’t blame you, any of you, if you hated me.”

Incomprehension filled Rose’s face. She opened her mouth. Closed it. Frowned. “I...I don’t understand.”

Oh, how well she had hidden herself. “For not protecting you from Edwin. For not stopping him.”

Rose’s confusion didn’t vanish. If anything, it became more acute. For an endless moment she stared at Simone, the silence growing more and more uncomfortable as understanding blossomed in the girl’s eyes, followed swiftly by anger. “And how many of us do you hold accountable with you? Should we all shoulder the guilt for every girl who came after us, even though we were surviving as best we could?”

“It isn’t the same.” Simone’s misery deepened. “I keep wondering if I could have found a way, back before he went truly mad.”

"I'm familiar with his madness," Rose said stiffly. "And I don't think it was madness at all. He was a man who could indulge every whim because his money gave him power. How would you have stopped that? Joan is the strongest of us all, and even she couldn't stop him on her own."

Reasonable words, with a reasonable point. "I don't know, Rose. I can't help feeling I should have *found* a way."

"I know. Perhaps you could have. Or perhaps you would have died, and Joan would have had no one to give *her* strength while she fought to protect us." Rose's anger faded a little. "For some of us, the worst Edwin could do was still better than what we would have had. You and Joan lost so much to Edwin. I didn't have anything for him to take."

"I'm sorry." Her guilt was selfish, borne of blindness. To many of Edwin's conquests, the abuse they suffered at his hands was a mere extension of their lives before, just more of the same. At least at his mansion, they'd also had a warm, dry place to sleep and plenty to eat. "I'm sorry."

Rose smiled and shook her head. "Don't be sorry. You still don't understand. You think we deserved better. You made me believe I deserved better. The life we have now...I know it's not much to you and Joan, but for me, it's a dream."

A dream, one Simone could help realize and build—but only if she stayed. She wiped her eyes and blew out a shaky breath. "I got you a new book in Searsport. Fairy tales."

Rose's smile lost its melancholy edge. "I love fairy tales. Thank you."

Because she hadn't experienced nearly enough of them. "You're welcome."

Rose leaned in to rest her cheek against Simone's blanketed shoulder. "We got by without you, but only because you taught us how to do it. How to be strong enough."

It was the sort of comfort she'd dispensed a thousand times, and she'd never needed it herself more than she did at that moment.

Between the thrill of knowing Simone was safe and the agony of wondering if he'd lost her completely, Victor had forgotten one very important detail.

He no longer had a place to sleep.

Nightfall found him cradling a mug of coffee he'd brewed over the hearth in the common building, a blanket thrown over his shoulders in a pointless attempt to protect against the chill. It couldn't protect against the icy misery of loneliness.

He was a fool.

Seamus put it more bluntly. "You're a blooming asshole, Vic."

The alpha didn't ask if he could sit. Why would he? A bench scraped across the rough floor, and Victor glared over at the man who'd gotten him into this mess to begin with. "Maybe I'm not cut out for life on an island."

"It can be confining," Seamus agreed, holding out a shiny silver insulated bottle. "Rose sent you some hot soup. Thought you might need it."

Popping the lid filled the room with the scent of rich broth and herbs. It would no doubt be delicious—the girl could cook so well the men would already be circling if she weren't so clearly wary—but Victor would have traded it in a heartbeat to be back in that cabin, laughing over Simone's slightly burned bunny stew.

Christ, he *was* an asshole. "I don't trust myself with her."

"Why?"

"I would have ripped the wizard's arms off for touching her."

Seamus snorted. "He wants her for his own. The urge is understandable."

To men who'd been wolves for decades, perhaps. "Not to Simone."

"Mmm." His friend nodded slowly. "So she thinks you doubt her."

Victor frowned. That possibility hadn't even occurred to him. That she was scared of him was easy to believe. That she felt wary of the violence inside, the violence that led him to lash out. What woman wouldn't be, especially when she'd been so poorly treated?

Seamus leaned forward. "Quit gaping at me and tell me what she did when you tried to pummel James."

He struggled to remember. "Tried to get me to stop, I guess."

"And do you think she did that for *his* benefit, or for yours?"

No, he wasn't an asshole *or* a fool. He was an idiot. A self-absorbed one. "Fine, I get it."

Seamus waved away his words. "Do you? You look at the wizard and you see a rival. Of course you do. But maybe Simone doesn't understand that, because maybe he can't compete with you at all."

"I said *I get it*." It came out as more of a snarl than he'd usually level at his alpha, but having his nose shoved into the truth like an errant puppy was less comfortable than taking a midwinter swim in the Penobscot Bay. "Leave off, Seamus. Or have you decided to give up being alpha in favor of matchmaking, after all?"

Seamus ground his teeth audibly as he rose. "The attitude has to go, Vic. You want me to mind my own fucking business, I will. But the woman in question is Joan's best friend, and if you break her heart because you're too proud to fix your problems, I'll beat your ass."

Less than two weeks on that island, and he'd already grown accustomed to being the alpha of a pack of two. Seamus wouldn't hesitate to kick him back into line if necessary, even if a challenge would damage the feeling of safety they'd fought so hard to cultivate.

So Victor lowered his eyes. Not for long, just enough to acknowledge that his fight wasn't with his alpha. "I understand."

“Uh-uh, this isn’t your alpha talking. This is *me*, your friend, telling you that you can hate me for interfering if you want, but don’t fuck this up.”

Victor squared his shoulders and looked up. “I’ll try.”

“Then I’ll leave you alone.” He gestured to the bottle. “If you want more, Rose stashed it in the big kitchen. Last I heard, she was tending to Simone.”

Food wouldn’t hurt. It would settle his stomach and give him time to think. To steel his nerves for what he had to do next. “Where’s James?”

“At home. He’s well-equipped to handle his own recovery.”

James was the one of the few on the island who had his own home, but since more than half of it was given over to the infirmary and his medical supplies, no one begrudged him the privacy. At least it would make the coming confrontation easier.

Only Simone could make it worth it.

James answered his door on the fifth knock, with a good-sized glass of Scotch in one hand. “To what do I owe this honor?”

“Can I come in?”

The blond man stepped back with a sweeping gesture. “Be my guest, Mr. Bowen.”

Not the most promising start, but Victor stepped inside and turned to face James. “I shouldn’t have lost control. I’m sorry.”

“You’re not sorry,” James countered politely. “You’re full of shit.”

Victor shrugged. “I *am* sorry I lost control. For her sake, if nothing else. I’m sure as hell not here for my ego.”

“Then why are you here?” He dropped his drink on the table with a thump. “So I can absolve you of your guilt?”

“Because Simone told me where you’re going in the spring.”

For the first time, some of the man’s tension faded, but he retrieved his drink, as if he hadn’t meant to put it down at all. “If you’re worried I might still press her to accompany me, relax. I withdraw my invitation.”

A selfish part of him rejoiced. No danger from a greater purpose, no choices for Simone. She’d be trapped on the island, his only rival a continent away. She’d be his.

But not really. “That’s not what I want,” Victor said, and if it was a lie, at least the wizard would never know. “I want to know if you’d only bring her if she was your lover.”

“I told Simone her participation was in no way contingent upon her being in my bed,” James said, “and I meant it.”

No turning back. “And if she’s in my bed? Would you let me come with you?”

The man almost choked on his liquor. “*You* want to go to Europe to fight for peace?”

“No. But she does, and I’ll fight for her. For any damn thing she wants.”

Judging by the wizard’s expression, the words had been unexpected. “Honestly, I’m not sure what to say.” He finished his drink, then shrugged. “If you both want to help out, you’re both welcome. There are so few people willing to even take a chance at peace that my uncle can probably find tasks for anyone willing to try. It might not be glamorous work, though.”

It made James a better man than him, and Victor might admit it out loud. Someday. For now... “We’ll have the winter to discuss it.”

He snorted out a laugh. “Perhaps by spring I won’t even mind so much. We’ll see, yes?”

“We’ll see.” Their truce felt fragile enough that Victor backed toward the door, past ready to be gone. “Thanks for finding us.”

“You’re welcome.” James sighed roughly. “Don’t hurt her. She deserves to be happy.”

“I know.” The only question was if he was ready to deserve being happy with her.

Chapter Nine

Simone frowned and watched Rose gather the last of her things. “You really don’t have to go.”

Rose smiled and folded her extra blanket with a little too much attention to how all of the corners matched up. “Nonsense. You deserve one night of peace before you have to deal with all of us again.”

“But surely you shouldn’t have to *leave* for the night.”

“It’s just one night.” She was still fiddling with the blanket, smoothing down the creases. The other two girls who shared their tiny one-room house had already left, both expressing a sudden interest in squeezing in with friends for the evening.

Simone’s desperation grew. If they left her alone, she’d have nothing to distract her from thoughts of—

She groaned. “Seamus put you up to this, didn’t he?” Victor was probably already on his way over.

Rose looked up and wrinkled her nose. “He’s the alpha. We obey. And Joan—” Her lips curved up in a tiny smile. “Well. Joan said she’d be along in an hour or so anyway, to make sure you weren’t alone tonight unless you wanted to be. *She* doesn’t obey.”

“No, she doesn’t.” Joan would never have given in to Victor the way she had, allowed him to hide so that things deteriorated to such a sad state. “Was Seamus so sure Victor would come tonight?”

“Sure enough to give up his wife’s company for the evening if Victor doesn’t.” The girl pulled on her warm knit cap and picked up her bundle of blankets and clothing. “If you need anything, if you need me—I’ll just be a few steps down the path. I’ll come back, I promise, no matter what the alpha says or thinks.”

Simone’s hands had started to shake, and she tucked them into her pockets. “Either way, I’ll be fine. Tomorrow, after breakfast, though. Our next lesson exchange.”

“Fairy tales,” Rose agreed, striding toward the door. She paused with her hand on the cool metal knob. “I hope you get yours.”

She already had, for a while. “I will, if I have anything to say about it.”

A heavy knock rattled the door hard enough to drive a startled yelp out of Rose. Color filled her cheeks as she slapped her free hand over her mouth. “Maybe Joan ran out of patience.”

But Simone already knew who stood on the other side. “Have a good night, Rose. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Rose pulled open the door and dropped her gaze, inching aside to let Victor pass. He stepped across the threshold, then bent low enough to catch Rose’s eyes. “Thank you for the soup.”

She nodded with a small, shy smile. "Have a good night, Mr. Bowen. Simone."

She practically ran away, and Simone steeled herself against the way her body reacted to Victor's presence. It was the same as always, a hunger that went straight to her bones, only so much sharper now that—

Now that he's been yours.

Simone squared her shoulders. "Come in, Victor."

Victor closed the door quietly behind him and turned to lean against it. "Simone."

"How are you feeling?"

"Well enough. Rose sent me soup."

"Good." He was nervous, *she* was nervous, and the whole thing was just ridiculous. "This is insane. Why are we tiptoeing around one another like strangers?"

His lips tugged up in that half smile she'd come to know so well. "Because it seems like we just woke up."

"Maybe we did." *Now or never, Simone.* She took a step forward. "I have some things to say, things I've held inside far too long."

The smile faded. "I'm listening."

She took a deep breath. "I told you once that, if you needed time, I would wait for you. Well, it's still true. I love you, and that's not going to change, so I'll wait. One of these days, you won't have any choice but to believe me."

After a moment, Victor nodded. "I may need time. Not to love you. Not even to believe in you. I need time to learn how to be what you need."

"What do you think I need?"

He didn't answer. Not quite. "I talked to James before I came here."

There were only a handful of things the two of them would have ever discussed, even under the best of circumstances. "About the trip overseas this spring."

Another nod. "I asked if I could go."

He couldn't have. Victor was the last person who should have wanted to end the war between werewolves and wizards. He should have wanted to *fight*. "You'd go...for me?"

He might claim not to have an affinity for words, but he made the ones he used count. "I'd do anything for you."

It stole her breath, because it wasn't a grand declaration, just a simple statement of fact. Her eyes welled with tears as she tried to answer, but the only sound that emerged was a strangled sob.

"Oh, Christ." In two seconds he was at her side, both arms sliding around her. "This is why I don't talk. All I ever do is say the wrong thing."

“Don’t be daft.” She barely had time to breathe the words before her mouth landed on his in a quick, desperate kiss. “If you say what’s in your heart, it’ll always be right.”

Victor lifted a hand to her hair, smoothing it back before sinking his fingers into the bulk of it. “Then why in hell are you crying, woman?”

“Because you have no idea how wonderful you are.”

He smiled, a real smile that lit up his eyes. “Don’t waste tears over that. You’ve got all the time in the world to teach me.”

It would take a long time to heal the scars that plagued him, no matter what, but it would never happen if he couldn’t open up to her. “Will you be honest with me, Victor? Will you help me understand you?”

“I’ll be honest. Starting now.” Strong hands coaxed her head back. “I love you. And I want to protect you from everything. Even things you don’t need protecting from. Even from myself. You have to understand that I mean well, and kick me into line when meaning well isn’t enough.”

“I can do that.” She didn’t have to worry about driving him away with her demands. “And we don’t have to go to Europe with James. All I need is to be useful, to *do* something. All other things being equal, I’d just as soon do that here.”

If he was relieved, he didn’t show it. Instead he pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead. “No need to decide right off. We have a whole winter ahead of us, and in the spring... Well, before we go anywhere else, I was hoping you might take a different sort of trip with me.”

Only one thing could be that important to him. “Your family?”

“Mmm. It might be time. I’ve turned over a new leaf.”

“Decided to settle down into that quiet life.”

He leaned over until his lips brushed hers, soft and warm. “Found a reason. And a woman I want to bring home to my mother.”

The temptation to fall into the kiss almost overwhelmed her. “There’s one more thing, Victor. It’s important.”

“Tell me.”

“You scared yourself the other night, when I had that dream.” Even with all the promises, it was surprisingly hard to form the words. “Tell me you won’t always have to hold back with me.”

He didn’t answer at once. Instead he studied her face, giving the request serious consideration. When he finally answered, his words held the strength of truth. “We both need to learn our boundaries, and that won’t happen overnight. But it won’t last forever, either.”

It might have been easier for him to lie to please her, but he didn’t. “Then we take our time.”

“We do.” He kissed her jaw, then her ear, his breath warm against her skin. “And I’ve already learned some of your boundaries. I won’t hold back from them again.”

No power could have kept her from kissing him then, from slipping her arms around his neck and holding him close, with nothing held back. No reason to hide. “I love you.”

This time, he didn’t run. “I love you too, gorgeous.”

She started to ask him to stay the night, then cursed softly as she remembered his ruined boat—and home. “Where are you going to sleep now?”

“I’ll find a place. Or maybe *we* can find a place. May not be quite as much privacy as my boat...” He lifted a hand and smoothed his thumb over her cheek. “We can still sneak away.”

“We can buy another boat come spring.” She turned her head and nipped at his thumb.

Victor backed her toward the bed, a wicked gleam in his eyes. “Mmm. Which means tonight might be our last uninterrupted night of privacy.”

“I refuse to even entertain the possibility,” she murmured, a heavy anticipation warming her. “Like you said, we can sneak away.”

“And we will.” He kissed her cheek. “Every chance we get.” Another warm kiss, this time to her jaw. “But tonight...” His teeth closed on her throat, gentle but firm, and magic curled around her. “Tonight you’re all mine.”

“I told you already, I belong to you.” An easy promise to make, now that she knew the truth. They would struggle from time to time, with themselves and with each other, but nothing would ever bring them as much happiness as making that effort and staying together. It wasn’t the fairy tale Rose had wished for her, but something better. Something real. Something that wouldn’t end just because dawn had broken and real life had overtaken dreams.

Always.

About the Author

How do you make a Moira Rogers? Take a former forensic science and nursing student obsessed with paranormal romance and add a computer programmer with a passion for gritty urban fantasy. To learn more about this romance-writing, crime-fighting duo, visit their webpage at www.moirarogers.com, or drop them an email at moira@moirarogers.com. (Disclaimer: crime-fighting abilities may appear only in the aforementioned fevered imaginations.)

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Deadlock
Wilder's Mate

A bootlegger will save her life. A debutante will steal his heart.

A Safe Harbor

© 2010 Moira Rogers

Building Sanctuary, Book 1

Joan Fuller enjoyed a privileged life—until her wealth and connections garnered her the wrong sort of attention. Her rejection of a textile heir's proposal comes back to bite her when he turns out to be a werewolf on the prowl for a mate.

She may have been turned against her will, but now that she's part of his pack she sets out to protect all its women. Even if that means joining forces with a witch and a vampire—and leaving the comfort of Boston.

Former bootlegger Seamus Whelan has cleaned up his act, but when his old partner Gavin comes to him for help, he can't say no—no matter how deadly the threat. Escorting some female wolves to safety should have been easy, except their leader is a prim ex-debutante with enough power to challenge Seamus himself.

Her courage captures his interest, and her first hesitant kiss ensnares his heart. But before they can build a haven for their kind, they must free themselves of the past—and the powerful man who's out to teach her a lesson she may not survive...

Warning: This novella contains a rakish werewolf bootlegger forced to join forces with a teetotaling ex-debutante as they fight epic battles, engage in criminal activities and eventually give in to inappropriate passion on a kitchen counter.

Enjoy the following excerpt for A Safe Harbor:

Seamus barely managed not to smile. She was sneakier than she gave herself credit for being, and he liked it. "I think you've got a bit of a rogue bottled up in you too, sweet Joan."

She finally looked up, and her eyes glinted with amusement. "Women have been using men's vices against them since men discovered vice."

"Mm-hmm." He cracked two more eggs into the bowl. "And what did they use against them before that?"

"Why would they need to? Men were angels. Now I'm thinking they might have been a bit boring too."

"Men have never been angels, sweetheart."

"I suppose not." Her pen scratched against the paper again, more idle doodles. "I'll enjoy learning about your vices, as long as I'm numbered among them."

His greatest vice, and he proved it by not being able to stop himself from crossing to the table to slide

his fingers through her hair. "Tell me something."

She tilted her head back and smiled up at him. "Anything."

He nuzzled her cheek and relished the scent of her. "What are *your* vices?"

"I don't know." The pen clicked against the table and her hands smoothed along his cheeks. "I never allowed myself to have any, except pride. That's not a very fun one."

"Mmm, I'm partial to lust, myself."

Her lips found his ear, warm breath skating against him as she spoke. "You inspire lust in me."

"Better than wrath." He bent his head licked her earlobe gently.

Her breath caught on a tiny, startled noise and released on a sigh of pleasure. "You inspired a little of that too. Is it wrong to admit it makes the lust...sharper?"

"Wrong? No." Seamus closed his teeth on her ear. "A little naughty, yes."

That elicited a satisfyingly breathless gasp. Her fingers slipped down to curl in his shirt and her voice grew huskier. "I'll have you know, I am never naughty."

"No?" He couldn't resist the soft curve of her throat, so he dropped his lips to it. "Not ever?"

"Maybe once. Or twice. I might have to concede that our antics in the bathtub last night were a little outrageous."

Just thinking about having her under him again made his blood heat. "Outrageous enough for you to need more time to recover?"

Joan laughed as her hand edged under his shirt, her nails dragging lightly over his skin. "If you don't stop treating me like I'm weak, we're going to have to detour into wrath. I can feel how strongly the magic burns in you. Can't you feel me?"

"Yes." Her magic soaked into every pore of his body, vibrating inside him as they spoke. "But what sort of lover would I be if I didn't concern myself over you?"

"Lover." Her voice turned the word into a caress. Her teeth closed on his ear, mirroring the way he'd nipped at her, and pleasure shuddered up his spine.

Seamus leaned over, trapping her against the wood. "Lover."

Joan eased her hand free and slid both up to hook under his suspenders. "I'm fine, Seamus. I'm aching for you."

He could tell. The scent of her body, earthy and aroused, tickled his nostrils and stirred his own body. "Tell me what you want."

She guided his suspenders down. "Everything."

There were plenty of things he could do to her, things she might never have heard of, but would love all the same. He grasped her hips, lifted her and turned to drop her on the counter. "Lean back."

"Bossy." She'd donned a loose men's shirt and a flowing skirt, claiming she wanted to be ready if they had to shift. Now she smiled wickedly as she lifted her fingers and tugged the top button of her shirt

open, then the second, revealing the smooth curve of her breasts. “Do women just do whatever you tell them to?”

“Sometimes,” he admitted.

The third button gave way, and the shirt slipped from her shoulder. The fabric caught on her breasts, snug enough to show how tight her nipples were. “Do you like it when a woman does whatever you tell her to?”

He didn’t bother to hide his feral grin as his hand grazed her inner thigh. “Sometimes.”

Joan drew her legs together, trapping his hand, then leaned forward until her lips hovered over his. “That sounds like submission,” she whispered, every word like a teasing kiss. She licked his lower lip and laughed. “I’ve listened to the gossip. I know that giving in to our instincts can make sex more...primal.”

“You want primal?” Her shirt was like paper under his hands, and he tore the fabric free of her body, though he left it wrapped around her arms. “Say the word, sweet Joan.”

She dragged in a breath and leaned into him, pressed her breasts to his chest with a shaky moan. “What word? Primal? Please?”

He chased her back until his body was stretched out over hers. “The word...is *yes*.”

“Yes.” Her head fell back, and she didn’t struggle, even though she could have easily torn her arms free of the tangle of her shirt. “Yes, yes, *yes*—”

She wore only plain cotton panties under the voluminous skirt, and Seamus tugged at them. “What other gossip have you heard?”

Wildness filled her eyes as she watched him. “That finding a man with a clever tongue is of paramount importance.”

The cotton slid easily down her legs, and Seamus licked his lips. “You don’t say.”

“Are you going to show me why?”

He wanted to, not only to drive her wild, but to put his mouth to her body and taste her. “Yes.”

She wet her lips, an adorable anticipation lighting up her face. “Right here on the counter?”

“You like the idea?”

“More than I should.”

“Says who?” He teased her by grazing his fingertips over the sensitive flesh at the apex of her thighs as he bent closer. “That society you’re always talking about?”

The sound of her shallow, strained breaths filled the kitchen as her legs inched apart in silent invitation. “I want it more than I thought possible.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” This close, he could feel the heat of her on his tongue before he even touched her. And then he did.

Her breath caught and her knees knocked into his shoulders as she let out a choked noise that mixed pleasure with surprise. She moaned, and fabric ripped a second before her fingers thrust into his hair, the

tattered remains of her shirt hanging from one arm. “*Seamus*.”

To speak, he’d have to raise his head, and he was nowhere near ready to relinquish the warm taste of her. Not yet.

One heel dug into his back as she squirmed, tugging at his hair in time with her short, gasping moans. “This is—this is so good, so *wicked*.”

He turned his head and bit the inside of her thigh. “Wicked?”

She snarled and tightened her fingers in his hair as power swelled, fierce dominant magic that trembled with her pleasure even as it challenged him.

It was a sweet challenge, and one Seamus couldn’t resist. He eased her off the counter and turned her over it. He dropped a single kiss on the smooth line of her spine and held her hips still. “Say yes.”

Desire cuts both ways...

Night Haven

© 2010 Fiona Jayde

Nothing gives Dina more pleasure than leaving the vampires she hunts to the mercy of the dawn. And yet most humans she is sworn to protect seem all too happy to offer up their necks. She has vowed never to be like those needy creatures yet, three months ago, she allowed a vampire to kiss her. The memory still makes her body burn—and her skin heat with humiliation.

For over twenty empty years, Luke has lived in a world of dead pleasure and burning sunrise, feeding off those who long for immortality and taboo thrills. Only his art makes him feel half-alive. Until one night in a dark, moody nightclub, where a reckless, amber-eyed bloodwolf left behind her clean, sharp scent—and an ache in his blood nothing but another taste can ease.

Finally, with the chance to purge Luke out of her system, Dina moves in for the kill. But she comes to a horrifying realization. She can no longer shift, and the desire to taste him—body, soul and blood—is making her crazy. As an enraged bloodwolf threatens to rip them both apart, she may just be crazy enough to trust Luke with her life.

Warning: Contains interspecies lust between a bloodwolf and a vampire, and desire thick enough to cut with a blade.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Night Haven:

The vampire didn't move closer, but he didn't bolt. Keeping her movements casual, Dina closed the distance between them. His gaze locked in with hers, direct and dark and thorough. Tough chin, a slash of lips that looked both sensual and cruel. She wished he had a smear of blood, something to keep her focused on the job instead of remembering his mouth over hers.

"Nice shirt."

Tonight, she had dressed up her usual black with a long-sleeved T that spelled out "Fuck U" in black glitter. Perfect for work with just a bit of charm.

"Bad night?" Dina sidestepped a swaying couple in matching cowboy boots. "I thought your kind was all blood, all the time."

He smirked, gave a small upwards jerk of that hero's chin. She wondered if he saw her heartbeat pulsing somewhere in the hollow of her neck. *Get over it.*

"And you're an expert in my kind?" He emphasized the last word slightly in that clipped, low-pitched voice. Enough to make it sound insulting.

"Expert enough to dust you." She hadn't witnessed him actually take a bite, but no one had to be the wiser. She could simply dust him now and never see that cruel mocking smile again.

The thought churned her gut.

She faced him with small shivers racing down her back, trying not to remember how his arms felt banded around her, his body hard and hot against her own.

“You want to dance, bloodwolf?”

She couldn’t risk fighting him, not here amidst the crowd. Instead she flashed a smile, short and sweet. “Let’s take it outside.”

“Now that’s an invitation.”

He moved. Before she could react his hands gripped her shoulders, firm yet kind. She had one second to push back, to scream, to growl, to punch him. Instead, Dina just watched his face as he leaned down and put his mouth on hers, hot, hard and nearly brutal.

Her breath shattered with shock as he pulled her against his body, teased out a low moan, biting her lower lip. She fisted her hands in his hair and let herself be taken, ravaged, swaying among the other dancers under the cool and bluesy beat.

Dina didn’t know when his touch became gentle, when his arms eased and merely hugged her close. His lips left her mouth to trail kisses over her jaw, up towards her ears.

“What the hell are you doing?” She pushed away, fighting to keep her heartbeat calm and even. Her mouth tingled but she refused to lift her fingers to her lips. “I should kill you right here.”

“Yeah.” He backed away, his mouth mocking. “Yeah, you should.”

Her heart pounded now—insult and shock pulsing under a slick layer of aroused fear. Once more she had let him put his hands on her. He could have torn open her throat with one smooth move.

“Get out.” The words came out in a low trembling hiss.

“After you.” He raised a brow when she didn’t move. Even if she was an idiot, she wasn’t about to give her back to a damned vamp.

Another sizzling moment and he shrugged as if he didn’t really give a fuck, and walked towards the back entrance. Dina pushed through the crowd after him, forcing herself to breathe, already reaching for the short blade hidden at her lower back.

She’d cut strips off his skin before piercing his heart and leaving him for morning.

As if he read her mind, he smiled darkly when he turned and stepped aside. “Go ahead,” he said again and this time Dina took the invitation. Better to get out first and secure the scene instead of stepping out blindly.

The alley behind Kennedy’s was dark and crisp with cold November air, the stench of alcohol and trash a foul assault on her nose. His body was a shadow in the dark, silent and still.

She clutched the cold smooth handle of the push blade and swung out, barely missing bone and skin. Another strike, which he evaded just in time for her to ram a fist into his granite jaw.

Pain flashing up her arm, Dina jumped back and crouched, waiting for him to make a move. Willing

him to make a move so she could kill him with a clear conscience.

A second passed. Another. He remained still, not lifting a limb to strike her. Instead she felt his gaze burning her skin.

She didn't like the taste of fear and arousal, arousal she didn't understand. Trembling, she let the knife drop to the ground, its clatter drowned by the thunder of her pulse.

She wouldn't back away, she wouldn't step closer. Trapped by his gaze, Dina damned clothing and caution and dropped her balance to the ground, forcing herself to shift into her other form. Instinct would overpower thought, she wouldn't feel the tug and pull of lust inside her belly.

His gaze caressed her skin.

She bared her teeth at him, curling her hand into the ground. Another moment and she'd feel the kick and pulse of magic melding her bones into her other shape, forcing her into wolf form. She'd change while he watched, give him a good, long look. Maybe then his gaze would stop tugging at something inside her, maybe then she would tear him apart instead of wanting to jump him and give in to this greed for more.

The cold November breeze teased goose bumps on her skin. Still standing in the shadows, the vampire flicked his wrist to light a cigarette. The short flame lit his face, illuminating harsh lips and cruel watchful eyes.

"You let me know when you're ready."

Shock was a chilling coat of sweat. She couldn't breathe because a fist squeezed at her belly. Her blood ran cold while she gasped for breath. She couldn't shift, couldn't feel the magic burning. Shaking, mindless, Dina groped for her knife, waited for him to leap, to grip her throat, to end it.

He took the cigarette out of his mouth, puffed out a ring of smoke. Holding her gaze, he uttered the same words that she had given him earlier.

"Get out."

With shock clogging her throat, she did.

Score one for the underdog...er...wolf.

Wolf Tracks

© 2010 Vivian Arend

Granite Lake Wolves, Book 4

TJ Lynus is a legend in Granite Lake, both for his easygoing demeanor—and his clumsiness. His carefree acceptance of his lot vanishes, though, when his position as best man brings him face to face with someone he didn't expect. His mate. His very *human* mate. Suddenly, one thing is crystal clear: if he intends to claim her, his usual laid-back attitude isn't going to cut it.

After fulfilling her maid-of-honor duties, Pam Quinn has just enough time for a Yukon wilderness trip before returning south. The instant attraction between her and TJ tempts her to indulge in some Northern Delight, but when he drops the F-bomb—"forever"—she has second thoughts. In her world, true love is a fairytale that seldom, if ever, comes true.

Okay, so maybe staging a kidnapping wasn't TJ's *best* idea, but at least Pam has the good humor to agree to his deal. He'll give her all the northern exposure she can stand—and she won't break his kneecaps.

Now to convince her that fairytales can remake her world—and that forever is worth fighting for.

By popular demand: Clumsy sidekick wolf grows up, sarcasm reigns, and the wilderness gets wilder. Includes hot nookie in places you expect—like a remote cabin—and places you don't.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Wolf Tracks:

Someone stepped in behind her, the heat of his solid body hitting her back as he wrapped his hands around her waist and gently nestled them together.

TJ.

Cocky bastard, really. Pam debated slamming a heel on his instep, or flipping him over her shoulder, just to teach him a lesson, but watching Maggie and Erik float around the floor had mellowed her too much.

"You should be careful putting the moves on a girl like that. You might lose something important," she warned.

He ignored the threat and rested his chin on her shoulder. The heat radiating between them tempted her. "They fit awesome together, don't they?"

His breath brushed her cheek, warm and sweet smelling. Her mouth watered, but she didn't want to talk romance with him.

"They look...unbalanced. What was Maggie thinking getting involved with someone so much taller than her?"

He *hmm*ed. "They were probably thinking that when it's right, there's no denying you've found the one you want."

Oh lordy, his thumbs stroked her waist, and he nuzzled under her ear. Did she want this? Heat flushed her. She had to decide, and quick. She could lead him out onto the dance floor and enjoy his touch in public, or they could find a dark corner and see what else came up.

So to speak.

He tugged her backward and her body overruled her mind. They slipped into the shadows at the side of the hall, ducking behind a room divider. He pressed her against it, his solid body very, very warm. Her heart rate increased, as did the tingling sensation between her thighs, and she squeezed her legs together to stop the ache.

Man-oh-man, his eyes were so incredible she swore he was using some kind of hypnosis. Turning away was impossible as he stared at her, tracing her hair, her face, one finger outlining her lips before he slowly lowered his head and brought their mouths together.

He brushed his lips over hers like a gentle breeze, his fingers tugging her hair to redirect the angle of her head until their mouths meshed together. Tentative strokes of his tongue brushed fleetingly past her teeth. Teasing, barely giving her a taste of him before he broke away and dropped his forehead against hers.

“Holy shit, you taste good,” he panted. “Incredibly fabulous. I’d never dreamed a woman could taste like you. Or make me feel the way you make me feel.”

Screw the sweet talk. She hadn’t had nearly enough of his kisses. She tried to regain possession of his lips. Arched her back in an attempt to press their bodies together and let her feel his muscles, his desire for her.

He groaned softly. “You’re killing me. We shouldn’t…”

She stepped on either side of his leg and pasted her aching crotch to his thigh. A short gasp escaped her as the impact made her clit throb.

“Fuck it.” TJ grabbed her butt and dragged her hard against him, wrestling control from her as this time he kissed her senseless. Sucked the air from her lungs, twined their tongues together. An almost desperate, mindless, seeking touch. He demanded her response and she gave it eagerly. The pleasure in her sex rose like a rocket blasting into outer space.

His hands were everywhere. Skimming her torso, touching her breasts. Clutching her hips and grinding her hard onto his thigh. Excitement washed over her, the rapid beat of her pulse making her lightheaded, out of breath. He licked a path down her neck, nibbled on her collarbone and something electric shot to her core.

“I want you, Pam,” he growled against her skin. “You’re going to be mine.”

Sheesh, that comment pushed a few wrong buttons, but right here, right now? She wasn’t about to argue with his macho-sexist statement as long as he kept doing what he was doing. Lost beyond all reason, she teetered on the edge of an orgasm and if he stopped she would kill him. Pam clasped his head in her hands and hauled his mouth to hers as she leaned back and tried to find the final touch she needed to go

over the edge.

The barrier at her back wobbled for a second, then tilted to the north. All their weight went with the wall as it tipped, crashing to the floor with them on top. She smothered her curses as the flames of desire building between them evaporated into thin air.

TJ's heavy breathing echoed in her ear as they unwound tangled limbs. The damn disco lights flickered over them, showcasing their undignified situation. Partygoers congregated to stare with concern and offer helping hands. Pam scrambled to her feet, but all she could think about was the aching need in her core and the sweet taste of him lingering in her mouth.

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