



STACEY
KENNEDY

AN
*Everlasting
Bite*

THE BLUE BLOODS BOOK ONE

An Everlasting Bite

The Blue Bloods Series – Book One

Stacey Kennedy

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Liquid Silver Books
<http://LSbooks.com>

Email:
raven@LSbooks.com

Editor
Tracey West

Cover Artist
Anne Cain

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Blurb

A vicious werewolf attack in Plymouth, Minnesota leaves a young woman violated, bitten and now, transformed into werewolf. But Rynn Murphy doesn't have to face this transformation alone—she has her mate by her side. And the charming Briggs—Beta to the Patriarch, Valor—is eager to ease her into this new life and mend her battered soul.

With only weeks to adjust to her new fur, Rynn, follows Briggs while he assists in locating the daughter of the Montana's Alpha, who was abducted from her home. But this journey is not without danger. And soon, they discover the ones who have taken this young wolf do not want her found and will stop at nothing to keep her hidden. Or so it may seem, as bodies begin to drop around them, the murderous attempts start to appear more as a hit than a smoke screen—leaving only one question, who is the intended target...

Dedication

To my editor, Tracey, who is my go-to-girl, savior of my bad grammar, and most of all, my friend. None of this would be possible without you!

Chapter One

The damp ground parted under Rynn's sharp claws and the wind breezed steadily across her fur. Sounds of the world came sharp through alert ears. Quiet noises hidden to human ears sounded crystal-clear with these new senses of hers—brushes of air against the trees, bugs crawling along the earth, even a deer nibbling on grass a mile away.

She scanned her surroundings, her acute vision taking in everything around her. The sharp colors, shapes, everything was just so powerful as a wolf. It made everything brighter—more vivid.

Her four legs trembled as the force of magic swept through her in pure need to find her human form. She reminded herself of her small framed curvy body, long brown hair, deep silver eyes, and cheeks she always thought were a little too chubby.

This was the most difficult part about being a werewolf and the control over the wolf within her was a struggle. Of course, it would be since she'd been thrust into this life only a few days ago. She shouldn't be so hard on herself. Still, it came with frustration that the shift came as a challenge.

It didn't help much that Rynn's focus was off—still reeling from a conversation she had only an hour ago with new friends, Nexi and Kyden. To the supernatural world, they were Guardians. Well, Nexi was part Witch too. They're also part of the Council's Guard—the leaders of the Otherworld. As Guardians, they policed the supernatural races that live within the Earthworld.

The memory of the shocking conversation replayed in her mind.

Nothing about Nexi was normal. Sure, her to-die-for body, dirty blonde locks, country home girl features were all the same, but it was her hazel eyes that sank Rynn's heart. The spunkiness that lived within them was gone—darkness and despair was all to be seen. Something wasn't right.

"Nexi?" Rynn questioned, as she examined her further.

What was going on here? This wasn't how she remembered Nexi. The Nexi she met was full of zest, happiness, and extremely strong in confidence, not the anguished woman before her.

Sure, she didn't know her all that well—they'd only met a few nights ago after the brutal attack in her hometown of Plymouth, Minnesota, that now allowed her to stand on all fours.

After she first experienced herself in fluffy form, she was too frightened to shift back to her human form, too terrified to accept that this was now her life. Then came Nexi who shared her story, which in turn, showed they had very similar paths. Both were normal young women who came from rural cities in the United States who had awakened to the world of the supernatural.

The connection with Nexi was instant. The bond of friendship allowed the fear to settle in Rynn and kept her to calm enough for the magic to release her back to human form, which was an entirely desperate situation.

If she hadn't been able to shift back, the wolf within her would have taken over, which would have caused her to go mad. Crazy by the animal inside her that would need to seek out blood and kill. If that happened, Valor would have to destroy her.

Needless to say, Nexi was a Godsend.

Rynn was happy to note that Valor had no intention of harming her. As the Patriarch, ruler over the Alphas of the United States it would have fallen on him to take care of her. He fit the part of Alpha too. He was big and powerful with strong shoulders, thick dark hair and dark eyes that demanded you kneel at his feet. Rynn often wondered if that was the power he held over her as a wolf, or if that was just his thing. She still hadn't figured it out.

Rynn knew enough about Nexi to know something was off. She searched deeper into Nexi's eyes for any sign of the woman she had met. Finding none, she glanced at Briggs, bewildered. "Something is terribly wrong. What's happened?"

Kyden cleared his throat, drawing Rynn's gaze to his. Kyden was always serious but calm. He wore his warrior look well. It wasn't just his sculpted body and strong cut features—it was his aura. Tonight however, he seemed weakened—distraught. "It has become known that Nexi is the destined to Magnus."

Briggs interjected before Rynn could comprehend Valor's words, his brows raised in surprise. "Magnus, as in The Lord of the Underworld?"

Kyden gave a firm nod, his jaw clenched tight.

Rynn didn't understand any of this. "But I thought..." she hesitated, remembering the past few days. The last she heard, Nexi had accepted Kyden as her mate. They were to be bonded soon—a marriage of non-supernaturals. She cleared her mind and asked, "Aren't you being bonded soon?"

Kyden nodded again. "Indeed we are."

Rynn glanced at Briggs who looked desolate. "What does that mean?" She couldn't comprehend any of this. Nothing made sense.

"Destined bonds overrule the bonds of the heart," Briggs replied, his eyes sad.

That was all that needed to be said for Rynn to understand. Nexi's time with Kyden would soon to be over. She could see the heartbreak in every pair of eyes around her. No matter how much Nexi loved Kyden, wanted him, her soul wouldn't allow it.

Rynn wanted to know more, but it wasn't her place to interrogate them. A sense of dread filled her as something else bothered her. Rynn glanced at Briggs, needing clarification. "There is an Underworld? Like demons and scary things like that?"

Briggs nodded hesitantly.

She suspected he never told her because she was just coming around to the idea of there being an Otherworld. Home to Werewolves, Vampires, Guardians and Witches. Even though, the only ones allowed to live there worked for the Council directly, all others, including the werewolves, lived in the Earthworld. The Otherworld was nothing to be afraid of and she'd seen for herself that what existed there was good. But she knew enough to know anything that lived within the Underworld couldn't be good. Even if she didn't know for sure, the horrified expressions around her would have told her as much.

Still, she couldn't wrap her head around it all. She needed more answers.

"And you are going to be mated to their leader?" As Nexi gave a soft nod, Rynn's mystification turned into disparity. She had enough common sense to understand that this is about as bad as it gets.

"We have to do something to help you." Nexi had been nothing but kind to Rynn, she saved her life, and Rynn felt compelled to do the same. She glanced at Briggs. "What can we do to help her?"

Briggs sighed, and the simple sound said it all . Nexi didn't stand a chance at overcoming this. Rynn breathed deep, tears filled her eyes. Instead of comforting her, Briggs stepped toward Nexi, reached down and embraced her. He hugged tight and looked at Rynn, "Nothing I'm afraid, darlin'."

Just as his grip tightened, Nexi stiffened immensely and Kyden ripped Nexi from his arms, latched onto her.

Kyden glanced over Nexi's head. "She needs the connection."

"He can't let me go," Nexi whispered.

Rynn's stomach clenched in horror. It was already that lost. The full reality of the situation hit.

Nexi was losing herself without Kyden's contact. Her mind drifted from the love they shared. Rynn would have thought it strange, if she'd hadn't felt it for herself. The mate bond was powerful. Her own connection with Briggs showed her that. She understood what was happening—it wouldn't be long before Nexi's heart belonged to another.

After a moment of silence, Kyden said, "We have some news of the attack on Rynn."

Briggs gave Kyden a curious look. "The attack on Rynn?"

Rynn was equally confused. She assumed the wolf had attacked her, bit her, then left her there when he was finished. She wasn't expecting there to be more.

Before she could ask, Nexi whispered, "It was the beginning."

"The beginning of what?" Rynn exclaimed.

Kyden looked at Briggs. "A revolution in the Underworld."

"Against Magnus?" Briggs inquired.

Kyden nodded. "You know of the Warlock, Pye?"

"Aye," Briggs replied, then looked at Rynn. "He's a powerful Warlock who wants to rule the Underworld, but has never succeeded to gain control."

Kyden continued, "To dethrone Magnus, Pye needed to further his strength. His followers bewitched wolves to kill women of a pure nature."

Rynn blushed. It was true that the night of the attack, the man had stolen the one thing that would forever scar her soul. He stole her virginity—her purity. "So..." she said hesitantly, reminded of the horror of that night, and also trying to piece together this new information. "If they needed their virginity, why did they..." she paused again and gulped deeply. "Take it away."

"It was the process. By taking the woman's virginity, they were draining the purity of the soul. It's how they gained power from it." Nexi replied.

Rynn placed her hands on her heart, confused. "But I still have my soul." She glanced at Briggs. "Don't I?"

Briggs wrapped his arm around her. "Of course you do, darlin'." Then, he looked at Kyden. "Why did they go to such measures as to overtaking these wolves, and not just do it themselves?"

Kyden embraced Nexi tighter, and she melted into him. "If the Witches were not killing themselves, Magnus would not know Pye was plotting against him. It was a decoy."

Rynn couldn't put it all together. "Why then? Why do I still have my soul?"

"Magnus destroyed the wolf attacking you before he could drain you," Kyden replied, his tone cold.

Rynn glanced at Briggs, who looked equally befuddled. "Why would he do that?"

She never met or heard of this Magnus. Why would he help her?

Rynn glanced back at Nexi as she continued. "Magnus knew of Pye's plan and intervened to stop him. He knew of my relationship with Valor and helped Rynn so that I would be close to Valor. Then, he stole Dante's soul knowing that I would do anything to get it back. He agreed to return it to me, only if I destroyed his only threat in the Underworld, Pye." Tears filled her eyes, her lip quivered. "Now, of course we know that wasn't the only reason he wanted me close."

Briggs growled deep and low. "To know the danger that was caused because of Magnus' desires." He growled again. "And Dante's life could have been lost. Now, you..." His voice drifted away, sadness filled his expression.

Rynn remained silent. What could she say? This was horrible.

"Valor had not made me aware that Dante was in danger at the time and said nothing of it until he returned with him intact. As he told to me, Nexi had killed Pye in return of Dante's soul." Briggs clenched his teeth. "I should have been there to help her, Maybe I could have changed the outcome so Nexi wouldn't be in this situation."

Nexi shook her head. "There is nothing you could have done."

Rynn put a hand on Briggs' arm. As he glanced down at her, some of the torment running through him eased, immediately.

He looked torn as he said, "If Magnus hadn't concocted this plan of his, Rynn's life would have been lost the night she was attacked but now, Nexi is losing hers." He finally looked away from Rynn and glanced at Nexi. "This comes with mixed feelings."

"I know," Nexi replied just as soft. She reached forward, kept her hand connected with Kyden and hugged Briggs. "I wouldn't change any of this if it meant Rynn survived." Her gaze hit Rynn's. "Remember that."

Pulled back into the present, Rynn's heart throbbed in pain for Nexi and Kyden, probably because she could relate. She had someone taken from her too.

Her Grandfather, Pops, had been stolen years ago by the crippling horror of Alzheimer's. It's the reason she took all this werewolf business in stride. There wasn't only herself to think about here. Rynn wasn't selfish.

Besides, thanks to Valor, Pops now resided in an upscale hospital in Utah. That reason was why she sucked up this wolf stuff and accepted it. He's somewhere better and nicer. That was her priority.

When she was four, Pops stepped in to raise her when her parents decided being junkies was more important. Did they object? No. Why would they? Drugs ruled their lives.

Pops was the kindest, gentlest soul on earth and treated her like a treasure growing up. Now because of his disease he couldn't even remember her. He was like a vacant vessel. Gone forever, yet still alive. A cruel disease in every way. Death would've been better, but Rynn would never admit to that. She needed him. Loved him.

Still, she hadn't had the chance to go and see him yet, since she was too unstable as a werewolf. The danger for him was too great if she shifted before his eyes. She wouldn't risk his life. But it didn't make it any easier to deal with. She missed him with an ache in her heart that left her empty.

Luckily, someone had made it his job to fill that ache. Her mate Briggs, who nuzzled his damp nose into her side.

It's a strange thing to meet your soul-mate and instantly fall in love, but that's

exactly what happened. Briggs couldn't have said it better in the conversation with Nexi and Kyden—*your destined mate overrules everything else. Trust is born in the very moment you accept it.*

Not only is he sweet, but also sexy as hell. She couldn't have chosen a better mate for herself. Letting fate take the wheel wasn't a hard thing to do.

He brushed up against her again. The contact with his nose on her side was an instant connection to force the change within her. Her breath caught as the pure rush hit, sending her elongated vision to become foggy. The sharp scents around her returned to normal levels, and her hearing hushed as she found her human form.

Surprisingly, there wasn't anything painful about the transformation. Just more of a shift in senses—everything weakened as a human. Within seconds of the blast of magic, the change occurred. No bones breaking or muscles tightening, it was over before Rynn even knew it began. As an added bonus, after the shift, her clothes appeared back on her body. How that worked, Rynn still hadn't figured out, but she was glad for it. Walking around in her birthday suit didn't hold much appeal.

When her eyes opened, she found Briggs' smile. His yellow eyes were tight with joy, his sharp angled face was cocked to the side with his brown hair spiked messily, and his lips were soft and inviting with a perfect curve.

He made everything all right—everything less scary. She felt right where she belonged. No matter what happened, she would always have him to make life good. Sometimes hearing how quickly love can be taken away, as she'd seen with Kyden and Nexi, made her appreciate just how lucky she is.

"Getting easier to shift isn't it, darlin'?" Briggs asked.

Rynn gave a half-hearted shrug. "A little, but I think it's because of your touch. I doubt I could do that without it."

"My contact is just helping filter the magic through our bond, stabilizing you. Don't worry, it will come. Just give it time."

Time. That was the thing. They'd spent days working on controlling her wolf and getting to know each other, considering they were together for a lifetime.

A long lifetime at that. That's just another surprise she had to swallow. Werewolves were immortal, which meant, she was too. Having Briggs around made the acceptance easier. A thousand life times with him wasn't hard to take.

He said that he'd be everything she needed or wanted, and he sure lived up to it. His focus was for her alone and it'd been a long time since she had someone to depend on.

After a sigh of settlement, she glanced out to the beauty around her. Valor's log ranch style house was her home now, located in Cache Valley, Utah, set deep in a valley surrounded by evergreens and uninhabited land.

She couldn't argue it was a big step up, and one she'd become quite used to. After Pops got sick, which was close to her eighteenth birthday, she ended up living on her own. Needless to say, it is far from glamorous.

The money Pops had gathered through his life was scarce and only provided for a year of his care. With the few hundred left over, she moved into a one-room suite at *Hotel Shit Hole* with lovely neighbors such as drug addicts, strippers and runaways.

As friendly as the runaways were, she couldn't connect with them. She would have given anything to have a family that loved her. And even more, ones who remembered her.

So that was her life. Working at a coffee shop, restaurant and a bar to keep the bills paid at the nursing home, keep her fed, a roof over her head and clothes on her back. Mindless work, but she needed the money and slapped a smile on her face every day. No matter how sad she felt inside.

Now, experiencing all this, going back to the slums didn't appeal to her and there wasn't a single thing she missed about Plymouth, Minnesota.

Briggs sighed deeply, drawing Rynn's gaze. He focused on their joined hands. As of late, this uneasiness in him grew. If she hadn't been able to sense it through their mate bond—which was just an added bonus, saved the unknowns in the relationship—she'd see it written hard on his face. "What's wrong?"

He glanced out to the paddock of horses that rested alongside Valor's home. Then, he looked back to meet her gaze. "I have a duty that I need to return to."

"You have to go back to work?" Rynn asked with hesitation. She understood that he worked for Valor. Briggs was his Beta—what that all entailed she still wasn't sure.

His nodded softly. "Valor has been kind to let me have a few days off so I can be with you and tend to your needs, but it is necessary that I return in my duties to him."

Fear tingled through her and tension filled her body. She couldn't be without him. This crazy situation was only okay with him beside her. He couldn't leave her alone—ever.

Without warning, a familiar sense of power sucked her breath back into her body. Her stomach clenched, her entire body shivered as a loud moan escaped her mouth. Her senses sharpened.

Shoot!

Briggs' smile was kind as he looked down to her now fluffy form. "Now don't go doing that."

This was a perfect display of why seeing Pops was out of the question. When her emotions ran high, she'd shift. A big no-no in the werewolf world. They never shifted in front of humans. Their existence a secret for obvious reasons, since humans are curious creatures, and who knows what they'd do to werewolves if they captured one.

Briggs caressed her furry head slowly, giving her a chastising look. "You'll come with me wherever I go."

Rynn leaned into his hand. Instantly, it calmed and settled her nerves. His touch felt wonderful. But it was only good, if he moved slowly. If he rushed it, it was game over. She was still shaken by her attack and touches still scared her.

Had she dealt with it? No.

Did she want to? No.

Was she going to have to? Yes.

But not right now.

Briggs' voice was low and soft. "Come back to me now."

Rynn closed her eyes and let the magic release. Calmness washed over her as she focused back on her human form—remembered her features, the senses a human holds—the weakness of it. Briggs' touch helped. His contact seemed to steady the magic. Force it out. It took a few minutes, but she eventually shimmied back to herself.

"I get to come with you?" she whispered, glancing down.

He placed a finger under her chin, lifted her gaze to meet his. "You think I'd leave ya behind?"

The look on his face told her how ridiculous that notion that was, but how could she think otherwise. "I did."

His fingers left her chin, softly caressed the edge of her jaw. "I know you haven't had anyone to count on in some time, and those that you should have been able to count on have failed you." Fierceness flashed through his eyes. "I will not be one of them. You can trust in that."

She sighed, from the pain of truth those words held, but also from the knowledge that she could always depend on Briggs. It was nice to have that to rely on.

A growl rose from deep in his throat. "It disgusts me to hear of your upbringing." He shook his head in revulsion and dropped his hand from her face. "Those parents of yours."

"It's not really their fault, you know," she replied in earnest. "They can't help it. Drug addiction is a disease. I don't hold anything against them for it."

Briggs' jaw clenched, his eyes narrowed. "You are very kind to offer them forgiveness for mistreating you. No matter how you look at it, that is exactly what they've done and in the eyes of some that can never be forgiven."

His eyes flashed angrily. "Especially by me."

Chapter Two

Briggs waited patiently for Rynn to return from her bath. He sat in a recliner in the bedroom Valor allowed them to use, clad only in his jeans.

He was tired of sleeping in the chair next to the bed, but it was the right thing to do. He knew to keep a safe distance from Rynn.

She wasn't ready for *that* kind of contact. Not after what she'd been through. The fear of physical contact sat deep in her eyes. No matter how much he craved to take her, claim her, his needs would have to wait. His only concern was to heal her battered soul, and he could fight the desire he felt for her while she was healing. Since meeting her, he always slept in the chair beside the bed. Close enough without scaring her.

His mind swirled with the implications of what might come when he returned to his duties. Not only the danger Rynn would be in, but because she was still unclaimed by him. Yes, they were bonded, but they had yet to seal their bond physically. It was not the ideal situation to be introducing her to the other wolves, especially the non-mated ones. But he wouldn't rush her. Not now. Not ever.

With his feet propped up on the bed, he leaned his head back and sighed. The house was quiet tonight. Now that Valor's daughter Isla was gone—since being mated to the Texas Alpha, Thor, earlier this evening—loud voices went with her.

Isla, a natural beauty, was the closest thing he had to a sister. No one was perfect and Isla's personality was anything but pretty. She had the tendency to be obnoxious, intrusive and pushy but always meant well. Having her gone, though, was a nice peaceful time for him. The only trouble was that he doubted she'd be gone long.

Dante, Valor's son, was the other wolf who lived on the grounds and was always coming and going. Valor was away tonight handling wolf business. Not only did he lead the Utah pack, but being responsible for the Alphas kept him far from home. Briggs' absence meant Valor would be wearing thin—hence the necessity for him to return to Valor's side soon.

Normally, the house was full of Utah pack members needing some sort of assistance, workers that took care of the very large and busy home. Labeling it a hotel would be a better fit.

Tonight though, it was perfect. Briggs inhaled the peace with joy.

The bathroom door suddenly opened. When he lifted his gaze, he perused Rynn as she walked into the room, wearing some cute pajamas with wolves decorating the pants. Isla and her sense of humor. He'd prefer to see Rynn in a black lace teddy, but doubted he'd be able to control himself if she did.

"I contacted Valor while you were bathing," he told her as she strode across the room. "We'll be joining him tomorrow at the gathering."

"Where will we be going?" She climbed into bed, pulled the blankets around her and turned on her side to face him.

How beautiful she looked, her dark hair resting against the pillow, bright silver eyes twinkling with curiosity. "To a lodge near here, but I thought I would take you home in the morning before we go."

Those pretty eyes lowered in confusion. "Isn't this our home?"

He shook his head. “No. This is Valor’s home. He’s been generous to allow us to stay with him.” He leaned forward and ran his fingers slowly down her arm, needing nothing more than to just touch her. “He wanted us close to be sure you were well. It’s our choice now if we want to stay with him or go home.”

Rynn shuddered a little from his touch, watched his finger as it danced on her skin, then glanced back to him. “Well, where is home?”

“Not far from here, just a couple miles or so.” It pleased him to see flickers of arousal in her, even if she wasn’t quite ready to act on it. He liked knowing that he stirred her up a little.

“So, this home of yours...” she said, her tone expectant. “It’s only yours. No one else lives there?”

He nodded, quite taken by her sweet perplexed look—very curious as to what intrigued her so. “It’s ours.”

She shot up, yanked the blankets off and headed for the door.

“Going somewhere?” Briggs laughed, pulled his legs off the bed to stand.

At the door, she glanced over her shoulder, smiled brightly. “Sure am. We’re going home.”

Briggs didn’t hesitate. He followed behind her as she practically trotted out of the house. Once outside, she looked at him and waited until he nodded toward the garage. Again, she hurried off, leaving Briggs to chuckle behind her as he quickly slipped his feet into his work boots sitting by the door.

The moment they entered the garage, Rynn froze. She glanced back at Briggs, wide-eyed. “Is that yours?” Her voice rolled with excitement as she looked back toward his sleek black racing motorcycle.

“It is.” Briggs made his way to the center of the garage where the bike rested. At the bike, he straddled it and glanced back at her.

Rynn stood, doe-eyed, the scent of lust wafting through the air. Well, well. His mate liked the sight of him half-naked on the bike. He’d have to remember that. He said nothing about it, not wanting to embarrass her and waved her over. “Hop on.”

“Right,” she responded, with a cute little shake of her head. She made her way to him, then sat in behind him.

He reached back, took her by the hips and pulled her in tight against his back. With her secure, he brought his hands back to the handlebars.

“Hold on tight, darlin.” The bike roared to life with a crash down of his foot.

* * * *

The night whipped by quickly as the warm air breezed across Rynn’s skin. The image of Briggs on the bike still had her heart racing. When he reached for the handlebars, his shirtless back flexed—every muscle stretched gloriously. She hadn’t really appreciated just how muscular he was. With only wearing a pair of low-cut jeans, work boots open, he looked sexy—very sexy. Her arms wrapped around his bare stomach, felt it tense beneath her touch. She inhaled deeply, intoxicated by the rich scent of her mate. He smelled like a day after summer showers, a scent she’d recognize a mile away since it was uniquely his own.

Being so close to him like this felt wonderful. Needing more, she laid her head against his back. The moment she did, his body loosened a little—the tension of his tight

muscles disappeared as she wrapped her arms around him even further.

It told her one thing. He craved her contact, needed to hold her close. The thought that he restrained himself, probably because he wanted to give her time to be comfortable with him, made her hold onto him even tighter.

His thoughts revolved around her. She needed to remember that and try to give a little. No matter how scared she was, he deserved her trust.

A few miles passed beneath the wheels of the bike before the motor quieted as they slowed down. She raised her head, but kept her chin on his back, as a small log cabin nestled into a deep forest came into view. Down a bit further, a boat sat tied to a dock with a huge body of water resting quietly.

Briggs pulled up to the front of the log cabin, pushed out the kickstand, then reached back to take her hand and help her off. Instantly, they walked toward the cabin, hands still joined. It was so silent here. Not even a gentle wind in the air to make a sound.

Peaceful. Everything that home should be.

At the door, he gave her a little grin, then opened the door and nodded her in. Rynn stepped through and smiled.

The cabin was essentially one room that had been broken up into a bedroom, living room and kitchen. Two large chocolate brown couches sat huddled around a wood burning stove on the right. To the left, a little kitchen with pots hanging from the ceiling, and at the back of the room was a king-size wooden bed with a country quilt on top.

Luxury was nice but this was so much better. It was home.

Briggs stood behind her, resting his hands on her shoulders. "It's not as lavish as Valor's—if you want something..."

Rynn glanced over her shoulder, interrupted him. "I love it." Love might be a strong enough word to describe it, but maybe it wasn't the home as much as it was who lived in it. Briggs' personality was all over this house—simple, full of heart, charm, and comfort.

Briggs' worried eyes settled and a smile grazed his lips. He leaned down, laid a butterfly kiss on her shoulder, then lowered his hands. Rynn stepped forward to have a better look, while he headed over to the kitchen, filled a pot of water, set it on the burner and turned on the stove.

The oversized couch looked inviting—big and fluffy. Rynn sat down, embarrassed that her feet didn't even touch the ground. Being only five-foot-three, her height always left her a little flushed. Instead, of sitting there like a child, she tucked her legs in underneath her.

A moment later, Briggs returned, tea in hand. "Sweet, but not too sweet, right?"

She nodded and took the porcelain mug from his hand, raised it to her lips and took a sip. Perfect. Only took him a couple days to get the pinch of sugar with just a dab of milk right. After another sip, she lowered the mug and rested it on her legs, her hands wrapped around the warm cup. She was still worried about Briggs returning to his duty to Valor and needed to understand more of what she was getting herself into. "How often does this *gathering* happen?"

"As often as it needs to," Briggs settled on the couch next to her. "Something must be up. Valor wouldn't even discuss it on the phone."

Her mind felt lost and confused, not a position she liked to be. Sounding stupid was never fun, but her curiosity of this world intrigued her too much to say nothing. "What could be up?"

“Feelin’ a bit lost, are you?” His eyes were laughing, even though his face showed no humor.

She shrugged, pushed away the embarrassment that threatened to rise even though she suspected Briggs liked seeing her in this position because he thought it cute. “Diddly squat would know more.”

Briggs laughed, gave her cheek a rub with his fingers, which only proved her suspicion. “It’s quite simple, love. As you know, Valor leads the Utah pack, but he is also the head of the United States Alphas. When problems arise within, they’re settled by Valor’s decisions.”

Okay, that all made sense. She wasn’t quite sure she liked where this was going. “So what’s going on is something serious then?”

Briggs nodded without hesitation. “Very serious. Gatherings are only called when the resolution is not easily found.”

Nope, she didn’t like where this was going at all. It sounded dangerous. “What kind of problems do Alphas have between each other?”

“More than you can know.” Briggs sighed. “It’s a job that never rests and why Valor hired me. The duty was straining on him.”

“So you’re not an Alpha, then?”

“Alpha blood runs through me, yes.” He began to run his finger lightly along her thigh. “But I did not want to claim the position.”

Her gaze fell to his finger. His touch was so feather-light, it tickled. Such a simple move, but one she could feel linger within her whole body. She pushed away the effects and tried to focus completely on the topic at hand. “Why wouldn’t you want that?”

“Simply put, to overtake an Alpha, a fight between the two occurs. Whoever is left standing will remain Alpha, until another challenge arises.”

A pretty flat answer, considering the subject. Something else though, made her curious. “You didn’t want that kind of power?”

His eyes darkened and his finger stopped moving along her skin, only to press into her leg. “When I was born, my father led the Wyoming Pack. Close to my twentieth birthday, he was killed by another Alpha who had challenged him, and who is still the Alpha. As a rule within the Alphas, if the current mate will not submit to the new Alpha then she is destroyed as well. My mother was deathly loyal to my father.” He hesitated a moment to clear his throat. “You can imagine the outcome.”

Rynn gasped, raised her hand to her mouth. He couldn’t really be saying that he saw his parents had been killed in front of him? “You witnessed this?”

No sadness showed on his face. “I did.” His voice was flat as before, as if it had no effect on him whatsoever.

“That’s horrible.” Rynn didn’t have the ability to hide her emotions like him. She could hear the despair in her own voice.

He shrugged nonchalantly. “That’s the way of the wolves—done thousands of times. I’m not special in seeing this.”

That explained the coldness—it was normal to them. But far from ordinary to her and something she had trouble wrapping her mind around. “Still, it must have been hard.”

His smile was reassuring as he raised his hand to smooth out the worry etched around in her brows. “It was a sad day, this is true. That’s when I decided I would never want for that life no matter what power came with it. The thought of my future mate

suffering so.”

He shook his head, his disparity now showed through and his eyes became darker in color. “Not until now have I realized just what a monumental moment that was. It’s not a situation I would want you in.”

Her heart melted. Repeatedly, he proved how much his thoughts revolved around her. This conversation should be all about him, yet somehow, he flipped it to be about her. As much as it touched her, the desire to know more about him overwhelmed her. “So, that’s why Valor asked you to be his Beta, right?”

He nodded and resumed the light dance of his fingers along her thigh. “It was an ideal situation for him. A wolf with the Alpha qualities, but one that did not seek the power, he knew I would stay neutral.”

She grabbed his hand, hoped her words came out as heartfelt as she felt inside. He might shower her with compliments and she might have trouble taking them, but she could say the same about him. “He is right to trust in you.”

He smiled softly. “A sweet thing for you to say, darlin’.”

“Is the Alpha who did this...is he still...” she started.

“Three years ago he was overtaken.”

His tone was emotionless, which didn’t surprise her. She actually didn’t mind the idea of hearing that the Alpha had received what was coming to him. She opened her mouth to ask another of the thousand questions racing through her mind, but could only yawn.

Briggs reacted instantly and stood, then pulled her along with him. “You’re tired, love. We can talk more tomorrow.” He released her hand, headed toward the kitchen and reached for the wooden chair that rested beside the table, presumably to drag it over to the bed.

Rynn rushed forward, grabbed his hand midstride and forced him still. “No. You don’t need that.” Her heart raced in her chest, nerves made her stomach turn and sweat beaded along her skin.

This was a must. This was their home. He shouldn’t need to sleep in a chair. It’d just be more awkward to break this habit later. This was *his* bed, he should stay in it too. She wanted him to stay, especially knowing how much her closeness meant to him. Yes, she could do this.

Briggs examined her brow arched, his gaze questioning. “You sure you’re ready for that?”

Was she sure? *No*. But she wasn’t sure she’d ever be. She gulped back the fear, hoping she sounded confident. “Yes, I’m sure.”

He appeared to believe her or perhaps he was just doing as she asked, she didn’t know. He took her hand again, led her over to the bed and pulled the blankets back, then motioned for her to get in first. After she settled her head against the pillow, Briggs dropped his pants and climbed in behind her.

Rynn’s eyes stayed glued on the log wall in front of her. Briggs’ warm body came up tight alongside hers and her throat constricted, hardly letting in air. She didn’t doubt he could hear her heart beating a mile a minute because she could hear it too. It sounded loud to her own ears.

“Come here,” Briggs said softly. She squirmed back until there was no distance between them. He wrapped his arm around her hip loosely. “Is that all right? Not too

constricting?”

“Its fine,” she replied, a bit strangled. It was one thing to be wrapped around him, but having him wrapped around her overwhelmed her. At the same time, his touch felt so right—perfect.

It just took a moment to settle into having him so near. It wasn’t that she didn’t want to be touched him—there were little flickers of excitement whenever he connected with her skin—but getting passed the fear was the hard part.

Just as the lingering effects of trepidation fluttered away, she leaned back further and took Briggs’ hand that dangled across her. She tucked it into her chest so she could hug it, feel him as close as possible. He hummed in approval and sank in against her.

With the added closeness, something else started to rise. His hard erection cradled along her buttocks, and it was just the thing to make this not okay. She jumped and let out a tiny squeal. Briggs instantly let go.

“Too much?” Worry filled his voice.

She gulped deeply, gained control of herself, before she answered. “Sorry, it’s just...I felt...”

“He has a mind of his own,” he told her quietly. “Trust me, darlin’, I have no intention of pushing you into anything. Just being here with you like this is enough.” He pulled her back slowly so that she lay in front of him again, then positioned his thigh against her bottom.

His sleep came long before hers, but it not because she was scared or uncomfortable. She finally felt safe and loved. No matter what had happened before, right now everything was okay.

With Briggs, her world was perfect and something deep within her told her it always would be.

Chapter Three

Briggs eased the throttle on the bike. The wind around him became a gentle breeze as he turned the handlebars to guide the bike into the resort. He glanced over his shoulder to where Rynn had her head resting, and said, "Wolf Creek Utah."

The journey to the resort located in Logan's Canyon, known best for its million dollar views, golf courses, lakes and mountains, had taken longer than it ever had. All due to his selfish wants. Having Rynn so close to him, without fear, without hesitation—he wasn't about to rush this time with her.

And he felt a loss, when he stopped the bike, and she leaned away from him. He reached back to her and assisted her off the bike.

"Wolf...huh." She laughed, looked around at the scenery a moment, then looked back to him. "Is that a coincidence?"

"Nah," Briggs jumped off his bike to stand beside her. "Valor owns this place."

She looked back at the log mansion surrounded by large stone boulders. She was clearly awed. Valor's homes were something to marvel. Too big for his liking, but nonetheless they were beautiful.

"Is this the lodge?" she asked, unable to look away.

Briggs smiled. She looked incredibly sweet befuddled. He took her hand and led her forward to the side of the house, which gave a good view of the grounds. "No, the Red Moose Lodge is a ways away. This is Valor's home when he stays here." He pointed toward the mansions spread out through the hilly terrain. "The Alphas will stay in those."

"Briggs!" Valor called out.

He glanced over his shoulder to see his boss and friend exit the house and quickly approach. He instantly felt a powerful surge of insecurity rage through him, a feeling he'd never felt before. Curious, he looked down at Rynn. She stood with her head bowed, glancing at her feet. Now, he understood the feeling—submission.

Valor gave Briggs a knowing look, before he turned back to Rynn. He placed a finger under her chin, lifted her head to meet his eyes. "That is a natural reaction, Rynn. As wolves, we are subordinate to our leaders. But you do not need to do that with me."

Then, he glanced at Briggs, his gaze unwavering. "You need to work on that with her. We cannot have that happen here."

Briggs nodded. "Will do, boss."

If Rynn displayed that reaction in front of the other werewolves, they'd make a dirt rug of her. He hadn't seen her react that way yet, and though it pleased him that her wolf had developed enough to display that type of respect, it unsettled him that this might be an obstacle for her. He would see to nip this little problem in the bud immediately.

"Come on you two." Valor waved them forward and headed back toward the house. "The Alphas will be here shortly and I need to fill you in."

Briggs took Rynn's hand and gently pulled her forward. He could see she had questions about what Valor just told her, plus a little shock that she had reacted the way she did, but he needed to get up to speed on the situation first before he could deal with anything personal.

Valor held the door open as they entered the house. He suspected Rynn was going to

be as taken with the inside as she was the outside. The full windows that overlooked the grounds and surrounded the living room were breathtaking. Even to him and he'd seen them a hundred times.

Valor took a seat on the couch that faced the wall, while Briggs led Rynn to a loveseat that would give her full view of the windows. As suspected, Rynn's eyes went a little wide and her mouth formed an O as she stared at the view in front of her.

Briggs smiled, then focused on Valor. "What's happened?"

As his gaze met Valor's, he suddenly noticed the tension set deep in his eyes, which meant only one thing—danger. With Rynn next to him, the last thing he wanted to do was bring her anywhere close to the violent sides of werewolves. Her human upbringing had shown already, in her shock mainly, that she would likely not handle it well. Sheltering her from it would only draw out the reality.

This was her life now. Though he hoped to protect and support her while she faced this world, he suspected it would still throw her a little off balance.

"Hendrix contacted me..." Valor said, drawing Briggs' gaze back to him.

"The Montana Alpha," Briggs whispered to Rynn quickly, sensing from their bond that she had trouble following along.

Valor rubbed his hands across his stubbly face. "His daughter, Kali, has been abducted."

"Stolen?" Briggs responded, incredulous. "From her home?" He'd never heard of such a thing. He immediately regretted his decision to return to his duty. He didn't want Rynn anywhere near this. It reeked of hard times ahead.

Valor nodded. "Hendrix said he searched for days following her scent, but when he hit Minnesota, it vanished."

"What would someone want with her?" Rynn's asked in a soft whisper.

Valor shrugged as he shook his head. "I have yet to find the answer to that question. A part of me wonders if the young wolf has not left willingly."

"What leads you to that assumption?" Briggs asked.

"There was no struggle," Valor responded. "No blood or disturbance anywhere. I find it hard to believe that a werewolf would just allow herself to be taken without a fight."

"Aye, I see." It was an obvious assumption. Even if she was young, she still could have caused an injury or two. The fact that her room was completely undisturbed left a bad taste in his mouth also.

"When I joined in the search," Valor continued. "I also lost the trail in Minnesota. There was no trace of her—leaving Hendrix with one theory."

Briggs nodded in understanding. "He is blaming the Minnesota Alpha, Sayer." If this was true, Hendrix would be out for blood. Just another thing he wanted to keep Rynn away from.

Valor gave Briggs a shrewd look. "Yes, he believes Sayer is to blame. I, on the other hand, have not come to that conclusion as of yet, but Hendrix will not listen to reason. His claim is even if Sayer wasn't directly responsible, he is accountable for the wolves in his pack. Since the trail ended in Minnesota, he believes she is hidden there, her scent masked somehow."

"How would they do that?" Rynn asked, her tone curt with confusion.

Briggs wasn't annoyed by her questions, they were valid, and he would do his best to

see that she understood the situation she'd been brought into. "By confusing the scent, her trail is only marked by her touch against the ground. If that contact was gone and she was carried, her scent would be gone with it."

"Exactly," Valor agreed. "When we hit Minnesota her scent ended, mixed with ten others. We couldn't pinpoint her location since it was intermixed."

"Ten other wolves?" Briggs exclaimed. He mentally swore obscenities to himself. This just cemented why he didn't want Rynn involved. His need to return to Valor was being thrown back at him and he could thrash himself for getting her entangled in this.

"You see the seriousness of this." Valor sighed deeply with unease. "This was not a single wolf acting here."

"I do see," Briggs took Rynn's hand in his and rubbed his thumb across the back of her hand. His need to protect her made his thoughts foggy. He didn't want to frighten her and refrained from asking any more on this subject until he was alone with Valor. At the same time, he'd already decided he couldn't shelter her. Resigned, he looked back up at Valor. "What is Hendrix asking for?"

"Either for Sayer to produce her or I intervene." Valor's expression spoke volumes. The latter option was one he didn't want to proceed with.

Briggs looked toward Rynn, felt the confusion raking her. He couldn't hide the slight grin on his face seeing her face squished together in thought. But just because he enjoyed seeing it, didn't mean he would let her suffer in this state. "When Valor intervenes, the result is death."

Rynn gulped. "Oh," was all she said.

"The Alphas and mates arrive soon to help resolve this." Valor said as he stood. Briggs followed and pulled Rynn up with him. Valor took a couple steps, closed the distance between them, then glanced at Briggs. "You need to prepare her."

Briggs responded with a firm nod. Yes, there was so much to prepare Rynn for, but he was unsure where to start. He had purposely kept some things from her, not wanting to overwhelm her, but the time for keeping her away from the truth was over. He wasn't quite sure what he was going to say and hoped he didn't fuddle up his words.

Valor took her chin in hand again and tilted her head up. "You need to be strong here. Do not let them get to you. Do you understand?"

She nodded, the puzzlement clear on her face.

Valor seemed to approve of her response. He stepped back, crossed his arms over his chest and examined her. "You are looking well, Rynn." A blush rose to her cheeks. "Thank you."

Briggs had already discovered she didn't handle compliments well. He would make a habit to tell her daily how beautiful she was. Hopefully she'd grow used to hearing such things and begin to believe they were true.

"You've done right by her," Valor said, drawing Briggs' focus back to him and away from his mates' crimson cheeks.

He nodded in acknowledgment. It came as a relief to know that Valor had seen a change within her, because then, Briggs knew that he wasn't just imagining that she was getting better. The pain, hardness and disparity were vanishing—replaced with hope, joy and peace. He made it his goal to see that those emotions in her only grew until no trace of her harsh past existed.

Valor gave Briggs a determined look that he knew well, then turned back to Rynn,

hiding the expression with a soft smile. “Would you please excuse Briggs and I for a moment?”

Rynn looked at Briggs in question and he nodded encouragingly. “Just wait over there by the window, darlin’. Enjoy the views.”

Her mouth parted as if she was about to reject the idea. He suspected she didn’t like the idea of not knowing everything, but once she caught sight of the view, she lingered over there without looking back. He chuckled to himself while he followed Valor back to the front door.

Once there, Valor placed a hand on his shoulder, leaned into him and whisper in a low voice Rynn could not hear. “You haven’t completed the bond.”

“She’s not ready,” Briggs whispered back. And he believed that. He would never suggest that she mate with him yet. She could barely have him wrapped around her before sleep. Yes, they kissed, but it was not the kind of kissing connected with mating. It was gentle, and he wasn’t sure he could be gentle once he began to take her.

Valor groaned, his mouth a tight line of unhappiness. “This is not an ideal situation you are entering her into.”

No, it wasn’t and Briggs knew it. The others would frown upon this for many reasons. But what could he do? He wouldn’t push her. “I don’t care how it will look to the others. I will not rush her.”

“I do understand, Briggs.” Valor hummed slightly and removed his hand from Briggs’ shoulder to cross over his chest as he examined him. “I am only fearful of the conflict it might raise.”

Briggs could feel the tension in him rise. It was true that leaving Rynn unclaimed by him could land them in a heap of trouble among the unmated Alphas, but he wouldn’t push her unless he needed to. “We’ll face that if we come to it. Her emotional state is important, first and foremost. Let’s see if there is any interest first. It might be a worthless worry.”

A long resolved sigh came from Valor. He studied Briggs a moment longer, then gave a resolved nod. “If that is your wish, I will respect it.” He cocked his head curiously. “Do you want me to tell the others what has happened to her?”

“No. It is not to be shared.” Briggs’ tension grew and his blood began to boil.

“As you wish,” Valor responded. “But be sure that she knows of her heritage. Make her well aware of what will happen here.”

The boil in his blood had reached a critical level, his voice came out in a low growl. “Nothing will happen to her here. I will not allow it.”

Valor chuckled and gave Briggs a rough slap on the back. “It pleases me to see your protective nature, Briggs. It is one I’ve not seen in you before.”

Briggs let the roar in him settle. Valor was only looking out for her. He glanced back at her, seeing her face pressed against the window as she scanned the grounds. “She’s just such a little soft thing—the Alpha in me roars to protect her.”

Never had he felt like this with a woman before. He’d never been in love. With Rynn, he loved with a deepness that was almost impossible to control. It wasn’t only her beauty. She was small, only coming up to his chest, and had rounded curves that he longed to discover with his mouth. Soft and silky long brown hair, her silver eyes were not only mesmerizing but also the kindest ones he’d ever seen. She was his to love, protect and enjoy forever.

“Just make sure she is aware, all right?” Valor’s chuckle deepened as he gave him another good tap on the back.

“Will do, boss.” Briggs gave his head a shake and settled his thoughts.

Valor opened the front door and left. Briggs made his way to Rynn who currently ran her hands along the leaf of a potted plant. The way she caressed it sent a fierce craving in him to feel that hand along his dick, which hardened at the thought of her touch on him.

As he reached her, she spun around. Briggs smiled sweetly, hoping to disguise the lust rushing through him. Good thing her connected sense to him hadn’t developed or she’d be running from him right now. He had to get control of himself soon. Once she gained more control over her wolf, she’d discover all her senses and he’d be unable to hide anything from her. She’d smell his desire for her miles away.

He reached out and took her hand in his. “Come, love. We have things to discuss,” he pulled a little and she willingly obliged, following him back to the couch.

“So,” she took a seat next to him and turned a little to face him. “Is people disappearing is a normal occurrence around here?”

Briggs chortled and kept her hand in his while he traced his thumb over the back of it. “No, nothing this serious usually happens. Mainly it’s just Alphas being Alphas—testosterone overload. Pack members wanting to join others, Alphas overstepping their territories, those kinds of things.”

She appeared relieved by that, her hand relaxed a little in his. “And it keeps Valor busy enough that he needed you too?”

“Alphas are territorial and very proud creatures. Their mates are worse.”

Her brows rose and her hand tensed again. Little worried lines sat around her eyes. “Worse how?”

“This is what we need to discuss.” He drew in a deep breath to stabilize himself, truly hating the idea that he even had to have this conversation. It was absurd. “Now I need you to trust me. Will you promise to do that?”

She shrugged in a very nonchalant way. “Depends on what you’re going to tell me.”

Amusement filed through him. He adored this side of her. Adored her smarts and wit. Her reaction eased him a bit, certain she could handle what she was up against here. “You need to prepare yourself for the reactions the others will have to you.”

“Their reactions to me,” she retorted, “What do you mean? Cause I’m new here?”

He shook his head and squeezed her hand. He didn’t want to tell her any of this, didn’t want her to worry but what choice did he have? As Valor said, he needed to prepare her. Embarrassment raged within him. “No. It’s because you were not born a wolf, you were made.”

Her eyes widened, clearly taken aback. “Aren’t we all made?”

“No, darlin’. Most of us are born, bred through long lines of werewolves. You were the first made werewolf in more years than Valor can remember.”

She gulped deeply and looked away. “I didn’t know that.”

His assumption of her strength faltered. He did not like the shameful look that crossed her face. He reached out, cupping her chin, brought her focus back to him. “I’m not telling you this to frighten you or segregate you. I just want you to understand what you will be up against. The women can be cruel and vicious.”

“But I don’t even know any of them.” Her voice was a soft whisper. “How can they be like that without even knowing me?”

“It is a prejudice is all.” His embarrassment soon led to rage. He shouldn’t even have to speak a word of this. His job was to see to her well-being. He ran his hand along her cheek. “Do not worry yourself. If I hear it, see it, I will stop it.” He grasped her chin again and raised her head up high, proud as she should be. “You can trust in that.”

His face was just an inch from hers and her lips had a slight swell to them. With his Alpha roaring inside him, his sense of mind drifted away. Arousal stirred within him as he breathed in her sweet scent and it stimulated his senses. Before he could stop himself, he leaned in and pressed his lips against hers.

He ran his hand from her chin to trace along her face, until he cupped the back of her head and angled her so he could kiss her as deep as possible.

Their mouths opened and closed in sync. His other hand caressed the side of her face as a growl erupted from deep in his throat. Rynn gave herself over to him and it took all the control on his part not to ravish her. When she kissed him, it came without restraint. None of the worry or fear showed through her kisses and he could spend a lifetime just doing this with her. She let out little whimpers with each stroke of his tongue and the Alpha in him roared for more. In response, he released his hold on her face, grasped her arms and pulled her closer toward him.

Immediately, she yelped and flew backwards, landed with a thud on the floor.

“Sorry,” Briggs gasped, breathing heavily. His body shook from the desire flooding him and rage at himself for how he just acted. “I’m sorry, Rynn. Please come back to me.”

She trembled, her whole body shook as tears welled up and shame filled her features. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

Briggs slowly crept forward and wrapped his arms around her. “Shhh...your kisses are incredible is all. I just have to get used to that. I’m lacking a little control when it comes to physical contact with you, but it will come, darlin’.”

She sniffed against his chest, her head sank in against him as he cradled her in his arms. “It’s just so confusing. I want to kiss you, touch you...I feel excited around you, but then, when you move fast it...”

He ran his hand along her hair, furious at himself for scaring her. “You are right to be afraid. We will take our time as I told you, love. We just have to find a way to relax you. I also need to gain a little self-control around you.”

She glanced up to him, pain and confusion sat heavy in her eyes. “You know that I want you, right?”

The side of his mouth arched up as she attempted to console him. It was sweet, but unnecessary. “You wouldn’t kiss me like that if you didn’t.”

“I just don’t want you to think it’s you...”

He interrupted her, placed a finger against her lips. “None of that now. I am not going without anything I can’t handle. A kiss here or there is enough.”

Her expression clearly said she didn’t believe him. He would have said more, but Valor cleared his throat from the doorway. Briggs glanced toward him.

“They’re here.”

Briggs stood and assisted Rynn to her feet. He lifted her chin, raised her head until her gaze met his. “Can you handle doing this now?” She sucked in a deep breath and nodded. “Do not lower your eyes to them. Never look away. It is a sign of weakness and you rank higher than any of them.”

Her brows came together in a mask of surprise. "I do?"

"You're the Beta's mate. Essentially that puts you third in command."

She laughed and took a step back from him. "Okay, now you're just being silly."

His grip on her arm tightened, kept her gaze locked on him. "No I am not. You must do this. Promise me that no matter what is said or what they do, even with the Alphas, never look away first."

"Well..." she hesitated a moment, looking unsure, but then gave him a steady glance. "Okay, I promise."

Appeased, Briggs released her arms, took her hand and made his way toward Valor.

"Come then, let's go get this bloody well over with."

Chapter Four

Rynn's thoughts ran furiously through her mind as she followed Briggs and Valor outside.

It didn't take her long to realize that what Briggs and Valor were talking about had to do with sex.

She wasn't supposed to be listening. So what? Being a nosy-parker isn't the worst trait in the world to have. But now, the thought of them talking about it had her heart pounding. Why did it matter that they hadn't had sex? Whose business was it anyway?

Plus this whole 'do not lower your eyes' bit. Briggs was so serious when he had said it—so tense—she agreed because she didn't want to disappoint him. She wasn't entirely confident she could keep that promise though.

Once she stepped out onto the lawn and glanced around at the crowd of werewolves, everything in her screamed to lower her eyes and hide behind Briggs. Not just because the steely look in the Alphas gazes demanded it but there was also an uncomfortable feeling in the air.

Soon, every face she passed or stared at for a moment, examined her, only to quickly look away. It was an immediate sense of empowerment and just the thing she needed to get through this. At least, they couldn't gawk at her.

"Let me first welcome you all here," Valor said, stopping before the horseshoe shaped group. "I will give you time to get settled before the gathering will commence. Let's meet in the Grand Hall at eight. Agreed?"

Everyone nodded in unison.

Valor turned on his heels, stood behind Rynn and rested his hands on her shoulders. "As you have heard and seen, our Beta has found himself his mate." He gave her a squeeze. "I'm pleased to introduce Rynn."

One by one, the Alphas bowed their heads. The women next to them smiled, then looked away quickly. But not everyone was smiling. Some of them just glared before averting their gazes. Not a very settling feeling of welcome.

After the introductions, a woman stepped away from the crowd and approached her. A perfect replica of Barbie, the woman didn't have a single flaw. Bright dark eyes, perfect bone structure, and plump lips matched a spectacular body. She gave Rynn a lingering glance then shifted her focus to Briggs. "We were so pleased to hear you had discovered your mate, Briggs."

Briggs nodded and returned the smile. "That is quite kind of you, Echo."

Her Alpha stepped forward to step next to his mate. He was as powerful as he was handsome. Clean cut, auburn hair that was gelled prim and proper, soft brown eyes that held knowledge and humanity. "The Minnesota Pack welcomes you, Rynn. I am Sayer. As I have heard, your roots are from my territory."

Rynn nodded softly. "Born and raised."

She noticed immediately how this whole eye contact thing worked. It was only at introductions because Echo and Sayer looked away from Rynn immediately when they first spoke, but now their eye contact was steady.

Rynn sighed to herself. There went the whole gawking thing. Glares were coming

her way and if looks could kill, she'd be six feet under with pretty carnations on top.

"Rynn, you came!" Isla said, rushing forward. She glanced back at Thor. "I told you she would." She pulled Rynn into a tight embrace. "How do you like it here? It's nice, isn't it?"

Rynn laughed quietly and patted her back. Isla was always welcoming, but at the same time, someone to only spend a little time with. She could be overbearing and annoying.

Isla backed away, beaming with excitement. "You and Briggs should come and stay with Thor and I. We're just over there." She pointed to a pretty bungalow down the lane.

Thor suddenly appeared irritated with her.

Rynn tensed. More time with Isla was not on her top priority list.

Briggs chuckled and placed his hand on Rynn's back in reassurance. "Our place is with Valor, Isla. You know this."

Isla made an all-out grumpy face. "The rules are so stupid." She wrapped her arm in Rynn's. "We should change that. You're a top dog now, what do you say, Rynn? Put your foot down and get this tight ass bunch to loosen up a little."

Thor sighed heavily and glared at his mate.

Valor frowned and shook his head. "Isla." His voice held a warning.

Rynn couldn't help but smile. As much as Isla could drive her batty, it *was* reassuring to know that she had someone on her side. Isla was one tough cookie and having her unleashed mouth nearby was a source of confidence.

Suddenly, Rynn felt a penetrating glance. It tickled up her spine and sent cold shivers along her skin. She quickly searched for the source of it and found a woman focused on her intently. This woman, hidden earlier, now stood clear from her Alpha and looked at Rynn with pure revulsion.

She wasn't averting her gaze from Rynn. She would not give her respect, that much was clear. Her small bright, blue eyes were barely visible through her glare. Her slender features were tight with revulsion. Even her light brown hair, a rough spiky cut, looked pissed.

No one had ever looked at Rynn with such disgust in her life. It took every ounce of strength that lived in her to maintain a steady eye contact. Part of Rynn wanted to run while the other part wanted to knock the woman on her ass. She didn't deserve to be looked at like this, never asked for any of this. This woman's look implied that her being attacked, violated and left for dead was her fault. It was enough for her to snap.

Briggs leaned down and whispered in her ear. "What's upsetting you, darlin'?"

She never dropped her gaze from the woman's—kept her focus glued to the bitchy wolf. She fought against herself since she promised Briggs she wouldn't look away and didn't want to break her word.

Without looking away, she responded, "What do I do if she won't look away?"

Briggs followed her gaze. In a blink of an eye, chaos erupted around her. A roar ripped through the air as Briggs slammed into his wolf form, taking a protective stance in front of her.

Valor's hand tightened on Rynn's shoulder, clearly telling her not to move. As if she could. She desperately wanted to look at Briggs, but the woman hadn't looked away yet. Even though she didn't understand the importance of this, she knew what was happening was serious and something deep within her demanded she keep her gaze glued on this

woman.

Just as quickly as Briggs shifted, so did the woman's Alpha. Rynn feared they would go at each other and was surprised when they didn't.

Instead of Briggs and the Alpha having a go out of it, the Alpha turned on his woman and growled deep, teeth snarling.

Still, the woman's gaze never left Rynn as she shifted into wolf form. Her Alpha lunged at her, breaking the connection when he tackled her to the ground. Loud snarls and vicious growls filled the air as the two of them went at it like two rapid dogs.

Instant relief flooded Rynn now that the staring contest was over. She let out a deep breath just as Briggs backed up to stand in front of her.

A big wolf—much bigger than the other Alphas before her—his coat was a mixture of black, grey, and white. His ears, eyes and muzzle all defined by dark black fur, he was just as sexy in wolf-form as he was human.

Seeing him so protective brought a smile to her face. She stepped away from Valor's grip and settled close to Briggs' side. She ran a hand along his thick back, needing nothing more than to be close to her Alpha.

At her touch, he glanced at her, his yellow eyes glowed with anger and protectiveness.

Moments later, the commotion silenced. The fight was over as quick as it started. With a loud yelp, the Alpha pinned his mate to the ground and growled loud above her.

He shifted, returned to his stockbroker self—short blond tousled hair, tailored suit with brown loafers. "My apologies, Briggs. Nera forgets her place. She will be reminded."

Briggs returned to two feet in a flash and took Rynn's hand tight in his own. "See that she is, Rainer."

Nera's shift came slower. The anger on her face was fierce and filled with hate, but she never once looked up from the ground as he yanked her away from the crowd.

Right then, three lone wolves stepped forward—their gazes glued on Rynn. She was immediately unsettled about the severity in their eyes. What could be wrong now? Rynn glanced at Briggs in question.

He wasn't looking at her. His eyes locked on the wolf approaching them. Rynn followed his gaze to see teal eyes tight with intensity and a sly and calculating smile.

The man stopped a few feet away from Rynn, raised his head and inhaled deeply. His nostrils flared as he turned his head, the smile had grown in size. "Well, well, what do we have here?"

Briggs grabbed Rynn by the arm and pushed her behind him as the other two men stepped forward. In an instant, she was shielded from them and felt completely lost. Why were they looking at her like that? Why was Briggs ready to kill someone? His tense emotions were sending flickers of harshness through their bond.

Compelled to have a look, she peeked around Briggs' back to find the three men standing in front of them. Any of them could be an ideal candidate for an ultimate fighting challenge. That alone was cause for concern.

Briggs was as tall as any of them, but his body wasn't as overbearing. He was still in every way muscular—defined—just not bulky. In a fight against them, Rynn wasn't totally convinced he could win. As a wolf, she didn't doubt they'd lose. Briggs' size came close to Valor's, which was saying a lot. Valor as a wolf is comparable to a small

horse.

Right now though, they weren't shifting—all stood in silence with testosterone filtering through the air.

Before Rynn could voice her questions, Briggs pushed her behind him further. Valor stepped away from her to move between Briggs and the men. "I declare my protection on her. Step aside, Tiago." Valor's voice rang strong with authority.

"This is fair game, Valor," Tiago said, his tone challenging. "You have no right to protect her here."

Rynn snuck another peek around Briggs' side to see the other two Alphas had backed away, appearing uninterested. She still had no clue to what held their attention in the first place. But this Tiago wolf challenged Valor, face-to-face.

"You will not have her," Briggs growled. "You will die before you do."

She was confused. From their conversation earlier, she believed that because they hadn't slept together it could cause a bit of a rift, but she thought it had something to do with the women thinking badly of her or that she was strange. Considering they would already hold not being a pure blood against her, it just added to the problem.

What was this about and what did he mean 'have her'? Have her do what?

Quicker than she could blink, Valor's wolf form stood in front of Tiago—cinnamon-colored fur dusted with black tips. He was quite a striking wolf—one to gawk at for sure.

Tiago however hadn't shifted. He looked more annoyed than anything else and stepped back within the crowd. Tiago's gaze never left Rynn's. She swallowed deeply.

Those eyes were not only that of a predator, but were also very possessive.

Briggs' tension rippled through him, angry and protective. Those emotions also ran through Rynn from their bond. Never had she felt anything like it, especially coming from Briggs. He was always so gentle, the strength of it made her feel safer. His security was like a warm blanket around her.

Still, this was such a huge mess.

Half of them hated her because she wasn't pure blood, and now, it appeared that this Tiago was ready to pounce because she and Briggs hadn't done *the deed* yet. Nothing in her felt good about any of this.

Briggs didn't miss her somber mood, pulled her around from behind him and brought her close to his chest. "It doesn't matter. You hear me? All this is not important. You are my only concern here."

She wasn't settled.

"Go on," Valor ordered to the crowd. "Get yourself settled, then we can meet and get to the business that has brought us all here."

The crowd dissipated. Briggs looked at Rynn concern tightened his eyes. He sighed deep, but gave her a little grin. "Rough crowd."

Jokes weren't appropriate now, she needed answers to her questions and the truth. "What was that about with Tiago?"

Briggs' opened his mouth, but Valor interrupted. "Briggs, I need a minute with you, alone."

Oh, all this wasn't sitting well at all. Knowing there were secrets didn't make her happy.

"I will be only a moment," Briggs, obviously sensing her distress, gave her a soft smile and kissed her cheek. "Wait here," he told her. He approached Valor, who stood

near the front porch.

Once there, Valor placed a hand on Briggs' shoulder, just as he had before, leaned in and whispered something in his ear. Immediately, Briggs' shoulders sank and his gaze cut to Rynn's. She shuddered at the concern in his eyes and the torment raging through him.

Valor said something again that made Briggs glance at him and nod.

While Valor made his way into the house, Briggs headed back toward her, gaze on the ground. When he stopped in front of her, he lifted his gaze, his eyes soft but conflicted.

His expression told her something was terribly wrong. With the bond they shared, it was a dead giveaway.

"You okay?" she asked, concern made her voice squeak.

He nodded dully. "I'm all right, love." He cupped her cheek. "You have questions and I will answer them, but first, let's run you a bath. It's been a bit of a rough day and it will be an even longer night with that bunch of wankers."

Chapter Five

The steaming hot water pounded against Rynn's skin as the jets moved it around in the tub. She sighed, ran her hands through the water. The bathroom here was wide open. Wood layered the walls halfway, from there it was all glass until it met the wooden roof.

Briggs had relaxation down pat. The room was filled with scented candles and rose petals floated along the water's surface. Perfect and fluffy clouds peeked through the windows as each one drifted by.

She could have stayed there for hours. Briggs' objective of the bath worked, she felt calm and settled. Knowing the gathering would happen in less than a few hours, she reluctantly stepped out of the tub and drained the water.

Briggs had left her an organic cotton bathrobe. She wrapped it around her body, reveling in its softness, which she could have stayed in for a lifetime. After she brushed out her wet hair, she opened the bathroom door.

Valor stood, his arms crossed as he leaned against the wall. She jumped, startled. "Sorry, you scared me."

He pushed away from the wall and waved his hand to the right. "I just wanted to show you to your room. I apologize if I frightened you."

"No, no it's okay," she waved away his concern and forced her heart to settle. Valor had become a close friend these past weeks. Maybe even a father figure, which was odd since he looked around thirty, but didn't act it. He seemed much older, especially in his eyes. Nothing about him scared her. He could be tough and powerful, but gentle.

Three doors down, he stopped and turned toward her. She reached for the door handle, but Valor stopped her with a touch on her arm. She glanced at him. "Are you doing all right from the encounter today? Not too upset?"

She shrugged a little, not really sure how she felt about it all. "I'm okay. Confused, but okay."

"Not to worry, sweetling," Valor said with a soft smile in a low tender tone. "Briggs will explain the Alphas to you. I just wanted to make sure that the woman, Nera, didn't worry you."

Rynn huffed. Oh yeah, Nera worried her all right. "She's entitled to her opinions I suppose, but if she gives me a look like that again, I'll smack it off her face."

Valor's brows rose, amusement lit his dark eyes. "There might be a little wolf in you after all. You're not so timid now, are you?"

She laughed at the insinuation. "It's just she looked at me as if it was my fault. Like this was a choice or something."

Valor gave shoulder a pat of reassurance. "It is wrong. Her ways of thinking are old and it was a disgusting display. Just keep your head up and stay strong. Understood?"

Rynn nodded.

"Go on then." He gave her shoulder a squeeze, nodded her toward the door. "You'll be okay."

She'd be okay with what? Before she had the chance to ask what he meant, he headed off back down the hall. By the time he vanished from sight, she still hadn't a clue. Giving up on her curiosity, gaze on the floor, she opened the bedroom door, then closed it

behind her. She turned around to find Briggs beside the bed completely naked.

Rynn wasn't quite sure what shocked her more. Seeing Briggs' incredible muscular body, all sleek and defined or the implication of what he was suggesting. Her breath hitched, as she looked him over. He was in every way delicious. Never had she been so attracted to anyone in her life. Just the sight of him like this had her stomach doing somersaults.

But she wasn't ready for this. Her heart raced and her entire body tensed from the fear of it. It'd only been weeks ago that she had been violated. She couldn't do it. She didn't want to have sex again. Her lungs began to close in and the room swayed a little.

Briggs smiled softly when her gaze connected with his. "It's time."

"I can't do this," she gasped, scared, and deathly worried. Would the memory of that night come back to her? She couldn't endure it again. She had done a good job at blocking it from her mind and she wanted to keep it that way.

Briggs approached her. She let out a little shriek and slammed herself against the door. He froze, but the softness in him never changed. "Now, Rynn," he said quietly. "Trust me when I tell you I do not want to push this. I could spend a lifetime waiting until you are ready, but with Tiago's interest in you, this is a necessity."

"Why?" Her voice shook.

He started toward her again, little steps that barely made a sound. "I had hoped that none of the unmated Alphas would show an interest in you." He let out a frustrated breath. "I am not surprised by the turn of the events, but if we do not mate, I could lose you to him."

She tightened against the door, her back soon to become a permanent fixture. "Why?"

He stopped just a few short feet away from her. "First, I look weak because I have not claimed you. Second, the others will think you are not agreeable to being with me."

Rynn remained glued to the door, her legs shook and the quiver in her stomach had reached the edge of nausea. Maybe if she kept talking, she could find a way out of this. "But what does that have to do with Tiago?"

Briggs took another step toward her, but at her deep intake of breath he stopped, and let out a deep breath himself. "Alpha mate blood runs in you. That kind of blood does not run in every female wolf. Yes, we are lucky that our souls have found each other, but not all Alphas are so lucky. And it has been known that soul bonds have been forced by magic."

"How?"

"The moon-bonding ceremony. You felt how it deepened our connection that night, darlin'."

She nodded, gulped deeply. She had felt it. She hadn't felt his emotions before then, couldn't sense him like she could now.

Only love and worry spiraled through her now. He was worried? It didn't relax her, either. If anything it made it worse. As if he read her mind, his lips firmed, then she felt nothing—no emotions from him—only patience.

He took another slow step toward her then stopped again. "The bond between chosen mates rather than destined is just not as deep. Emotions are still there, but weaker. Do you understand?"

She nodded again. Her breath panted—hardly catching.

He stepped closer, dissolved the distance between them, the warmth of his body against her skin. He reached out slowly and rubbed his fingers across her cheek. "I cannot lose you." He smiled softly. "Do you trust me?"

She nodded, still glued to the door behind her. Trust with him was strong and steady. She never thought he'd do anything to mistreat her. It wasn't him she worried about, but the reminder of the what happened that night. Her first experience with sex was horrible and nothing felt good. The memory of that pain was like a constant knife in her heart. No, she never wanted to feel that again.

His fingers trailed off her face, down her neck and along her arm to grab her hand. "Come then." He pulled gently, but she didn't budge. Fear held her incapacitated. His soft look was meant to console her, but it didn't.

"We have time. We do not need to rush anything. If at any time it becomes too much and you can't handle it, I will stop."

Rynn felt a tumultuous amount of mixed feelings. The attraction to Briggs was unimaginable and seeing him naked stirred arousal within her. She couldn't deny the scent of him and the look of his glorious body was something she wasn't sure she could ignore. But the fear within her was stronger.

It wasn't that she didn't want to be touched by him—she did. At least, part of her did. It was more the fear of what his touch would bring.

Would she know the difference between Briggs and the monster that had violated her? Whose face would she see above her? She wasn't sure she wanted to know the answer.

Briggs pulled a bit stronger this time and her legs decided to work. She willingly followed behind him as he led her to the bed. Even though, a large part of her said to run, her trust in him was the only thing allowing this happen tonight.

As they reached the bed, she caught sight of a bowl on the night table filled with a yellowish silky liquid that smelled of honey and almonds. Her gaze moved away from the liquid as he reached for the belt of her bathrobe, slowly opened it and let it fall open. The world spun. Hot waves of panic made sickness roll through her stomach.

His deep yellow eyes never left hers as he reached out to brush the robe from her shoulders, then lowered her onto the bed. This was good. If he looked at her body, it would've been an immediate reminder that she was naked. She couldn't think of that right now, let alone anything else.

Briggs positioned Rynn on her stomach and no matter how much fear flamed through her, she had enough sense left to wonder what he planned to do with her face down.

Yet fear made it impossible to ask, so she got a grip on her control and just trusted him. He'd never hurt her. It was that thought alone that she kept her from fleeing. She laid her head to the side, watched his every move. Her breath felt forced, the lump in her throat was a second away from coming out as vomit.

Briggs knelt beside the bed, then reached over to the night table, dipped his hand into the bowl and cupped out some of the liquid. He rubbed his hands together, then placed them on her shoulders, rubbed the warmed liquid over her skin. The scent of honey and almonds instantly multiplied.

It was then she knew his intention.

A smidgen of the fear decreased as his hands began to massage the length of her

back. It didn't take long before her body succumbed and all her brain could register was his tender hands along her skin. They seemed to know exactly what to do and felt marvelous across her flesh. He manipulated all knots from every single muscle. Working in deep circles, he applied steady pressure and vanquished the fear in her body with relaxation.

By the time he reached her feet, the fear within her had settled and had brought her to a place of bliss. Her eyes closed with tranquility as he never missed a single spot on her body. The tension that lived deep within her faded away to something else entirely and she liked it.

He continued to run his hands along the length of her body until it was loose and willing, then turned her onto her back. As she moved, she opened her sleepy eyes to see that the relaxation she was experiencing, Briggs was not. His eyes smoldered as his erection stood strong.

For a moment, she was captured by it. She'd seen her fair share of male parts—she never claimed to be a saint—but never one of this caliber. The perfect length to width and the hairlessness of his body didn't stop at his chest. She'd never seen anything look so good.

When she looked back up, Briggs was reaching back into the bowl to grab more oil. He dribbled it along her stomach and she tensed all over again. The other way she wasn't so exposed. She didn't have to look at him and the areas she was afraid to be touched were right in his line of vision.

"Shhh," Briggs hummed softly. He ran the liquid along her stomach and made his way down her legs. He hadn't strayed from his course of mending her body and kept his distance away from areas that might ruin the moment. He reminded her of how nice a touch felt and how much sensitivity came from someone's hands on her body.

It was almost as if this was the first time she'd been touched. What was once lost was beginning to return. Each knead of his fingers, the tingle of his stroke seemed to caress the pit of her stomach.

His hands glided slow and deep from her feet, up to her legs and hips, then back down again, working the tension that stiffened her limbs.

Wasn't much of a surprise that eventually her body gave in. Eased and relaxed again to the wonderful sensation of his loving touch against her skin. When she began to sigh in surrender, Briggs hands wavered from their safe course to run along her inner areas. Close, but not enough to scare her. He rimmed the outside of her warmth so her body grew to accept his touch there and want it.

More than anything, she felt surprised. She hadn't expected to feel aroused or needy. She even felt the need to beg him to satisfy her. The more his hands skimmed the side of her warmth, the more she wanted him to touch, tease it until she screamed out for him. In response, she slowly opened her legs, invited his touch closer.

He still didn't rush. Never dove toward it. With each caress along her legs, he moved closer to the throbbing need.

After a few more long strokes, he reached it and she jumped at the contact. Just as quick as he touched it, he continued with the massage—moved up her body to stimulate her receptiveness to him.

His touch grazed over her breasts, nipples tight with anticipation. When his palms tickled the tight buds, her breath drew in deep as they seemed to be a direct line to her

center. The tingle jolted a need for more.

“Mmm...I’ve craved to touch you like this.” He didn’t focus on any one part of her body, but continued with long stroking movements to settle her soul. The arousal within her started to surpass manageable levels. Without a thought in her mind, she began to move beneath his hand, especially when it lingered near her warmth.

He took the hint she provided because he cupped her warmth in his hand. He rubbed the oil along the sensitivity of her heated flesh, teased it until her moans deepened and had nothing to do with relaxation.

“Open your eyes,” Briggs’ voice was as soft as before. He stood over her, left her space to breathe. He showed her the distance between them was safe and that if she wanted him to stop, he would. She found it amazing that she didn’t want this to stop and craved more of him.

He leaned down, still keeping a distance with his body and laid his lips across hers, slowly meeting her tongue swirl for swirl. His kisses were enough to lose herself in and stole all thought from her mind.

“You’re so lovely here—so pretty, warm and wet.” He continued to play with her sensitive skin, never stopping until she was so aroused that her warmth clenched tightly and the wetness grew to a point that demanded attention. As if knowing her thoughts, he slowly slipped his finger inside her.

She gasped from the sensation of it. “Oh goodness that is wonderful.” It provided an instant relief to the desire coursing through her—a perfect outlet to fuel the arousal consuming her.

Briggs groaned, low and deep.

His strokes were slow and energizing. He caressed every part of her body to stimulate it with desire. Soon, the need to have him closer consumed her. She reached for him, took his face in her hands and pulled him down toward her. He allowed it without hesitation, leaned his chest across hers as he deepened the kiss.

With heat raging through her, she reached out with her other hand to touch him—wanting him to feel this pleasure. Before she could, he grabbed it and placed it back on her stomach.

His strokes within her warmth came slightly quicker, still soft and gentle with just a faster speed. She moaned and squirmed beneath him. Her body begged him to go harder, faster, but he wouldn’t allow it.

Just as the rush of frustration swelled within Rynn, he backed away, and ran his hand up to her hip, grasping it gently. “Not yet, love. I want to feel your release along my body.” He slowly spun her on the bed so her buttocks were right on the edge and stood between her thighs.

She let out a deep breath that sounded as needy as she felt. Of course, she understood why he went about it like this. He wanted to take her differently than she had experienced before so the memory would be fresh and new. In taking her like this, it kept his body away from her. She wouldn’t feel held down and the ability to stop this if she wanted to.

But she didn’t. Her arousal made her numb to the memory before. Seeing him there, ready and willing, she wanted him inside her—claim her, make her his.

He reached over to the bowl again, and just as she was about to object, he spread the liquid along his hardened shaft. It glowed and glistened in the light. “This will help ease the pain.”

His gaze never left hers and the desire that burned through them was enough to set her on fire. He stepped in closer and waited—waited until she opened her thighs for him so he could close the distance. “The choice is yours, darlin’.”

“I want this—you.” She widened her legs and he slowly stepped in closer, rested his erection against her warmth. She squirmed against him, the contact with her swollen nub made her moan.

He slowly leaned back a bit, then placed the tip of his erection near her entrance and gave a steady push. She expected it to hurt, but as he slowly pushed through, it was more of a burn. He moved slowly. With each push into her body, he was immediately accepted.

It only took minutes for him to slide in completely. His eyes closed as a deep moan that called to her soul escaped his mouth. “Ahhh...” his voice purred, his eyes snapped open to hers, and he gave a mischievous grin. “Nothin’ has ever felt so good, love.”

He pulled back again and then pushed in slowly. The burn continued, but she liked it and welcomed it. The knowledge that he was the first to have her felt so right. This pain spoke the truth that it was Briggs she was meant to be with, her body was his to break in. She wanted to tell him how much she enjoyed this, but couldn’t find her voice.

The magic poured around her as his claim over her set in deep. The joy that she’d given herself to him was hard in his eyes. Finally, their bond was now complete.

“You feel that...” his eyes burned with lust and possession, “do you feel our bond connecting.”

“Yes, oh yes, I feel it,” she drawled, raised her legs and he placed his hands on her thighs. He slowly filled her completely.

With a few more strokes, the burn began to subside as his unhurried movements continued. The thrusts inside her created flutters of pleasure straight to her core and she vocalized her happiness. “Don’t stop, please...don’t stop.”

“I’ve only just begun.” He picked up his pace, glided inside her with gentle movements. He was careful, as if she would break and didn’t want to force her into climax. He waited patiently for her response to grow naturally from just his gentle touch.

And it was building.

She moaned aloud as the pleasure took hold. “Oooo...don’t...stop,” was all she could come up with. His body provided the perfect ease of the pressure. She began to contract around him. Her back arched, breasts high as her hands clasped his forearms and gripped them tight.

As the tightness engulfing her grew stronger, his body throbbed inside her. With the added sensations, she reeled in pleasure. Her entire body clamped down and her eyes closed as the most glorious euphoria washed over her.

Briggs’ deep groan echoed through the room. “Damn...” he groaned. “Mmmm...yes darlin’, let go.”

His hands around her hips tightened and his soft strokes faltered. After two hard thrusts, nothing else existed. No him, no her, only the pure pleasure rocketing through her body and loud roars within the air.

By the time she returned to reality, the hardness within her had alleviated, and Briggs wore a sedated and content expression.

He gathered her into his arms, withdrew from her body and pushed her back up into the middle of the bed. After he settled in beside her, he ran his fingers down the length of her spine and stared at her with elated eyes, which she was sure mirrored her own

expression.

She snuggled deeper into his arms, burrowed into his comfort. “I didn’t think of him.”

“No?” His breath tickled her forehead.

She leaned back a bit and met his gaze. “I thought I’d think of him. That he’d be all I could think of but it wasn’t. He wasn’t anywhere in my mind.”

“It’s because your body was treated as it should have been, love.” Briggs smiled before he kissed her forehead. “There was room for your mind to wander.”

He had never asked about what happened to her that night—never wanted to know all the grimy details. She was sure it was because it’d be too hard for him to keep it together.

It was almost a relief, really. Focusing on the future was far easier than dealing with a past she could never change. Besides, her future looked bright, why deal with the dark?

She sighed, content and leaned her head against his arm, while his fingers feather along her spine. “It wasn’t just that. It’s because it was with you.”

He winked and gave her a mischievous grin. “There is that too.” He glanced at her, curious. “There was one thing that was a bit of a surprise.”

She tensed.

He chuckled and gave her bottom a little tap. “Now don’t go doing that, love. You bled is all.”

She blushed. “Isn’t that normal?”

Briggs lifted his hand from where it rested on her bottom, ran his fingers along one rosy cheek. “I thought that had already been done.”

Right, she never told him. Her blush deepened, and she thought it wise to explain. “Zia healed that for me.” The memory from just a few nights ago rushed back into her mind. It was the first night she saw for herself that there were more worlds than just the one she knew. The first time she couldn’t deny the existence of witches, vampires, guardians.

The woman before Rynn was one of the four leaders of the Otherworld, but looked more like a star gliding across the red carpet. Her elegance, confidence, and shining beauty gave her the air of a perfect woman. “I am Zia, Master of Witches. Please consider this your home as well,”

Rynn blushed, feeling slightly inadequate. “Thank you.” She glanced around a little, surprised to say the least. Tonight wasn’t at all what Rynn had expected. Here in the Otherworld, they were celebrating the full moon. Rynn could feel the pull to it now that she was a werewolf, but seeing so many supernatural creatures together—carrying on like this was a birthday bash—was nothing short of amazing.

When Rynn glanced back at Zia, she was giving her a curious look. Zia glanced at Briggs. “She’s your mate?”

Briggs beamed at Zia. “Aye, she is.”

Rynn felt just as thrilled. They were classic newlyweds, lost in each other and wanting everyone to see it.

Zia clapped her hands, a smile graced her face that made her more beautiful, if that was even possible. “Oh, what wonderful news!” She leaned forward, reached a hand out to Rynn. The second their skin made contact, she snapped it back and gasped.

Rynn gasped as well and leaned into Briggs, who wrapped an arm around her. She

could barely breathe. It was quite obvious by Zia's horrified expression that her magical abilities allowed her to see into Rynn's mind, and what had happened to her. Something Rynn didn't want anyone to see.

Zia regained control of herself quickly, then reached out to Rynn again, sadness lay very prevalent in her eyes. She leaned forward and whispered in Rynn's ear. "As a Spirit Witch, I can erase that memory from your mind. Would you like me to do that for you?"

Rynn backed away from her in shock. "You can do that?" This magical stuff was unbelievable. To think such a thing possible, she couldn't wrap her head around it.

Zia smiled and nodded softly.

Rynn thought for a moment, considered Zia's offer. Without a lot of consideration, she knew the answer. "No. I do not want you to erase the memory." The memory was what brought her into this new life. Without it, pieces would be missing. She had already lost enough of herself and to willingly lose more, wasn't an option. No matter how horrible the memory was.

Zia's smile was gentle as she leaned back in. "That I can understand, but what I can do for you is return your virginity. I can heal your body so that when you make love again, it will be as if it wasn't stolen from you."

Hope filled Rynn. To have that back, to give it to Briggs... "Yes, that is something I would want."

Zia gave her arm a little squeeze and with it came pain that nearly crippled Rynn. Menstrual cramps felt like a massage compared to this.

Briggs tensed immediately. Rynn could sense that he was about to lose it. She quickly grasped his arm to let him know she was fine. Yes, it was painful, but she could endure it because of what having her virginity back meant to her.

It wasn't long before the pain eased and when Rynn opened her eyes, she did feel different. Whole again. It was a wonderful feeling.

"Thank you," she whispered to Zia. "Thank you isn't enough. A thousand thank yous will never be enough."

Zia cupped her cheek. "I hope that gives you some peace, Rynn."

Briggs' fingers continued the dance along her cheek and snapped her out of the memory. He gave her a classic Briggs grin. "It pleased me."

She smiled back at him, pleased as well. She believed that in this moment, it was the beginning—the start of her healing.

Would she ever be cured of what that night did to her soul? She doubted it. But Briggs showed her one thing tonight that she needed to see.

This was love, pleasure and how she deserved to be treated.

That night was theft, hatred, and a lust for power. There was a difference between the two. The event may always scar her, be ever-present in her mind, but eventually it would fade away to a distant memory.

She had Briggs and a bright future with him. That was all that mattered.

Chapter Six

“This is so embarrassing,” Rynn exclaimed to Briggs as they sat in the Grand Hall. “There’s no hiding it. They all knew I hadn’t done it a few hours ago, now they’ll all scent out that I have.” Her sweet cheeks burned crimson.

Briggs chuckled at her blush and took her hand in his. “It’s nothing they haven’t done themselves, darlin’.”

Rynn snorted softly and gave him an annoyed glance. “Still.”

His grin grew and he lifted her hand to his mouth, laid a kiss upon her palm as he glanced at the crowd. The Grand Hall was located just off the main lodge at Wolf Creek—with typical high ceilings of dark wood beams, crystal chandeliers and candles provided dim light. The table where he, Rynn and Valor sat had a deep silver cotton tablecloth with sleek matching covered chairs.

“So, what’s going to happen?” Rynn whispered to Briggs.

He would have responded, if Tiago’s entrance in the hall didn’t steal his attention. Briggs watched as Tiago inhaled deeply. Immediately, he scented out that Rynn had been claimed, sending his eyes into slits.

Within seconds, the look faded and he gave Briggs a firm nod of acknowledgment as he found his way to his table. *Sod*. Tiago was not a man he liked at the moment and it would serve him well to stay clear.

It took a few more minutes for all the wolves to find their tables—of course, Valor’s table sat a little apart from the rest. Briggs could sense Rynn didn’t enjoy the fact she was displayed in such a way. He found her lack of comfort amusing but did scoot her chair a little behind his so she was hidden further.

As the last of the wolves took their seats, Valor stood. “Hendrix. Sayer.” His voice rang clear in authority, a sound Briggs had gotten used to and respected. “Come forward.”

The two men stood from their chairs—both puffed up, muscles clenched, death gazes hard on their faces. Briggs could only hope no blood would be shed here in front of Rynn, which was very likely. She’d yet to see how violent his kind could be and enough had happened already. He wasn’t sure she could take much more.

Hendrix and Sayer stopped in front of the table. Hendrix immediately got down to business. “Return my daughter!” he roared at Sayer.

Briggs tensed, ready to move Rynn out of the way if he needed to. Hendrix looked about a second away from shifting. His entire body trembled beneath his khakis and black cotton tee shirt. Even his charcoal shoulder-length hair seemed to shake and his dark eyes raged with fury.

Sayer stepped in closer to him, nose-to-nose. “I do not have her,” he said through gritted teeth. The challenge had been issued, and Sayer wasn’t stepping down. The look in his eyes was just like his cropped honey hair, soft and relaxed. Exactly how an Alpha should look like when presented with a situation like this—not guilty.

Valor sighed and gave his face a rub as he examined the men. “You have not heard anything of this?” he asked Sayer.

Sayer glanced at him, his gaze conveyed truth. “Nothing at all, nor am I involved in

it. Furthermore, I doubt any of my pack is either.”

“How can you be so sure?” Valor asked.

“I am as sure as you would be. I trust my pack. They are not capable of doing this. My wolves are well looked after. They do not go without. They wouldn’t need her for anything. What would the motive be?”

Valor leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms, his brows furrowed in contemplation. “Hendrix, you heard him. He does not have her or any knowledge of her whereabouts.”

Hendrix breathed deep through his nose, his fists clenched tight against his sides. “I do not care. If the trail ended in Minnesota then she must be with the wolves there. He needs to pay for their lack of discipline.”

Valor turned his gaze to Sayer, who stood cool and collected. “That does pose a question. Have you had any rogue wolves come into your area?”

Sayer pondered that for a moment, then shook his head. “Not that I know of. I would have been informed immediately. No one has presented themselves to me.”

Briggs leaned over and whispered in Rynn’s ear, sensing the conversation confused her. “When wolves are without a pack, they are known as rogues. An Alpha’s permission is needed for them to stay in his territory.”

Rynn smiled a soft thank you, then looked back at the men.

“You see,” Hendrix accused, drawing Briggs’ gaze back to his. “No rogues. It must be members of his pack then.”

Valor ignored him, continued to look at Sayer. “Have any of your pack scented any others who have entered your territory and belong to another pack?”

“I have not been told of any.” Sayer replied.

“Point proven!” Hendrix roared like a wild animal just released from its cage. “You must die for this.”

Abruptly, a wave of amusement swept through Briggs. Stunned by it, he glanced at Rynn who was looking down at the table, shaking. Only a second later, she burst out laughing and glanced at Briggs with watery eyes.

When her laughter subsided a bit, she glanced around and noticed everyone was looking at her. Her laughter ceased, fear charging through their bond. She looked at Briggs for help.

He had to restrain his laughter seeing her frightened expression. As if, he’d let anything happen to her. He arched a brow. “Something funny, darlin’?”

“Ahhh...” She glanced around the room, then met his gaze again. “Sorry, no.”

Valor shifted his chair to face her, crossed his arms over his chest, and gave her a look that was half-inquisitive, half-amused. “You have something to add?”

Her brows rose, her face went beat red in an instant. She shook her head quickly. “No.”

Valor smiled softly, gave a wave of his hand. “Something amused you. Please enlighten us.”

She glanced at Briggs, seeking assistance. He didn’t offer what she wanted, instead only gave her a reassuring nod.

“Go on, love. Speak your mind.” Seeing her squirm was amusement in itself. Besides, she had just as much right to speak here as any other. Plus, he was slightly intrigued as to what was on her mind and caused such an outburst.

She gave him an annoyed look for not rescuing her and sighed. "It's just that—this one," she pointed to Hendrix, "just keeps repeating *die, die, die*. Then, there's this one," she pointed at Sayer, "who has no idea what's going on." She shrugged. "It is just funny—a pointless conversation."

The room was deadly silent.

Briggs was amused. His little wolf pleased him. Showing confidence around the others was something he had not expected her to do and it made him proud.

Valor shared in the amusement and cocked his head as if he meant to be serious, but his eyes said otherwise. "You have a solution to this then, do you?"

She leaned forward, looked Valor dead in the eye. "Don't you think time would be better spent trying to find the poor girl?"

Surprised flashed across Valor's face, she had clearly stated a valid suggestion. "Indeed it would." He glanced at Sayer and Hendrix, who stared at Rynn with equal blank looks. "What say you?"

Hendrix's eyes darkened, his gaze determined as he looked down at her. "You're willing to help with this search?"

"Sure," she answered, her tone sarcastic. "Don't expect a miracle though, I'm no detective."

Briggs laughed and wrapped an arm around her. The more he saw of the real her, the more he loved. She was such a quiet thing, soft in every way, but there was strength in her that appealed to his Alpha. She only needed to see it for herself. That would be the challenge.

Hendrix's look of death slowly lessened and behind it was deep pain. "Rynn is right." Sadness was heavy in his voice. "We should be out searching for her."

Briggs patted her shoulder, quite thrilled with her. She just had two very strong Alphas agree with her. The moon had indeed granted him one hell of a mate.

"Sayer, you and your pack will give aid here." Valor ordered.

"Of course," he responded without hesitation.

Valor stood from his chair and gave the crowd a direct once-over. "Any other business to discuss?"

No one said a word.

"Good," Valor resumed his seat. "Before we leave for Minnesota, we must eat. We need our strength."

Hendrix nodded, then glanced at Sayer, who just slapped him on the back. "Let's eat, dolt, then we'll find her." They shared a smile, then headed back to their tables.

Briggs glanced across the table. Valor had pride in his eyes. "Destiny has brought a wise mate to you, Briggs."

"Aye," Briggs responded as he looked at Rynn. It sure had.

She dismissed them both with a wave of her hand and fiddled with her napkin. "Its common sense, not wisdom."

Valor leaned forward, tapped his finger on the table to grab her attention. "No, sweetling, it is human smarts. You think like a human. We have not had that within the United States wolves before."

She gave him a baffled look, then turned toward Briggs. "What does he mean?"

"He means," Briggs answered, a little lost in her sweet expression. He wished it were proper, amidst a pack meeting, for him to kiss those pouty lips of hers. "As Wolves we

have been raised having these gatherings and solving the problems within them. Plus, Alphas are Alphas, whose answers usually result in the death of someone.”

“So...” she exhaled long and deep, then seemed to gather her thoughts. “Sayer would have been killed tonight, then what?”

“Hendrix would have requested the new Minnesota Alpha to give him aid in finding his daughter.”

Rynn snorted. “Well that is just plain stupid.”

Valor laughed and winked at her. “Isla could be right. You might be just the one to change our ways.”

Just then, Echo, Sayer’s mate, approached Briggs. He glanced at her just as she said, “Looks like you saved the day.”

Rynn rolled her eyes and let out another loud snort. Echo smiled at her before glancing at Briggs. “Would you mind if I had a moment alone with your mate?”

Briggs eyed her curiously. What would Sayer’s mate have to discuss with Rynn? If it had been anyone else, he would have said hell no. Echo was a kind and gentle woman and he suspected that if anyone would welcome Rynn, it would be her. So far, his instincts had never led him astray.

But he did think it wise to look to Rynn for her answer. When Echo directed the question at him, he felt pings of annoyance running through their bond. Of course, it was proper, but Rynn hadn’t yet learned that.

He glanced at Rynn. She nodded and shrugged at the same time, equally mystified. Briggs looked back to Echo and gave a firm nod. “Of course.”

After a final curious glance his way, Rynn stood. Echo took her hand and led them out of the Grand Hall.

Briggs had to wonder what the two women would discuss.

* * * *

Echo held Rynn’s hand tight as she pulled her into a foyer. A fireplace about the size of the hotel room where Rynn once lived sat in front of her. She could only giggle at the sheer size of it. Two lounge chairs rested next to it and Echo pulled her down into one, while she took the other. Echo didn’t say a word, simply stared at Rynn.

Rynn began to feel uncomfortable and looked around. Was she supposed to say something here?

“I wanted to make sure you were all right?” Echo finally asked.

“All right...” All right, with what? Becoming a wolf? Tiago? She needed more than that to understand what she was asking. “...with what?”

Echo looked away, her cheeks tinged pink, then cleared her throat. “Mating with Briggs.”

Rynn blushed.

Echo continued, looking anywhere but at Rynn. “Alphas can be rough at times and with Tiago’s interest in you, I’m sure Briggs felt threatened. It can be scary when you are forced into submission.”

“Forced into what?” Rynn gasped.

Echo glanced at her, eyes soft. She reached for Rynn’s hand and squeezed tight. “You can open up about this. You don’t need to keep it in. It’s better if you talk about it...”

Rynn let her drone on for a while longer before she had enough. “Excuse me, Echo. I have no idea what you are talking about. Briggs never forced me into anything.”

Echo’s eyes widened with surprise. “He didn’t?”

“No.” Rynn sighed, not wanting to have this conversation at all, especially with a virtual stranger. “He was actually very sweet.”

“Well then,” Echo smiled, disbelieving. “I am glad to hear that.” The incredulity was clear on her face.

Rynn finally understood what everyone must have thought happened. They thought she’d refused Briggs. Then because of Tiago’s reaction, Briggs forced her to mate with him. He used his Alpha powers to make her bow down to him.

Just the thought made Rynn burst out in laughter. “Force me.”

She laughed harder, her stomach gripped as tears ran down her cheeks. After what she’d been through, even the implication that she would let her mate do something like that was absurd. “Submission...oh, that’s classic.”

Echo’s blush turned scarlet red in embarrassment. She stood and smoothed her clothes. “Okay, so you are all right then. That’s good. I guess...I guess we should get back.” With that, she turned on her heels and scampered off.

Rynn felt horrible for laughing in her face. She jumped up from her chair and ran after her. “Listen, sorry for laughing.” She grabbed Echo’s arm, forced her to stop. “It was really nice of you to make sure that I was okay.”

Echo smiled sweetly. “You’re new to all this and I can only imagine how rough that might be.”

“Especially when everyone hates you,” Rynn grumbled.

“Don’t worry about the others. You’re not missing anything by not talking to them. The other females are spoiled rotten, conceited and brainless.”

Rynn’s smile blossomed. Echo appeared not to think very highly of them. So far, she had Isla and now Echo on her side. That was better than having no one. Of course, she had Briggs too, but it just wasn’t the same. “You know, that does make me feel better.”

Echo laughed, linked arms with Rynn and started back toward the Grand Hall. “Just keep your head up, they’ll leave you alone.” She gave a forgiving grin. “Eventually.”

As they entered through the doors to the hall, Rynn wasn’t surprised to see Briggs waiting by the door for her. He gave her an intrigued glance. “All good, darlin’?”

“Yep, just dandy.” She smiled at Echo. “Thanks again.”

Echo returned the smile, nodded, and headed in the direction of her table.

Briggs took Rynn’s hand and led her back over to their own table with Valor, where food waited on big white plate—chicken cordon bleu, fancy baked potato and crisp summer veggies.

Rynn’s stomach growled, hungry and happy. “Yummy, yummy, yummy,” she said, excited as she took her seat.

Briggs chuckled and pushed her chair in. “You and food.”

So she loved to eat. It was the reason she wasn’t a stick pole and a little curvy. She appreciated food like girls love clothes. Besides, this food was expensive. It’d been a long time since she’d eaten at a posh restaurant and it smelled divine. “Look at this...num num num.”

Briggs sat next to her, shook his head in laughter, then began to cut into his chicken. Rynn picked up her cutlery, cut into the meat, when she was suddenly blasted from the

front.

Wind breezed past and her head screamed in pain as it smashed against the floor. Or was that the sound that erupted from her throat?

Briggs was there instantly and pulled her up. Dazed, she looked around to discover Valor had attacked her. *What the heck?*

Without even meeting her gaze, Valor jumped to his feet from where he'd fallen beside Rynn and went back to her plate. He bent over and inhaled deeply. He glanced at Briggs, his look severe as he beckoned him over.

Everyone in the room was on their feet too. They looked as lost as Rynn felt.

Briggs kept Rynn's hand in his as he leaned over the plate and took a good sniff. Tension filled him, his body snapped up as he stared at Valor.

The silence was thick, but the look between them spoke volumes. Something was very wrong.

"What is it?" Rynn asked quietly, impatience getting the best of her.

Briggs turned and looked down at her, his eyes burned with rage.

"Darlin', someone just tried to poison you."

He stomach clenched in fear. For herself and Briggs. The anger emanating from his body spoke volumes.

Whoever had done this would die.

Chapter Seven

Rynn sat twiddling her thumbs while Briggs and Valor not only questioned the Alphas and mates, but all the staff at the resort. They discovered...zilch.

She was kissing her lucky paws that Valor had sat with them at the table. If he hadn't, Rynn suspected she'd be dust in the wind. As Patriarch, he was gifted with a stronger ability to scent. He even said the smell of the poison was very faint. Briggs scent was strong, not like Valor's, but he could still smell a chemical once he got close. Rynn smelled diddly-squat.

Now, back at Valor's ranch, they stood in the main foyer, still discussing the matter.

"You're so convinced that it was meant for me," Rynn said to Briggs.

That was the only reason she wasn't freaking out. Who'd want to kill her? No one, well except maybe Nera. Still, Rynn didn't believe she'd act on it in front of everyone. It'd be too obvious.

"What if it wasn't meant for me, though? What if the plate was set at the wrong place? Maybe Valor was the target. Isn't that more likely?"

Briggs pondered that, his brows furrowed. "Would make more sense," he agreed. "Yes, some of the women here have taken a dislike to you, as we have seen with Nera, but I cannot believe it would result in an attempt on your life."

Yep, great minds do think alike!

Valor sighed and leaned against the wall. "I must agree." He arched an equivocal brow. "But as we saw tonight, it is highly unlikely I would eat it without scenting it first."

"Maybe whoever did it didn't know that," Rynn suggested.

"That is a possibility." Valor rubbed his face. "In any case, we have to be cautious. Do not eat anything until I have examined it. All right?"

Rynn chortled. "I have no problem with that." A thought occurred to her. "Do you have any enemies?"

Valor laughed and Briggs followed suit.

She smiled. "I take that as a yes, then?"

"Not enemies as such," Valor responded. "Just some wolves that are unhappy with my decisions. But never has anyone taken steps to finish me off—especially in this regard."

"It is very cowardly." Briggs admonished.

Cowardly? It seemed pretty bold to her. "Why do you say that?"

"As wolves we are upfront about our dislikes," Briggs answered. "It's settled with a challenge or a fight. It's hard to imagine an Alpha resorting to such a secretive way of death. I've never heard of such a thing before." He glanced to Valor. "You?"

Valor shook his head, evidently just as mystified. "No. Alphas are proud. To kill without declaring it is simply unheard of."

"So, it's probably not an Alpha then," Rynn offered. "Could it be your normal everyday wolf?" The statement sounded wrong, but she wasn't up to date in her wolf terminology.

"Could be, yes," Valor answered, "but the wolves who work at the resort are members of my pack. They would never commit this. They'd have no reason to."

They were basically right where they started—at square one. It wasn't a place she enjoyed. What had she gotten herself into? Abductions and attempted murders! What happened to waking up and having Sunday morning tea? She might be afraid but with two powerful Alphas standing looking down at her, she didn't need to worry. She was safe. "Well that leaves us at a dead end to this mystery."

"Indeed." Briggs sighed heavily.

Valor pushed off the wall. "This will have to wait until later. Hendrix will be expecting us soon. They left on the first flight out."

Rynn watched as Valor headed down the hallway, then looked at Briggs. "I'm hoping this is out of the ordinary too?"

Briggs chuckled, placed his hand on her lower back and ushered down the hall. "Very." They caught up with Valor, where he stood before the wooden door at the end of the hall.

Rynn groaned. "I forgot about this part. We have to go through there again, don't we?"

Sure, it looked like a normal door, but it definitely wasn't. It was a portal. A teleport within the *Earthworld* as Briggs called it. Earth to human folk.

Briggs had said it was given to all of the superior supernaturals and with Valor being the Patriarch, he fell into that category. As he once told her, it was a gift from the leaders of the Otherworld to ensure, if Valor needed it, he could travel quickly within the world and allowed him access to their realm.

Rynn still hadn't totally grasped all the magical stuff, but really, she shifted into a four legged creature. It was a bit hard not to accept magic after everything she'd experienced for herself. The portal was about as fun as getting a tooth pulled.

"Let's get this show on the road," Dante, Valor's son, called as he trotted down the stairs to join them. He had the whole 'slay me dragon' thing going on. A tough guy with a body of muscles, a charming face, and a smile that was sweeter than sugar. His wolfish charms were hard to miss. A drop dead gorgeous man, but player-type gorgeous, which had never been Rynn's type. Fun to look at and that was about it.

With the possible attempt on Valor's life, Dante had gone into combat mode and demanded that he join them. Valor didn't object. Having another set of arms and a strong nose could help. Dante was released from his normal duties, which was the business end of the resort.

Rynn remembered when she was curious to know why Dante wasn't Valor's Beta, since Briggs and he were the same age. Briggs had given her a simple answer—Dante would kill for the power of Alpha, which didn't make him a very ideal candidate.

Valor opened the door and stepped through with Dante close behind. Briggs pulled Rynn through the door, and instantly, her body squeezed with pressure. Breathing and sight were impossible. There was no sound or light, just a feeling of non-existence. A very uncomfortable non-existence.

The good thing was, it didn't last long.

Within seconds, the pressure faded. When her feet connected with hard ground, Rynn let out a very deep breath. "Urgh," she groaned and rested her hands on her knees while she waited for the world to stop spinning.

Briggs held onto her around the waist, rubbed her back in slow circular movements. "Couple deep breaths, love."

It took a few minutes while she took his advice but the world became steady once again. She opened her eyes, green grass rested below her feet. She slowly raised her head to see a classic homestead with cattle grazing the fields.

“Better?” Briggs asked.

She looked at him, her mouth in a pout. “I really hate that. Flying wasn’t my favorite thing to do either, but I’d take airsickness over that any day.”

Briggs chuckled, kept her hand in his as they followed behind Valor and Dante across the yard to the house.

Steps away from the stairs, Hendrix marched out the front door and plowed down the steps. “Thank you for keeping your word, Valor.”

“Of course.”

Behind Hendrix stood his mate—a dainty gal with short honey-hair, kind hazel eyes—she’d make the perfect kindergarten teacher.

“Sayer just called,” she told Hendrix. “His flight has landed and he will be here shortly.” She smiled at Rynn. “We didn’t get a chance to meet earlier, I wasn’t up to travelling...” Her gaze filled with sadness, “...with Kali missing.” She sighed, trying to hold back tears and held out her hand to Rynn. “I am Danika.”

Rynn shook her hand. “Nice to meet you, I’m Rynn.”

Danika smiled, even if it did look a bit forced. Rynn suspected that had to do more with her daughter missing than Rynn being half-blood. Danika didn’t look like she hated her—maybe due to the fact that she was helping to locate her daughter? If it wasn’t for that would she have been as nice? Something in Rynn said no, as she recalled the little flinch Danika made when she touched Rynn’s skin. She hoped that it was just her imagining things.

“Come this way,” Hendrix said, and headed over toward the barn that sat just behind the house.

The stench of manure weighed heavy in the air. “It stinks,” Rynn complained and put her hand over her nose.

Briggs wrinkled his nose too. “Just be glad you’re not in wolf form, darlin’. Imagine the smell then?”

She shuddered at the thought. A country girl she was not. *Yuck!*

“We will take these to follow the same path as we did before,” Hendrix said, approaching ten dune buggies. “I don’t want to waste any time or ignore the path she took, in case one of you...” he glanced at Rynn and Briggs, “...miraculously picks up on something that neither I nor Valor do.”

Unlikely, but Rynn could understand why he wanted to follow the same route. She guessed it could happen, stranger things have occurred, but she doubted that she was going to be any help here. All she smelled was cow crap—that was about it.

Briggs’ eyes lit up with excitement. “My my,” he purred, and ran his hand along the chrome roll bars.

Rynn couldn’t deny her own little flicker of interest. These were going to be fun—really fun. She suddenly felt a great need for speed. Alphas didn’t have portals of their own, which meant they’d have to travel the old-fashioned way. Of course, they ran faster as wolves, but not quick enough. And Rynn was glad for that, her heart couldn’t take a run that long nor could her legs. Who had time to exercise? She never did.

Briggs didn’t hesitate, jumped in and patted the seat beside him. “Whatcha waitin’

for, love?” He beamed in anticipation of the thrill ahead.

Rynn giggled, then opened the door. Unlike Briggs, she wasn’t capable of doing a Dukes of Hazard move into the dune buggy. The result would be too embarrassing. She entered the car like a normal person. Just as she sat down, Sayer, Echo and a few of their pack members exited a car that had just pulled into the driveway.

Echo, as nice as before, gave Rynn a little wave and she returned it.

Hendrix approached Briggs and Rynn and handed them a tee shirt. “This is her scent,” he said. “Please, keep this in your memory to follow.”

Briggs nodded, raised the shirt to his nose and inhaled deeply. He handed the shirt to Rynn. She felt ridiculous sniffing the thing. Nonetheless, she did. The young girl smelled of peaches and cream combined with youth. After a final sniff, she handed the shirt back to Hendrix and he headed over to the others.

“Do you catch the trail?” Briggs asked.

She lifted her nose and inhaled deeply. “Not really.” There were too many scents to concentrate on a specific one. Manure overwhelmed everything else.

Briggs grabbed her hand, gave her a soft smile. “Close your eyes. Relax. Let your senses become stronger. Focus on the scent of the girl alone.”

Rynn considered this another lesson. She hadn’t really known her scent improved as a human now. Judging by the intensity in his gaze, she’d obviously been wrong. She took the hint and listened to him. He hadn’t steered her wrong yet. She took a deep breath as she closed her eyes. The others were all talking around her—hums of words spoken. Focusing away from them, she inhaled again and moved her head from side to side.

Surprise hit her. A faint trail of the sweet peach scent did linger in the air. Her eyes snapped open. She pointed toward the forest to the right side of the house. “It’s over that way.”

Briggs nodded approvingly. “Right you are.” He leaned forward and gave her a proud kiss, which she happily accepted.

“Time is precious,” Valor said, interrupting their kiss, “Let’s head out.”

Rynn pulled back, to find a sexy grin across Briggs’ face. The scent of something strong swirled around her. It was thick in the air, but she couldn’t make sense of it.

Before she could voice a question on it, Briggs winked at her. “Hold on tight, darlin’.” Briggs laughed.

Then, they were off.

Rynn raised her hands and screamed with excitement as they rushed through the forest. The dune buggy was quick and bumpy, felt more like an amusement ride than anything else. Their laughter was loud. With Briggs driving like a mad man, it just made it even more fun.

The journey was long but with as much fun they were having, Rynn could have stayed out here forever. Briggs took every chance to hit a jump that allowed them to catch air. The view of trees, nature and undisturbed wilderness was fulfilling.

Kali’s scent stayed with her the entire time. Very faint, but there.

By the time the scent vanished, darkness filled the sky. The quarter moon was bright as stars decorated the skies above. Briggs eased on the accelerator and Rynn glanced at him. “Her scent...it’s gone.”

“Right you are.” He nodded and brought the dune buggy to a halt.

She glanced around them, taken aback. The large lake, the mountains in the distance,

a forest off to the left...she had to be mistaken. She looked back at Briggs with wide eyes. "I know this place."

"You do?" Briggs appeared shocked too.

She nodded, unlocked the seat belt, opened the door and jumped out. "This is Medicine Lake. We're in Plymouth—my hometown."

If Briggs was shocked before, now it was undeniable. His expression filled with questions. "That is some coincidence."

"I'd say." She glanced around only to find they were alone. With the understanding that her senses were heightened now, she listened hard. She could hear roars of engines, but they sounded quite a distance away. "Where are the others?"

"They'll be along shortly." He gave her a sly look. "We arrived quickly. It sounds as if they're about a mile away."

He jumped out of the dune buggy. *Show off!* He came around to her side of the vehicle and wrapped her in his arms as he leaned back against the door. She looked up at him and giggled. "That was fun."

"Aye, it was. I might just have to purchase one of those."

"You can afford something like that?" Her gaze turned skeptical.

He grinned. "Yes—we can afford something like that." He lowered one of his arms from around her waist and reached into his back pocket. "Speaking of that, here." He handed her a credit card.

"What's this?" she asked, examining the shiny card with her name on it. She looked back at him, brow arched.

"What does it look like?"

"A credit card," she responded, sarcastic.

"Well, that's what it is then."

Okay, wait a minute—this card was for her? Heat began to rise to her cheeks. "You're giving me money?"

He took the card from her and stuffed it into the back pocket of her jeans. "I'm not giving you anything. We're mates, what's mine is yours."

The heat in her cheeks burned deeper, and it wasn't from a blush. One thing Rynn wasn't was a gold-digger. She took the card back out of her pocket and handed it to him. "I have my own money. Thank you for the thought though."

He gave her a chastising glance, took the card and placed it back in her pocket. "Your money was transferred to my account, which is where this money will come from."

She couldn't believe her ears. Her anger began to build. "You transferred my money without asking me?"

Briggs sighed, a very exasperated sound. "Rynn, we are mated. It is the way of things."

"So what if we are mated!" She didn't care if that's how they did things. It wasn't how she worked. "You better put my money back in my account." Again, she pulled the card from her pocket and held it out for him to take. "I don't need your money."

He didn't take the card. Instead, he examined her with a steady gaze. "How do you expect to live off of fifty dollars?"

"Hey, fifty dollars is a lot of money to me." She glared at him. "Besides, I don't need anything. If there is anything I want, I'll work and get it myself."

Briggs glared, his jaw clenched tight and unhappiness darkened his eyes. “You won’t work.”

Oh no, he did not just say that. Well, he needed a good ear full of what’s what. Her Pops raised her to be a strong independent woman. She learned a long time not to count on others. She’d survived like that. Who was he to step in and say she should live different, without asking her. “Says who?”

“Says me,” he said firmly.

She poked his shoulder, stood on her tippy toes to get in his face. “Get this straight, wolf—I survived for years on my own. I like it that way.”

They stood like that for a while, no words said in a stare down, then a slow smile spread across his face.

Nothing about this amused her. She slammed her hands on her hips, pissed. “What’s so funny?”

He didn’t answer. Instead, he pulled her toward him and planted a spectacular kiss on her lips. When he finally pulled away and let her breathe, she wobbled on shaky legs.

“You are quite unique, Rynn,” he mused. “Forgive me for acting without your consent. I will return your money to you as soon as we get home.”

The anger boiling her blood began to rescind, her cheeks no longer burned. “Thank you.” But she wasn’t done yet, she needed to make one point very clear. “When this is done, I’m getting a job. Deal with it!”

He inclined his head. “I suppose I will have to.”

Loud roars of engines cut through the air. She’d been so focused on the conversation, she hadn’t realized the others had arrived. She glanced out to see all the others had pulled up next to their dune buggy.

Valor jumped out, approached them with a chastising glance. “Glad to see you two alive.”

Dante hopped out after him and wore a shit-eating grin. “I should have opted not to ride with the old man,” he said to Rynn. “At least you two made a bit of fun out of it.”

Valor snorted.

Rynn giggled. “It was fun.”

Hendrix came to stand in front of Rynn. “As you can all see her scent is gone.” His eyes darkened in despair. “Just vanished.”

Rynn’s heart clenched for him, how horrible. She couldn’t imagine what he must be going through. She wished she could say some comforting words to him, but doubted he wanted to hear them. All he wanted was to find his missing daughter. She’d do whatever she could to help. She glanced around and inhaled deeply. Kali’s scent was gone, but Rynn could also smell the other wolves that Valor had mentioned. Ten very distinct trails.

Valor inhaled roughly, looked at Hendrix then to Briggs and Rynn. “Let’s split up. Each follow a trail of one of the wolves here. Find them and interrogate them—they’re the ones who will know what is going on here.”

Sayer also inhaled deeply and frowned. “These are my wolves, but not all of them. There are other scents here I do not recognize.”

Just as his words ended, something breezed by Rynn’s head—a big gush of wind. A bug? Sounded like a pretty loud bug? Rynn swatted at her head just to be sure it was gone.

A split second later, Valor roared, “Get down.”

Chapter Eight

One second Rynn stood beside Briggs, and the next, he slammed into her and pushed her to the ground while he lay on top of her. Now, her annoyance began to build. Getting pushed around hurt. Her face was smashed into the ground and her nose wasn't thrilled to be squished in such a way.

Loud hollers and firm orders from Valor spiraled around her. When Briggs finally let her up, she glanced behind her and discovered why. One of Sayer's pack members, Mateo, was not moving.

Sayer rushed past Rynn, flipped him over and glanced up at Valor. His hands were soaked in blood and pain sat hard in his eyes. "He's dead."

A rush of chaos erupted and quite abruptly, Rynn found herself deposited behind a tree.

That was three times now and her annoyance ran strong. She suspected it was more from confusion. Mateo was dead? Someone died? How?

Everything happened so fast, her mind couldn't comprehend what was taking place here. Before she could make sense out of it all, Briggs pointed at her. "Stay there." Then, he shifted.

In fact, everyone did. A bit of envy flashed through her, no matter how inappropriate it was. Their shifts were so quick. It took a lot of concentration for her to shift on command.

Deep growls shot through the night air, and suddenly they were off like a bunch of starving wolves on the hunt of prey. Pretty spectacular sight really—wolves were very beautiful creatures. She suddenly realized she was alone, sitting next to a tree in the dark, while a killer was somewhere close.

Not a very settling thought and fear began to sink in. Shadows appeared everywhere. In response to the high levels of anxiety that pumped through her veins, her body reciprocated as it always did when her emotions ran high. The magic rippled through her, then her senses became perfectly clear.

It came as a relief. Now, she could hear better and catch any sneaky bastard approaching. Not like she could do much about it, but still, at least, it wouldn't be a shock.

Her ears tweaked and turned as she scanned the area, searched for danger and found none. The only sounds were loud growls, which came from a distance away—snaps of teeth, vicious snarls and bodies hitting the ground in a brutal manner.

Briggs?

Her concern grew as the growls suddenly dissipated to loud howls. She peeked around the tree—her vision wasn't hindered by the darkness, but the space before her was completely deserted.

Now, she was getting scared. *What was going on? Was Briggs all right?*

Just as her panic reached dangerous levels, a wolf quickly approached. His paws blasted across the ground as his breath held steady. She caught the scent before she saw Briggs' form.

Relief settled over her.

She pounced forward, and made her way to him. When they reached one another, he nuzzled into her side and rubbed his head against hers. He nodded in the direction of the fight and took off.

As they ran, she stayed right on his flank. It surprised her how natural this all felt. She wasn't meant to run beside him. Her soul told her that her place was behind him. Of course, near him, but shielded by him. He was her protector, therefore, his body protected her from danger.

The others were quite a distance away, and by the time they stopped, Rynn's legs ached. She needed to work on that—go for more runs so she could keep up with the rest of them. She didn't want to be the weakest link.

As they drew in closer to the others, her fatigue was forgotten. Four wolves had been torn to pieces with two sniper rifles off to the side on the ground. The others had already shifted back, and as it appeared, none of their group were injured.

Briggs nudged Rynn's side with his nose, his suggestion clear. With that, she drew on their connection, allowed the magic to be filtered through him to make this quicker. It was easier to use his strength and help with the shift. This was not a time to practice.

It did just the trick. Once she returned to her two legs, which happened to be shaking a little beneath her. From fear or the strain of the run, she wasn't quite sure, she looked at Briggs. "Who are they?"

"Not a clue, darlin'."

Valor knelt by one of the wolves who lay bleeding along the ground. He glanced at Sayer. "Do you know these ones?"

"No," Sayer responded. "They are not mine."

Briggs stepped forward, leaned down to pick up one of the rifles. "Remington 700P—precision rifles." He glanced at Valor. "They were looking to kill."

"What has Mateo been into to get killed like this?" Echo asked Sayer.

Sayer shrugged, glanced curiously at his mate. "I haven't heard of anything. You know him, he's a good kid."

Echo nodded, a tear escaped her eye. "He was."

Sayer caught the tear with his thumb and brushed it away, then kissed her softly as he took her in his arms.

Rynn gulped.

Valor let out a frustrated breath and stood. "I do not think this has to do with Mateo. He has no enemies, we know this." He looked at Hendrix. "It appears someone does not want us to find your daughter."

"Apparently so."

"To go to these measures seems extreme," Briggs commented. "They've been sitting here waiting for us to arrive?"

"Which brings the next question," Valor added. "How did they know we were coming?"

"The Gathering," Danika piped up. "Someone there must be involved in this."

Valor considered that a moment. "It troubles me to believe any of our Alphas would be involved in the abduction of your daughter."

He looked at Hendrix again, his gaze steady. "Time for honesty—have you done anything to piss someone off?"

Hendrix shook his head, his hands up in surrender. "No, nothing. My pack is quiet."

We have had no issues with any other packs for well over five years.”

Valor nodded as if he already knew that, then reached into the pocket of his jeans, pulled out a cell phone and flipped it open. He hit a few buttons, then positioned himself over by one of the wolves and snapped picture after picture until he had captured them all. After he was done, he typed a while on his phone as everyone stood around him, clueless.

Valor looked away from his phone and back to the wolves, his brows drawn together in thought, but said nothing.

A moment later, Valor’s phone beeped and startled Rynn so bad, she squealed. In response to that embarrassing display, she laughed at her shaky nerves. A week ago, she served coffee and beer. Now, she looked down at dead wolves. Her nerves were shot. If these were human bodies, she suspected she’d be in hysterics already. The effect wasn’t the same since they were in their wolf forms. Still, she was very unsettled and not quite sure how she felt about all this.

“To be expected, darlin’.” Briggs smiled at her and ran his fingers along her arm.

She felt his touch all the way down to her toes. It created a little stir—a simmer.

Briggs caught her reaction, without haste his nostrils flared in response and his gaze burned with lust.

Rynn sucked in a breath, both from reaction to him and surprise at her behavior. This was not an appropriate time to feel aroused. Why was his touch making her feel so heated? He’d touched her many times in the simple way he just had and she’d never felt that reaction before. It couldn’t be from their mating, could it?

Now, that she honed in her enhanced scent, the smell that surrounded her was powerful. She inhaled deeply, her eyes shut of their own accord from the intensity of it. For the first time, she could smell his desire for her along the wind—it smelled thick, hot, and rich with lust.

She trembled and her sense came back to her. She snapped her eyes open, rapidly looked around to see if anyone else had smelled that. Thankfully, they hadn’t. It must be a mate thing.

Briggs gave Rynn’s thigh a little pinch, which brought his gaze back to her. His smile was about as damn delicious as she’d ever seen. He gave her a quick wink that she ignored as she attempted to focus on the job at hand—dead wolves on the ground in front of her. Resolved, to keep her mind on appropriate matters, she looked up to find Valor focused on his phone.

A moment later, he glanced away at Briggs. “They are from the Alabama Pack—Rainer’s Pack.”

Briggs’ eyes widened. “A bit far from home.”

Valor agreed. He looked back at his phone, typed away, then raised it to his ear.

“Rainer. Yes. They’re dead.” He listened awhile. “Has he now?” He nodded. “Right. Gather the others, find out what this is about, then join us here.”

He clicked the phone shut and glanced at the group. “Rainer has informed me that some of his pack has left their protection.” He pointed to the wolves on the ground. “These four plus one other, who has just returned. Rainer and his mate will join us here shortly. They’re heading out on the next flight.” Then, he rubbed his face in thought, hummed a little, then looked at Briggs. “I am starting to believe that the attempt with the poison was to offset us. If Rynn had been killed, we would have been too preoccupied by

that to look into this further.”

Briggs nodded as if he understood perfectly.

Rynn stood stunned. They truly believed the poison was meant for her. She couldn't believe that. Just then another thought struck her, if Rainer was coming, so was Nera.

When it rains, it pours!

“My poor Kali,” Danika cried. “Cruel killers have her.” She looked at Hendrix with a pleading expression. “Why would they take her? What would they want with her?”

Hendrix hugged his mate and hushed her. “We will find her and kill the ones who have done this.”

Valor stepped forward toward them and touched Danika's shoulder, drawing her attention. “Has anything been going on with her?”

Danika wiped her eyes, sniffled, and regained herself. “No. She is only twenty—she hasn't even experienced life yet to have any trouble.”

That was laughable. Most twenty year olds knew more about life than some adults she'd met. Maybe Danika was in parent denial thinking her daughter was perfect.

“Does she have a boyfriend?” Rynn asked, but immediately regretted it.

Danika shot Rynn an angry glance. “What?”

She shouldn't have said anything. It was pretty apparent by the glare on her face that Danika didn't like her speaking of her daughter. Guess the nice act was just that.

As much as it did hurt a little to not be accepted for stupid reasons once again, she wouldn't look put off. “I asked if she had a boyfriend.”

She was quite pleased with herself that her voice came out strong and steady. “It's just from what I've heard in cases like these, if the victim is in her late teens or older and abducted, it's usually love related.” She wasn't about to tell them her theory was based off of *CSI Miami*.

Danika tone softened a smidgen, the anger that tightened her face lessened. “No. We have not allowed her to interact with males yet.”

Yes, she was living in a dream world—a very stupid dream world. “Just because you haven't allowed it, doesn't mean she doesn't do it.”

Oh great, Danika's anger came back to life in a split second. “You dare question our daughter's morals?”

Briggs interjected, stepped a little forward to declare his protection and looked at Rynn. “I see where you are going with this.” He cut a glance back to Danika. “She has a point. As Valor said to us earlier, there wasn't much of a struggle there. Are you positive she didn't leave willingly?”

Danika face went through a slew of angry colors before she blasted into her wolf form and lunged at Briggs. He quickly shoved Rynn behind him. Before Danika could hit, Hendrix grabbed her hind leg, pushed her down and pinned her to the ground.

“Forgive her,” Hendrix said to Briggs. “This has been a hard time for her with her daughter missing.”

“Answer the question,” Valor demanded.

In a snap, Danika shifted and had completely calmed down. Valor had that effect. Rynn had learned that quickly by the actions of others. He was not to be disobeyed without serious ramifications. Hendrix helped Danika up, and she dusted off her clothes then looked at Valor. “Since Kali hadn't been exposed to a mate as such, we were planning on having one arranged for her.”

Rynn's confused gaze found Briggs, who looked equally puzzled. His head cocked and brows tight together, those feelings sped through their bond to enhance the emotion within her.

Valor said, "You were not going to let nature take its course?"

Danika shook her head, unashamed. "We want the best for her. It was our decision to find an appropriate mate for her and bond them."

"And she was okay with that?" Rynn couldn't seem to shut her mouth.

No one else seemed to mind her questions, except Danika, of course. In fact, Valor and Briggs gave her looks of approval, which said they were pleased she stepped up to the plate. She hadn't really believed Briggs when he said she held authority over the wolves, but now, she began to rethink that theory.

Still, it was all very strange and just sat funny in her stomach. She only asked because her curiosity needed the answers, then it was her smart mouth that continued on. She wasn't doing this because she felt she had the right to. Their looks unsettled her.

Danika's eyes darkened and snapped Rynn back to the present. "She didn't have a choice. That was our decision. It was done for us and we are happy. She knew it was best for her."

Arranged marriage—real nice!

Valor sighed again, it was becoming a typical sound from him. Classic Valor really, he either rubbed his hand over his face or sighed. Rynn suddenly realized that Briggs was right. Valor did look tired. She wasn't quite sure how she felt about that, a little selfish for keeping Briggs from his duties, but also worry for Valor. The concern a person feels when someone close to them is working too hard. She had the urge to tell him to go home and rest, but this was not the time, nor the situation to suggest such a thing.

After another of his disgruntled sounds, he turned to Hendrix. "Have you found an appropriate suitor?"

Hendrix shrugged. "We had a few in mind."

"Did she know of them?" Valor asked.

"No," Danika answered, sharp and curt. "They weren't going to be unveiled until she was twenty-one."

"Are you sure she was happy about this decision you made for her?" Briggs asked, his tone held a hint of disgust.

"Of course," Danika responded without hesitation. "Kali is a respectful wolf. She knew we would always want what is best for her. She understood that doing it this way would mean she would be with a wolf of power, strength and wealth. Lord knows whom she would have been mated to if we hadn't intervened. He could have been a commoner."

Rynn met Briggs' gaze. They were both thinking the same thing. These people were horrible. Even Echo looked a bit put off by her words and gave Danika an *are you for real* look.

"Besides, once she was bonded by the moon, her destined mate wouldn't be known to her anyway. Even if she had met him, she'd feel nothing, nor would he." Danika informed them.

Like that made it any better? Goodness!

"This doesn't matter." Hendrix waved his hand to dismiss the conversation. "It makes no sense that she has run off. Furthermore, why would someone be hunting us down? Kali would never agree to that."

“That is true,” Valor commented with a little nod. “Quite vicious of her to be involved in something such as this, and from the times I have met her, she was too kind to order such an event to take place.”

“So what now?” Hendrix asked, impatient.

“Let’s keep on here,” Valor answered him. “Finding your daughter is still our priority.”

Hendrix and Danika both softened, seemingly relieved the search for their daughter would continue.

On one hand, Rynn could see the girl running away from these control freaks. On the other, why would she be trying to off them all? Just didn’t add up.

As her Pops always told her, *‘when something doesn’t make sense, it’s because there’s more to it’*.

Rynn wasn’t so sure she wanted to find out what was going on. Not that it was all intriguing. Heck, everyone dreams of a good mystery to get the adrenaline pumping. Now faced with it, she’d rather be sitting in front of the television watching it on the big screen.

“Bo, take Mateo home to his mate. She will want to bury him.” Sayer interrupted the silence and looked to the other pack member who was with him.

Bo nodded and made his way back to where Mateo’s body lay.

“What would you like us to do about these?” Dante asked Valor, as he nodded toward the dead wolves on the ground.

“Leave them. The sheriffs will have animal control remove them.”

In the calm after the storm, Rynn began to process what truly happened. This was the first time she’s seen anything dead—it came as a bit of shock mingled with a lot of yuckiness.

“Not to worry, love,” Briggs’ voice said next to her ear. “We’ll find her.”

He misread her tension. “No it’s not that.” She took a deep breath before she looked up at him. “It’s just they’re dead.”

“Indeed—very dead.”

“Did you kill any of them?” she whispered.

He brushed his fingers across her cheek. “It will take some time for you to understand the way of the wolves. This is quite normal for a situation like this. These wolves put as all in danger. It is not to be treated lightly.”

Was that supposed to settle her? It didn’t. “So you kill a lot?”

Briggs gave a gentle grin. “Only when necessary.”

Chapter Nine

Briggs kept Rynn's hand tight in his as he followed Valor up the pathway to a house in a quiet neighborhood. Located on *Oakland Lane*, it was a community for the middle class, and a thirty-minute car ride from Minnesota Lake—on foot, it took well over an hour. Dante was off to arrange accommodations for the group, and the others had split up, each taking a scent to investigate.

So far, none of their leads had panned out. One path led to a young woman who had taken her dog to the lake for a swim. Sayer and Echo's lead brought them to an elderly couple. Hendrix and Danika had yet to make contact. Briggs could only assume they'd found nothing that looked suspicious or would give any aid in locating Kali's whereabouts.

Briggs stood before an average little bungalow. Teal colored wood paneling made up the exterior with dark green shutters on the two front windows. In fair condition, neatly trimmed grass, tailored gardens, he suspected this home didn't hold the abductor they were looking for.

"What are we going to do?" Rynn's tone was full of skepticism. "Just go up and knock on the door?"

"That's the plan." Briggs winked, gave a little pull of his hand so she'd follow in behind him. Even still, he could hear her feet dragging against the pavement. A smile rose on his face, but he didn't dare look back. No need to get her all fired up. Although, he'd be sure to do it later. Rynn was usually so quiet, very timid, but her reaction to him about the money showed a completely new side to her. As much as it shouldn't amuse him to see her livid, it did just that. A little fire behind her eyes appealed to him, in more ways than one.

At the door, Valor put his hand on Rynn's shoulder. "Just stay behind us and you will do fine."

Briggs felt her apprehension through their bond, and understood it, but this needed to be done. If he thought this dangerous, she wouldn't have joined them. He doubted any of these trails would lead them directly to the abductor. For selfish reasons, he just couldn't leave her behind. He needed her close.

Valor opened the outer glass door, and knocked hard a few times. A second passed before footsteps came barreling toward the door. It didn't sound like a grown wolf—the steps quick and light. When the door opened, it was apparent why.

A teenage punk rocker kid stood before them. Bright blue Mohawk, dark eyeliner surrounding his eyes, even had the red lips too. Briggs eyed him with disgust, as did Valor. What the hell kind of look was this?

Rynn let out a laugh—he was sure at their reaction—but he was too busy looking at this kid's hair to respond to her. How did it stay up like that?

The kid glanced at them all, his gaze widened when he recognized Valor. "Valor ...ah...oh...hello."

Valor smiled. "Are your parents home, son?"

The kid shook his head. "Nah, they're at work." He opened the door further. "Wanna come in?"

Valor nodded and stepped into the house. Briggs followed and gave Rynn a little tug. When he felt her resistance, he looked back at her, surprised to find her smiling.

"I take it wolves don't rock it out," she said.

"No," he said, tone firm. He'd never seen wolves dress this way, and had to wonder what he would do if his child ever came home looking like this. He suspected it'd be a conversation that wouldn't end well.

Briggs closed the front door behind Rynn, then turned back around. A leather couch sat against the far wall in the room with a couple of wood end tables, a television rested in the corner with a lazy boy chair angled toward it

The kid sat down in the lazy boy, which creaked loudly. "Are you here to see Mom and Dad?"

Valor sat on the couch, Briggs and Rynn followed. "What is your name, son?"

"Toby," he answered, grabbed a handful of mixed nuts out of a bowl and tossed them into his mouth.

"No, Toby we are not here to see your parents, we are here to see you," Valor said. "We have some questions for you and I expect you to answer honestly. Understand?"

Toby's face shifted to nervous. "Okay," he said slowly, dropped the rest of the nuts he had in his hand back into the bowl.

"Were you at Medicine Lake recently?" Valor asked.

Toby nodded. "Yeah, just the other night."

Briggs nearly laughed, but held it in. Toby's expression tightened, probably tried to think back on what he had done, to remember what he was about to get in trouble for.

"Why were you there?" Valor asked.

"A bunch of my buds and I were having a bush party."

"A bush party?" Valor glanced at Briggs for clarification, but he had never heard of the term either. He shrugged.

"Yeah, you know, a bonfire, alcohol..." Toby explained. He hesitated and fear filled his gaze. "This is because I was drinking isn't it? Listen, I won't do it again—promise."

Briggs let out his chuckle, unable to withhold it any longer. "You honestly believe Valor would come to your home to punish you for underage drinking?"

"Punish me?" The kid looked completely frightened now.

"No one is going hurt you, Toby," Rynn said. Briggs sent his harsh unhappiness through their bond. Having Toby fearful wasn't a bad thing, it kept him honest. She visibly shuddered, her breath gasped out. Quickly, she glanced at Briggs.

"There's no point scaring him if he is being honest." Her gaze fell back on Toby. "Besides, he knows he'll be a dead pup if he lies."

Toby gulped.

Briggs winked at her. His little mate's quick mouth pleased him. It surprised him how fast she understood his emotions through the bond. Being a new wolf, he hadn't expected that from her and was thrilled their connection had deepened so soon.

"Your drinking doesn't concern me," Valor told Toby. "How many were there with you that night?"

Toby raised his fingers, one by one, as he reconciled the names in his mind. "Six of us, I think."

Briggs exchanged a frustrated look with Valor. This might not be the lead they all hoped for. The numbers dwindled down.

Since Hendrix hadn't been in contact, they suspected he was at a dead end too. Which meant, unless one of these teenagers had abducted her they had nothing to go on.

"Was a young girl with you?" Valor asked. "About twenty—pretty, not from this area?"

Toby nodded. "Yeah, there was this new girl. Hmmm...what was her name?" He tapped his lip. "Kallin, Kay..."

"Kali?"

"Yup, that's it, Kali," Toby replied, reached over to grab more nuts from the bowl. "She was there with a friend of mine, Orion."

A little hope sprang to life. Maybe this was going to lead them in the right direction. Briggs tore his gaze from the nuts in Toby's hands to meet his gaze. "How does Orion know her?"

Toby shrugged. "Never said."

Briggs pondered that, as much as he hoped this would bring them right to Kali, he doubted it would. These kids were too young to plan an abduction of the daughter of an Alpha. Needless to say, they didn't possess the strength needed to subdue her. They needed to talk with Orion. "Where can we find him?"

"At home," Toby answered with slight hesitation. "He lives across town." He was worried—for his friend, Kali and himself—all three probably held an equal importance in his mind.

Valor took his phone from the front pocket of his plaid dress shirt, typed quickly then looked back at Toby. "Will he be there now?"

"Is Orion in some kind of trouble?" Toby asked.

"It is not him we are looking for. It is the girl, Kali." He gave Toby a look that demanded honesty. "Did she seem frightened when you saw her?"

"Frightened," Toby laughed. "No. She and Orion were tight that night." He crossed his fingers to prove his point.

"All right." Valor stood from the couch. "What's his address?"

"Don't know the house number, but it's on Twenty-Sixth Avenue. You can't miss it. It's the house on the corner, big and white."

Valor nodded. "I'll ask you, Toby, not to inform him that we are coming. Do not speak of this visit to anyone. Am I understood?"

Toby pretended to zip his lip and threw away the key. "Locked in the vault."

Valor picked Toby up so he was standing in front of him. "Why are you dressed like this?"

Rynn laughed softly.

"Cause its cool," Toby responded.

Valor touched his spikes. "How does this hold up like that?"

Apparently, Briggs wasn't the only one who couldn't wrap his head about Toby's hair. Valor asked the question he'd be wondering.

"Hairspray." Toby beamed. "Lots of it."

"The ozone is failing because of this one's hair," Briggs grumbled.

Toby scowled at him. "I use ozone free products..."

"Keep in mind young Toby, we have an example to set," Valor cut him off. "Dress as you like but lead accordingly. Underage drinking and silly behavior as this will only lead to the wrong path in life."

Toby responded as any typical teenager would. “Yeah, yeah.” He waved his hand as to dismiss him.

Briggs nearly laughed. He wasn’t talking to his parents—this was Valor.

As he suspected, Valor leaned in very close to Toby’s face, gave him the look that would send an Alpha to run away with his tail between his legs. “If I hear of any trouble with you, you will answer to me directly. Do I make myself clear?”

Toby gulped deeply and gave a shaky nod. “Very clear, sir.”

Valor spun on his heels without another word and made his way to the door. Briggs smiled at Rynn as she said goodbye to Toby and followed her out. When they exited the house, Dante waited in a big black SUV that sat parked in the driveway.

Rynn chuckled. “I’m beginning to feel like I’m living in an episode of CSI.” She glanced over her shoulder. “Just call me Agent Calleigh Duquesne.”

Briggs winked, opened the door and Rynn scooted into the backseat. He followed in behind next to her. He looked toward Valor who sat in the passenger seat. His mind swirled with the current situation. “An odd thing—how would Kali meet Orion? It seems unlikely that she has started a relationship with someone outside of her pack. Considering the restraint her parents have on her, how would they have met?”

“Very unusual.” Valor agreed.

“A kid has her?” Dante asked, his eyes looked at Briggs in the rearview mirror.

“It appears so. She has been seen with him.”

Rynn clipped her seatbelt, then added, “Not only that, but could teenagers really have hired hit men?”

Briggs nodded, rested his hand on her thigh. He was very proud of her. She might make jokes about her involvement here, but clearly, she was taking more of an interest than she thought she was. Her assumption was dead on. “Quite unlikely.”

He ran his hand along her thigh, felt her muscles tense and shudder. She looked at him, desire in her eyes. He enjoyed knowing that with just a simple touch, her scent of arousal flew so rich through the air.

Her desire titillated his senses, very delicious. His groin throbbed in anticipation. The reaction so new to her, made it stronger and full of heat. He knew why she was affected so deeply, he just wanted her to ask. Letting her discover her senses first was ideal, then he would provide her with any explanations she needed.

Rynn opened her mouth, breathed through the intensity. He suspected, she did it because if she caught his equal scent of arousal while she was feeling so heated, she didn’t hold the ability to control herself. A thought that only added strength to his erection.

Briggs gave her thigh a squeeze, delivered the message that soon he would enjoy her. Their desire kicked up a notch as their gazes stayed locked within the fervor of arousal. Through the whole ride, they stared, smoldered, fantasized.

When the car came to a quick halt, Rynn gasped and Briggs chuckled. He turned and glanced out the window. Valor exited the car with Dante behind him. A strong hold on his arm had him turning to Rynn.

“Why am I reacting like that?” she asked hurried.

“Couple reasons, darlin’. First, I’m your mate—the wolf in you is hungry. Second, the full moon is coming.”

Her brows grew together in the sweet look he was growing all too fond of. “What’s

the full moon gotta do with it?”

He wanted to say, *you'll be craving my dick till your body aches from my thrusts*. Instead, he gave her a smother answer. “Our *appetite* increases as the full moon draws closer.”

She took a moment to process that, then asked, “I experienced the full moon before and it’s never been like this. Why do I feel it now?”

“We hadn’t completed the mating before.” Briggs opened the car door, and got out, then reached his hand in to help her out. “Wolves are sensual creatures, love. What you’re feeling is completely normal. Fighting it is useless.” He let the yearning he felt show on his face. “Besides, your body is just anticipating all the things I have yet to show you.”

Her confusion melted away into a sexy grin. “Okay, but stop touching me.” She slapped his hand away and made her way toward Valor and Dante who approached the house. “Focus, focus, focus.”

Briggs chuckled, amusement high. She was trying to fight against the call of the moon. He’d told her it was pointless, obviously she thought she was strong enough. Soon, she’d discover just how wrong she was.

As Briggs followed behind her, he looked around. The neighborhood apparently sat in the rich part of town—large homes, manicured lawns, fancy cars—everything that screamed *I’m living the American dream*. Orion’s house was in fact the only white house on the street. Toby was right, it wasn’t hard to miss.

Rynn waited at the last step for Briggs and pushed him in front of her. He laughed. She scowled a little but stepped in close to his back. A swing rested beside the front bay window, which swayed slightly in the wind. Dante raised his hand to knock when it suddenly flew open.

A man stood, shock emanated off his kind face. His mate stood behind him. Classic suburban family—casual dress, proper haircuts, and perfect smiles planted on their faces.

Briggs glanced behind him, saw Rynn’s bewildered expression had returned, and those feelings rushed through him.

Valor began with the pleasantries, but Rynn quickly whispered. “I’m just realizing this now—and wondering why it didn’t clue in with Dante and Valor—but why does no one look over thirty?”

Briggs leaned back a bit, but kept his focus on the pair. “We age until thirty, after that our immortality sets in.”

She gave her head a bemused shake, but said nothing more on the matter.

“Cruz and Janiya, we need to talk to you about your son, Orion, is he home?” Valor inquired.

Cruz’s face darkened at the mention of his son. “What has he done?”

Valor waved his hand to dismiss the concern. “Nothing to do anyone harm, but he may have information we need.”

Janiya opened the door wide and waved them in. “Please come in. I will go and get Orion.”

Getting Orion meant screaming at him from the hallway. A moment later, his bedroom door slammed closed and jetted down the stairs. He stopped dead at the sight of the crowd sitting in his living room.

“Sit down,” his father demanded and glanced at Valor. “Ask him what you need. He

will do nothing but tell you the truth.”

Valor went through the story in mundane terms, keeping it short and to the point. By the end of it, the uncertainty across Orion’s face was obvious.

It took a minute for Orion to find words. “You want Kali?”

“We need to find her, yes. Do you know where she is?” Valor asked, his voice soft.

“Nope,” Orion answered with a quick shake of his head. “I only met her that day and haven’t seen her since.”

“Where did you meet her?” Dante asked.

“At the Uptown Diner,” Orion replied.

Rynn nudged Briggs’ arm. He looked down at her and she said, “A hotspot for the youth of Plymouth.”

“All right,” Valor said, drawing Briggs’ gaze back to him. “Tell us what happened when you met her?”

“There’s nothin’ to really tell ya,” Orion answered. “I was hangin’ there and saw her eatin’ at a table. She was hot, so I went over to her.” Janiya gave her son a reproving look, which he ignored and continued, “We talked a while, then she came with us to the bush party.”

“What happened after the party?” Briggs asked. “Where did she go?”

He shrugged and looked at his parents, embarrassed.

Cruz glared, pointed a determined finger toward him. “You better speak boy if you know what’s good for you.”

Orion glanced at his fumbling hands, and all but whispered, “We were ahh...makin’ out...”

“Orion!” Janiya gasped, her hand over her mouth.

“And what happened then?” Valor urged him.

He glanced up, his face beat red. “Some guy came, gave her trouble, and then they left.”

“The man that came to get her,” Valor asked. “What did he look like?”

“Big guy, short hair.” Orion’s face turned crimson. “I didn’t really look, I thought he was her dad so I booked it outta there, thinking he was gonna lay into me.”

“And he should have,” Cruz growled.

“This is a peculiar situation,” Valor pointed out, deep in thought.

“I’d say,” Rynn interjected. “She’s not a runaway because someone old enough to be her father was with her, and since she was playing smoochie-smooch with this one,” Rynn jerked a head in Orion’s direction. “She’s obviously not knocked off her feet in love with the other guy.”

“And if she was abducted, why was she out alone?” Briggs added and was about to reach for Rynn’s hand, but her glare stopped him. He grinned and placed his hand back in his lap. “None of this makes any sense.”

“But there was one thing that was sorta weird,” Orion said. “The guy carried her away, like she couldn’t walk, or something.”

Valor gave Briggs a knowing look, which he understood. It explained why her scent was faint.

Valor stood. “We must get going and see what the others have found.” He looked back at Janiya and Cruz. “Thank you for your help.”

“Not sure how much help it was. Orion will be punished for his bad behavior,”

Janiya glared at her son. Then, with a much softer expression and tone, she looked to Valor. "I do hope you find this young girl."

"I do as well." He nodded somberly.

Chapter Ten

Valor's phone beeped and glanced down at it, read the details of a text, and looked at Rynn over his shoulder. "Do you know where Orchard Lane is?"

She nodded. This was her hometown, she'd walked these streets countless times and could give directions with her eyes closed if she had to. While they drove, she told Dante the route to take, and within only a few minutes, they arrived at their location.

Once they pulled into the round driveway, Rynn could only laugh.

Briggs arched an eyebrow. "Something funny?"

"Pops sent me to a private school close to here—*Providence Academy*. It's just over there. We used to drive by this house everyday and I always drooled over it."

"You went to a private school?" Briggs asked, intrigue heavy in his tone.

"Pops wanted the best for me. Poor man worked for too long to pay those fees, but he never listened when I said I didn't need to go there."

On a weekly basis, she reminded him there was such a thing as public schools, which cost nothing except the taxpayers a few bucks. He'd always change the subject and ignore her. Really, where had it gotten her anyway? Working in a bar or coffee shop wasn't the right place for a private school graduate in her opinion. At least, she'd been well-educated—she guessed that might stand for something.

Briggs' expression showed he wasn't surprised to hear that. Either, he thought she was smart or he expected as much from her grandfather. Whatever it was, she liked his response. He smiled heartily. "He's a good man."

"As good as they come." Her words came with a little sadness. How she missed him. Even when he was sick, she'd still made an effort to see him at least every other day, if she couldn't get there daily. Not being near him hurt and she hoped he was doing well.

"Soon, love," Briggs said, his tone hushed. "Soon we can go and see him."

Dante put the car in park, cut the engine and jumped out. Valor opened his door and looked her way. "This home belongs to one of Sayer's pack members who is out of town. He has generously offered his home to us."

Rynn mused silently that all she needed was the glass slippers and she'd be Cinderella, or maybe an English rose—at least that was the vibe coming from this Victorian Country home.

Just as they exited the car, Briggs brushed against her arm. Again, desire stole her breath and warmth coursed right down to her very toes. She gave him a petulant look and stepped away. "No touching, remember?"

"As you wish." Briggs grinned with sultry intent and waved his arm out gallantly, bowing in a proper way.

Sure, he did step away, but his touch still affected her. As she made her way toward the house, her thoughts plummeted like a cold shower as Nera appeared in the doorway with Rainer standing in next to her. Rynn rolled her eyes. "And the witch is back."

Briggs laughed.

"Rainer, glad to see you arrived safe," Valor said, gave his hand a firm shake.

"It was a quick flight," Rainer replied, and moved back into the house so they could enter. "Let's sit, I'll tell you what I've discovered."

Rynn followed in behind Briggs as they entered into the living room. Everything looked to be imported from either Italy or France, completely Shabby Chic. Expensive.

Valor took a seat on the black Italian leather couch with Briggs, Rynn sitting across from him. Dante leaned up against the wall.

“What have you discovered?” Valor asked.

“Basically it’s this.” Rainer sank down into the loveseat, which sat against the far wall, Nera next to him. “The two wolves from my pack were lookin’ for a little adventure, so they accepted a paid mission from an unknown source.”

“Mission impossible.” Rynn giggled.

Everyone glanced at her, Nera glared of course. Rynn gave a soft ashamed smile. Right, not appropriate.

Briggs grinned and winked at her.

Valor ignored her. “How were they contacted?”

“Cashton didn’t know. The one who would know that answer was one of the men you killed.”

“Of course,” Valor grumbled.

Rainer continued, “They came here as part of the assignment. They were told there would be a group of wolves coming into the area. They were instructed to wait until they had been contacted when you would be coming into the area.”

Rynn glanced at each of their faces. Even she understood the implication of what this new information. Danika was right, it had to be someone at the gathering. Only they would know what their plans were. Oh Lord, had she met the person responsible?

“Why did Cashton leave and not stay to finish the job?” Briggs questioned.

“It wasn’t until they arrived here that found out that they were going to have to kill,” Rainer explained.

Rynn barked a loud shout of laughter. Of all the ridiculous things to say. “What else did they think was going to happen?”

Rainer met her gaze, very serious. “He didn’t know, but it wasn’t what he expected. Furthermore, nothing he’d participated in before.”

Nera glared at Rynn. “It could have been anything—stealing a car, pawing stolen jewelry, anything at all.”

This bitchy wolf was getting on Rynn’s last nerve. “Sorry, you’ve got a better sense of wrongdoing than I do.”

Nera jumped to her feet, looked about a second away from making Rynn doggy dinner, but Rainer grabbed her and forced her back onto the loveseat. “Sit down, woman.”

Valor continued as if no interruption had taken place. “All right, so once he discovered what was going to take place, he came home?”

Rainer nodded. “When you called he had just arrived at my home.” He rubbed his hands together, unhappy. “He has obviously been punished for this.”

“You didn’t kill them, did you?” Rynn gasped.

Rainer gave her a chastised look. “No...”

Before he could finish, Nera cut him off, glowered at Rynn. “And that is your business because?”

Oh, Rynn had enough. Her questions were valid. To date, she’d seen that wolves handled just about everything with violence. What did Nera expect her to say?

It wasn't so much her words, as the look in Nera's eyes that made Rynn snap. She jumped to her feet. "What's your deal?"

Nera stood too, fists clenched at her sides. "My deal is that you should not be here."

"Rynn," Briggs said softly.

She turned her glare on him. "Hush." Then, she focused back on Nera, enough was enough. She'd reached the pinnacle of it the moment she met this nasty woman. "I shouldn't be here because I was bit and turned, is that why?"

Nera raised her chin, an insinuation that she was somehow better. "Alphas and their mates are pure—you are tainting our bloodline."

Rynn crossed the room, stood toe-to-toe with the bitch. No woman, no wolf was going to push her around any longer and make her feel less than. "You think I had a choice?"

"Yes, you could have died."

Briggs lunged to his feet, his growl fierce as he stepped in behind Rynn. "What did you just say?"

Nera didn't take her eyes off Rynn. "She is filthy and you are all as bad as her for allowing this."

"Are you implying what I think you are, Nera?" Valor asked. His tone issued a warning.

Rainer was quickly on his feet and grabbed Nera's arm, gave her a hard tug. "You better sit down and shut it before you say something we are both going to regret."

Nera trembled, as did Rynn. She could only imagine the shade of the blood heating her body. "You are a real bitch, you know that."

Nera shrugged it off. "Your words are meaningless to me."

Rynn pointed her finger in Nera's face, right at the very tip of her nose. "Imagine this, Nera. Imagine that you are working three jobs to pay for the care of someone you love. Imagine you're walking home after a long shift and you're attacked by some psycho. That man takes you into a bush, strips you naked and then rapes you. Imagine the pain of that, of never having sex in your life because you were saving yourself for someone you love. Imagine his big sweaty body thrusting on yours in the most horrifying way.

"Then you're bitten, and even if you can wrap your head around it, imagine when you wake up you're a fucking wolf. Imagine being brought into a world that you can't even visualize and the people you meet are stupid bitches like you who say there's something wrong with you because of how you were made."

She lowered her finger, poked Nera's chest hard. "Don't you think I would change that night if I could? You think I wanted to be attacked, raped and left for dead?" Nera stared at her wide-eyed, and for a moment, Rynn swore she could read shame on her face. "Do you think I wouldn't want to be looked at like I'm some disease?"

"I...I..." Nera stammered.

"If you have nothing nice to say then just shut the hell up," Rynn spat. "Every time you look at me with that disgust in your eyes or make some bitchy remark, you remind me of that night. And it's something I'd rather forget."

"I didn't know," Nera whispered.

"That's right, you didn't know because it's none of your goddamn business," Rynn shouted and gave a firm stomp of her foot. "Now, you've gotten me so mad that I'm

swearing and I never swear.”

Briggs ran his hand down her arm. “Rynn,” he said softly.

She glanced at him, instantly snapped out of her anger until all that remained was sadness. It was too much to deal with right now. She dealt with the denial and felt the pain of that night constantly. Her lip quivered and her eyes filled with tears.

Briggs spun her around so fast the world twirled, but steadied when he wrapped his arms around her tight. “Shh love, you are all right now.”

“I hate him. I hate him for doing that to me.” Rynn’s voice was nearly swallowed by her deep sobs.

Briggs held her tighter, squeezed tight as if to save her from the pain. “Aye, I as well.” His tone was soft, but beneath it, it held the truth that if he could hunt down the one responsible and slaughter him, he would.

She leaned her head to the side against his chest and glanced around through her watery eyes, suddenly embarrassed by her breakdown, but the room was empty. She sank back into Briggs and gripped his shirt in her hands. “I just hate the way they all look at me as if there’s something wrong with me.”

“They are cruel, this is true, but they mean nothing in our lives.”

“Easy for you to say,” she sniffed, backed away to meet his gaze. “You don’t have them look at you like that.”

Briggs took her chin in his hand, pulled her gaze to his and wiped her tears. “You are beautiful, special, charming, and strong, love.” Then, he winked. “That would make any female a little jealous of you.”

She laughed through the tears. “Sure, that is exactly their problem—jealousy.”

Briggs pulled her down to the couch and knelt in front of her. “Tell me about that night.”

“You don’t want to hear it.” Rynn whispered.

“No, love, I don’t. You’re right about that. I don’t want to hear how you have been mistreated.” His hand brushed along her cheek, so tender. “But you need to talk about it and it is my job to hear you when you are troubled.”

Tears escaped her eyes and she had no ambition to control them. “I don’t know where to start.”

“At the beginning.”

Did she want to go back to that night? Hell no. But she also knew she needed to finally deal with this so she could move on with her life. The hours were just clicking by until she finally broke down.

She took a deep breath. “It was creepy you know, he was there at the bar drinking, but he looked scary. I tried not to look at him, but it was like he followed me with his eyes all night.” Her voice wavered. “I always walked home, my apartment wasn’t far. I was so stupid. I shouldn’t have walked home alone.” A lump formed in her throat and her cries anguished.

Briggs squeezed her hands, his expression empathic and heartbroken at the same time. “You should be able to walk home. The world should be safe enough that you can do that. That was in no way stupid on your part.”

She snorted softly at his attempt to make her feel better. “He must have followed me, but I never knew. Never saw him, you know?” Briggs inclined his head. His eyes were so sad, it only made it harder to get through this. “When he attacked, it just happened so

quickly. I should have been stronger, fought harder, I should have done more.”

Briggs’ brows arched up. “What could you have done, darlin’?”

“Fought back! I should have punched him, kicked him, did everything I could to get him off me. But I didn’t, I just laid there helpless. Let him do it to me.”

“You are a little thing, love. What would you have been able to do?”

She met his gaze, shameful. “But I didn’t even try.” Her voice was so broken, it was the first time in her life she let her feelings show. What bothered her most about what happened was that she failed in the one aspect she swore she never would—weakness. She’d been too weak to stop him.

Briggs studied her silently a moment, then a flash of determination spread across his face. “Right then.” He pulled her up from the couch, kept her hand in his and led her through the living room to the front door.

“Where are we going?” she stumbled, still trying to get a grasp on her emotions, let alone the ability to walk.

”To face reality, darlin’.”

Chapter Eleven

On the front lawn, Briggs positioned Rynn in front of him. Without any warning, he launched himself around her, holding her tight.

“What are you doing?” she exclaimed.

“Prove it to me. Prove to me that fighting back would have freed you.” His voice was harsh and stern.

She wiggled in his arms, nearly laughed at the idea of what he suggested. “I’m not going to hit you.”

“If you are darlin’, get to it,” Briggs demanded, his grip tightened further. “Free yourself. You think you can, so show me how.”

She wiggled a bit harder this time but his hold was tight. “Briggs, this is ridiculous.”

He met her gaze now, no emotion showed on his face, except the truth he wasn’t going to let her go. “Time’s a wastin’, love.”

Just to get over this, she gave a hard push. He didn’t even budge. She couldn’t free herself from his hold. It took one heartbeat for the panic to rise. Fear made the world spin and sweat form along her skin.

Yes, she knew this was Briggs, but her fear wouldn’t hear it. It was as if she was back in that moment, helpless with no control. “This is scaring me.” Her voice shook. “I don’t like this. Let me go.”

He didn’t listen, just held on tighter. Fear took Rynn to a place where her mind was lost. Terror pounded in her heart and her only thought was to get out of his hold. She glanced up at him again, alarmed when the face of her attacker stared back at her.

Without thought, she kneed him as hard as she could in the groin. He backed away slightly with a groan, but within a second, his strong arms returned their hold around her.

Instantly, she lost it. Punched, kicked and slammed into him as he kept his arms around her tight. She screamed, cried out, begged him to let her go. It was useless. Before she knew it, he had her on her back, his weight heavy on her chest as his body rested between her thighs. She just couldn’t move under his hold, he was too strong. Didn’t matter how much she kicked or punched, his weight was just too heavy for her to overcome.

A loud, piercing scream tore from her throat and even to her, it sounded like the scream of a woman who had her soul taken and demanded she get it back. She deserved it. Recognizing that need, she softened in his arms and sobbed.

Briggs brushed a hand along her face, his expression filled of his love for her. “You see, there is nothing you could have done to stop what happened. He was stronger.”

Rynn cried hard and deep. Sobbed because he was right and that it took something of this magnitude for her to see this truth. She was angry that Briggs had to use his strength against her in order to prove it to her. Watching her lose it, scream as if he was hurting her, could not have been easy for him.

He raised himself off her and gathered her in his arms. As he did, she looked over his shoulder to see Valor watched them with a sad look, and Nera peered out the window. She couldn’t even find it in herself to feel humiliated. Not now.

Briggs’ cupped her cheek, tilted her head up to meet his gaze. “You did nothing to

deserve what happened to you. There was nothing you could have done to stop it. He wanted to take what he could from you and nothing could have stopped him.”

Was this the best way to prove this to her, probably not, but it she'd obviously left him with no other choice. Nothing on her part could have changed what had happened. She hadn't failed herself by being weak because the truth was, physically she just wasn't strong enough. None of this was her fault. Finally, the knowledge of that eased the heavy weight from her chest that made every breath difficult.

She stared into Briggs' soft sweet eyes, and felt free to admit the one thing she'd never told him before. “I love you.”

Love for him consumed her. She loved that he knew just what to do to help her through this and always made her feel safe. Without him, she doubted she would have ever let go of the guilt she carried within her.

His eyes widened in surprise. He leaned forward and kissed her lips softly. With his lips close to hers, he whispered, “That sounds so good, say it again.”

“I love you.” His lips tickled hers and she hummed the words along his mouth. He closed the minute distance between them and pressed his lips to hers as he stood with her in his arms.

Warm air breezed along her skin as he started walking. She vaguely heard Nera's voice, “Third door on the left.”

Briggs kicked the bedroom door shut behind them, placed Rynn softly on the bed and continued with the soft kisses. He was being tender with her. It was sweet and all, but gentle was something of the past. She wanted him, needed him. She clasped his face in her hands and kissed him deeply. He groaned in response and grabbed the hem of her shirt to pull it over her head.

The second her face was clear, he was kissing her again. They ravaged, bit and licked their way out of their clothes. Briggs tongued his way down her body and when he nestled himself between her legs, she jumped at the contact. He anticipated the move and grabbed her hips to hold her still as he licked, sucked and swirled her toward climax.

Rynn could only whimper and squirm beneath him. He knew exactly how to take her arousal to unknown limits. He held her tightly as she moved about, but she didn't mind feeling restrained. The only man on her mind was Briggs. The man who loved and cared for her as no other ever had. Her soul rejoiced to be his.

With a final deep lick between her folds and flick of his fingers on her little nub, Rynn's orgasm exploded from deep inside. She could barely catch her breath and her scream came out jagged. He stayed on her until her breath returned to nothing more than deep pants and her body shook.

He kissed his way back up her body. When he reached her face, she gave him a devilish smile. The amber in his eyes burned deeper in color. She pushed him off her, sank to her knees in front of him, grabbed his erection and sank it deep into her throat. His groan came deep as she was ruthless with his body. His deep moans, finger brushes against her face, and slow thrusts of his body stirred a wave of pure pleasure inside her. It made her work harder and tease him more.

His deep gaze smoldered as it stayed with hers. From the base of his penis, she used her tongue to lick up to the tip, then gave him a sexy smile. His breath sucked into his body, everything inside him tense, his jaw clenched in rapid movements. He grabbed her by the arms and placed her on the bed. He flipped her over on her knees, raised her hips,

then pushed her chest down while he entered her.

The move was so quick, it surprised her, earning a squeal to escape. She was ready for him. The sensation of him filling her was perfectly right. He was just what she needed to relieve the pressure within her.

He slid inside her, moved in gently and withdrew with the same deliberate slowness. He meant to be gentle with her, but she didn't need that from him anymore. She reached back, grabbed his hips. "No...harder." Her voice came out needy.

"Harder, love?" he teased with a low husky tone.

She may regret the begging, certain he would remind her of it, but all she cared about was her climax. She wanted to soar and wanted him to forcefully send her flying. "Yes, please..."

With a low growl, he gripped her hips with his hands, and then he slammed into her. One hard, deep thrust.

Her head fell back, her hair tickling down her skin as pleasure rocketed in every part of her. "Yes...more," she begged again.

His hands at her hips and his fingers pinching into her skin, he slammed against her again and again—hard, deep, amazing.

"Is this what you want, darlin'?" he growled.

Her moans wouldn't allow her to speak, her eyes forced closed by his intent for her to release herself to his body. She sucked in a deep breath, and before he thrust again, she sputtered, "Yes, oh yes, more...more."

He gave it, slammed it, harder and faster, until she was screaming. She had no control over herself as she prayed for her climax to hit and begged him for the release she needed.

It hung there, so close, but hard to reach. "More," she screamed, louder this time. "I need more."

"You want it, love," Briggs roared behind her. "You got it."

He pumped hard and fast. Her knees rubbed against the bed as he slammed gratification into every nerve of her body. She gasped, screamed and shouted words that made no sense at all as his body moved roughly against hers.

Her entire body was enthralled, her fingers knotted within the bed sheets. Her eyes filled with tears as her body reeled in sensations. Briggs angled her hips slightly, which pushed him in deeper, and it was just what she needed. With one last hard thrust, her release hit. Her eyes closed tight as her body tingled and danced with delight.

Briggs followed right behind her. After his loud shout of fulfillment, his body dropped on top of hers. She could only laugh. "That was soooo good."

He pulled out of her and flipped her over, a proud smile on his face. "Aye." She squirmed up the bed and he joined her, pulled her close to him. He glanced down at her in his arms, and gave her his delicious grin. "My heart is yours and yours alone."

She smiled softly. "I know."

His brow arched up, a challenging look on his face. "Do you know?"

She nodded, curiously. What was that look for? Even if she hadn't felt his love for her through their bond, which always was steady and strong, his actions spoke loud and clear of how much he cared for her. "Of course, I do."

"Aye, but I do not think you truly know."

She rose up a bit, holding her weight on her arms. He ran his fingers along her arm.

“I can feel that you do through our bond. So, what are you going on about?”

He brushed her hair across her shoulder, his eyes followed the move, then returned his gaze to her. “When wolves meet their destined mate, it is not always who they might want or the situation in which they discover them. Sometimes, wolves are not pleased with who they have been destined to, did you know that?”

“No I didn’t. The way I understood it, once you found it, your soul rejoiced and found peace.” She’d experienced that for herself and was surprised to hear that others hadn’t.

“It is true. But you,” He put his hand over her heart, “You are everything I could have dreamed of in a mate.”

She looked down at his hand on her and could swear she could feel the warmth building in her heart. Giddy with happiness, she snuggled into him, nuzzled her face into his neck. “I feel the same.”

He gently moved her away, brought her gaze up to his. “No, I want you to look at me while I tell you this.”

She settled her head on his arm to focus on him better, his voice and expression so serious. Whatever was on his mind was important.

“Your life has been tragic, this is true, but seeing all you have been through is what captures me. You’re entirely unselfish. Never and I mean, *never*, have I seen that in a wolf before. Your only want is to see that everyone else is okay. It’s a trait in you that floors me. You’ve been thrown into this world and you are dealin’ with it with such grace. You’ve never once complained, once thought of yourself, when at a time, you’re entirely right too. You just push on. Trudge through. You’re here, standing beside me with only weeks to accept this new world.”

Tears welled up in her eyes as he continued. “Your kind nature makes me better, makes me want to do better—be the man who deserves you.” He grabbed her chin, held it firmly in his grip. “Now, I know you’re tough, never wanted help or needed anyone, but you can let that go, love.”

She opened her mouth to speak, but he put a finger over it to hush her. “I know the situation with the money upsets you because you don’t need assistance or need me to help you along, but it’s my way of giving you something back.”

“But...” she started.

He stopped her, sealed her mouth closed with two fingers. “I have been alone for a very long time. My only family has been Valor, which is more than I could have asked for. But with you, for the first time in so long, I truly felt loved again—a love that can only come from true family. With you, I have a family again—a family of my own. Do you understand that?”

She nodded, had wanted the same thing for so long. “So, love. Let’s move past this strength inside you. It’s time for you to let go and need someone, lean on them because that’s why I’m here. Life should be easier now. It shouldn’t be so hard.”

The hardness he was talking about, she knew well. It was what lived in her—a defensive mechanism—to never be hurt again. If she didn’t let anyone in, if she didn’t trust or depend on anyone, she could never be let down. Letting that go would be hard—very hard.

Briggs sighed softly, probably in reaction to her apprehension. “Trust is never an easy thing. If it was, it wouldn’t mean so much when you give it. But I need you to see,

darlin', just all that you've given to me—all that I have now that you're in my life. If I can make your life a little easier, not such a battle, am I really asking much?"

She let out a long deep breath, hating the thought of being taken care of. At the same time, he was right too. She'd created a barrier and to truly be loved by him, she had to let the wall crumble. If she didn't it would always be wrong between them. She didn't need to be tough, prove herself strong because he already knew she was. He only wanted to make things easier for her by sharing his wealth. He wasn't making a statement with it. He was doing it because he didn't want to see her struggle anymore.

He leaned over the side of the bed, grabbing his jeans, and reached into the back pocket. "Take it, love." He held out the same credit card to her that he'd tried to give her before.

Her gaze locked on his, her tears returned. For the first time, she wasn't alone. She didn't need to push and push to get through life, scrounge for money or eat hot dogs and macaroni and cheese just to survive. She didn't need to wear herself out working long hours.

Knowing it was right, she wiped away the tears and took the card from him because she could see what it meant to him. He was taking care of her because he knew she deserved it. It was his gift to her.

He let out a relieved breath, kissed her softly. "There now, love, I feel as though I am giving you as much as you have given me."

Chapter Twelve

“Briggs, this is way too expensive,” Rynn snapped, reading the price tag on a shirt.

Briggs had suggested a shopping trip instead of sitting around at home with Nera. Rynn didn’t object, it was nice to get out. Of course, once she knew where they were going she was less than thrilled. She looked up, glanced around at the upscale woman’s clothing store. A store she walked by hundreds of times, but never dared to go in. She couldn’t have afforded a sock.

“Would you stop looking at the tags!” Briggs grabbed the shirt from her hands, gave his head a shake, and pushed her into the dressing room. “Try it on.”

She sighed, annoyed, but did as he asked and closed the curtain.

“You would think,” Briggs remarked. “Shopping would be fun.”

“Not at this store it’s not.” She pulled the shirt over her head. “The cost of this shirt could feed a starving village.”

Briggs threw a pair of skinny jeans over the top of the curtain rail. “Get used to it, love.” His footsteps moved away. She poked her head around the curtain to see him looking at a pair of boots. He scooped them up and started back to her. She quickly shut the curtain and proceeded to step into the jeans. Just as she zipped them up, Briggs tossed her the boots under the curtain. “Try these too.”

Her gaze stayed far away from the price tag on these spectacular leather-heeled boots. Instead, she unzipped them and put them on. She couldn’t argue it wasn’t nice to have expensive clothes. Her apparel came from secondhand stores. Nice enough—just used.

After a final glanced in the mirror, she pushed the curtain back. Briggs sat in a chair a few feet away. She stepped out and did a little spin. “So…”

Briggs gave a firm nod of approval. “Better.” Then, he stood, came toward her and gave her a little shove back into the middle of the store. “Now, go get more.”

She sighed deeply.

By the end of it, she had her dream wardrobe. The cash register would be stuffed full, and the sales lady looked all too happy with the commission she was about to make.

Rynn didn’t feel as excited. She took the credit card from her pocket and held it out to him. “Will you go pay?”

He laughed. “What’s the problem, love?”

She leaned in closer to him and whispered, “I don’t want to hear the total.”

He seemed to enjoy this. Her, not so much. He ignored the card she held out to him and went to the counter. The sales lady began to ring in the clothes. The little beeps continued for way too long.

Rynn ventured over to the bay window in an attempt to ignore the sound of money diminishing. She’d think spending this much money would feel good, considering she’d never experienced this before, but she just wasn’t used to it. It felt like stealing.

“Ready?” Briggs’ voice snapped her out of her thoughts. Rynn spun around from the window to see him standing with an obscene amount of bags.

“Yeah, I’m ready.” Then, she whispered. “Was it bad?”

“No.” Briggs laughed. She reached forward to take a couple of the bags from his

hands. He gave her a chastised look and stepped back out of reach. "Rynn, I have money. Spending a few thousand on you doesn't break the bank account."

"What?" she gasped, eyes wide. "A few thousand?"

He grinned, leaned in and kissed her lips. "Mere pennies."

She snorted, accepting his kiss nonetheless. "Pennies, right." Briggs stepped past her and opened the front door. She followed and remembered her manners. "Thanks for the new stuff."

Briggs closed the door behind her and the bell chimed. "No need to thank me, love." He gave her a sweet smile. "You deserve to look beautiful and have nice things."

He was so generous with the compliments. Instead of blushing, she returned the smile then changed the subject. "Do you think Valor has found out anything about who might have hired those guys?"

"He would have called if he did. Not to worry, he'll let us know if anything comes up." He sniffed the air. "You smell hungry?"

She laughed and sniffed the air as well. Being a wolf came with a sensitive scent, obviously, it was even deeper in wolf form. While human, it was still stronger than she'd once known. For her, it was growing, probably because she was becoming more accustomed to this life. After a deep inhale, all she could smell was Briggs' spicy scent. "What does hungry smell like?"

"Like hungry," he said, simply.

She shook her head at him. What a blasé answer. "That explains it well."

"I wouldn't know how to explain it. You'll learn all the scents soon." He gave a wink. "You just have to discover them."

She inhaled deeply, this time smelling dirty city. Sweat, dirt, grime—nothing good. The longer they walked and the more she inhaled, a familiar scent came through. She couldn't pinpoint what it was, but it was definitely a smell she knew. Only one sure way to find out. She grabbed Briggs' arm and pulled. "Come this way."

He gave her a curious look, but didn't say a word. He followed her as she turned down an alley. The scent grew stronger, but she still couldn't place it. Everything around her just smelled putrid, but there was that one scent through it all that grabbed her. Something familiar.

Then, she saw why. Resting beside a garbage dumpster surrounded by blankets and filth sat her parents. Every emotion possible hurried through her—horror, embarrassment, shame, disgust. It was all present in her soul.

"What's the problem, love?" Briggs examined her.

"I..." she hesitated, took a deep gulp in an attempt to pull herself back together. Then, her mother looked up at her with wildly high eyes and she couldn't find any words. She wondered if her mother even recognized her. It'd been many years since she had seen either of her parents.

"What do you want?" her mother snapped.

Rynn glanced at Briggs who still watched her, flickers of intrigue filtered through their bond. He looked back at the woman, if only for a moment. When his gaze met Rynn's again it filled with understanding.

He leaned in closer. "Are those your parents?"

Her mouth parted to confirm his words, but all that came out was a squeak. Giving up, she nodded. Her parents, Warwick and Tarina Murphy.

Briggs' eyes narrowed. "Right then." He dropped the bags in his hands and strode toward them.

"Wait, Briggs...no," Rynn gasped.

In seconds, he had Warwick and Tarina by their shirts and pushed up against the wall. "Look at you," he spat. "Disgusting."

"Get your fucking hands off me," Warwick roared, swinging his arms and legs around. Briggs held him firmly in place.

Rynn hardly recognized her father. He looked so old. His dark hair was long with gray streaking it—his features almost unrecognizable behind all the dirt.

Briggs nodded toward Rynn. "Do you know who that is?"

Warwick gave Rynn a quick glance, then glared toward Briggs. "No. Who the fuck are you? What do you want? We have nothing."

"You had everything and yet, you chose this life." Briggs pinned him with a hard look.

Within the men's sharp exchanges, a soft voice came through. "Rynn?" Her silver eyes were just like Rynn's and her brown hair was probably the same soft shade, if it wasn't covered in dirt. "Rynn, is that you?"

Rynn somehow found her voice. "Yes...it's me."

Both their faces paled and shock widened their eyes. Briggs released them and stood before them with no misunderstanding that these two people were not on his happy list.

Everyone stood, shocked. No one seemed to have anything to say. Briggs cleared the silence, his voice a low deep growl. "Do you know what you put her through?"

"Briggs, you don't..." Rynn began. His gaze snapped to hers and pinned her with a fierce expression she'd never seen come from him. Instantly, she shut her mouth.

He turned that powerful expression back onto her parents. "Answer me."

"I'm sorry," Tarina said and began to cry.

Briggs growled again, deeper this time. "Those tears will get you nowhere, woman."

Rynn could not only sense Briggs' tension, but she could see it ripple off him in waves. But she couldn't move, unable to say anything.

Briggs finally swore, reached into his pocket and grabbed out his cell phone. He pointed to her parents. "Move and you will regret it."

They didn't and neither did Rynn. This wasn't at all what she was expecting to find here. When she followed the familiar scent, she never in a million years thought her parents would be at the end of her search. Had she known, she wasn't sure if she would have come here to see this.

Briggs sauntered off, pacing, while his angered and narrowed eyes stayed glued on her parents. He had a short conversation, then ended the call, and placed the phone back into his pocket. When he approached again, his tension hadn't subsided. Still, no one said anything. Her parents watched her and Rynn stared back.

What could be said? She missed them, hated them—either of those felt right.

Suddenly, tires screeched and she glanced behind her to see Dante stepping out of the SUV. Horror swept through her. She turned back to Briggs. "You can't hurt them."

Briggs looked at her in the most ridiculous way. "Do you think I would hurt them with you here to witness it, love?"

She shrugged. It was an obvious assumption. What else could she expect from these creatures of the moon? She'd seen them kill without any remorse. But this was Briggs, he

wouldn't do anything to harm her or her parents. Even if his eyes suggested he wished he could do just that.

Dante joined them, gave her parents an once-over and grimaced. "These are your parents?" he asked Rynn.

She nodded, horrified. These people produced her and they belonged in the sewer. Shame and embarrassment heated her blood.

"Wouldn't have thought that." Dante patted her shoulder, gave a kind smile. "You've done well, girl." He looked back to her parents. "To come from this and be who you are," He rubbed her back. "You've done very well."

She smiled at his attempt to make her feel better. It didn't really work. She could melt away from existence and never come back. It was one thing to know what her parents were, but quite another to have friends witness just how bad it really was.

Briggs approached Warwick and gave a commanding nod. "Arms out, wanker." When Warwick didn't comply, Briggs continued, "Either you put them out or I will make you." He arched a brow. "Your choice."

"Are you arresting us?" Tarina cried.

Her tears had no effect on Rynn. How many tears had she cried over these two? Thousands. Nope, she wasn't about to give them sympathy.

Dante left Rynn's side and stepped toward Tarina. "You deserve worse than that. Get your arms up."

Immediately, Tarina complied and Warwick followed.

After a search, Briggs and Dante discovered heroin in her father's pocket, wrapped in tinfoil. Rynn almost vomited. That was all they had on them. Their only possession was drugs. They were worse than ever. At least the last she knew, which was sometime around her sixth birthday, they still had an apartment. Pops wouldn't allow her to see them after that. She now knew first-hand, exactly what her grandfather wanted to protect her from.

Briggs opened the little foil package and began to sprinkle it on the ground.

"No," Tarina and Warwick screamed in unison and dropped to the ground to run their hands along the dirty pavement.

Rynn turned away, afraid they'd start licking the ground—they were that pathetic. Briggs and Dante pulled them to their feet and dragged them to the SUV.

"Where are you taking us?" Warwick shouted.

"You don't get to ask questions." Briggs opened the car door. "Get in, sit the hell down, and do not speak another word." Briggs climbed in beside them, and Rynn took a seat in the front next to Dante.

The ride was a quiet one. No one said a word, and she still hadn't figured out where they were headed. It took everything in her not to turn around hearing her mother's sobs. She wouldn't feel bad for her. Rynn stared at her hands the entire drive.

When the car finally stopped, she raised her head to see a sign, *On Belay House*. The simple brown brick building with flowers decorating the front was a building Rynn had seen before. A drug rehab.

Briggs opened the door, jumped out and held it open for them. "Get out." Her parents did as he asked, but both cried. Rynn joined them outside to see Briggs had them pushed up against the car, held both the shirts fisted in his hands. "You're going to go in there and clean yourselves up."

Warwick glanced at Rynn. The pain and agony in his eyes was far worse than she remembered. As strong as she was trying to be, it just wouldn't hold. Before she knew it, she was weakening.

At the same moment, Briggs slammed her father hard against the SUV. "I should beat the pain on your face right off. Do you know the pain you have caused her? Is there anything about you that is unselfish? Can you see the pain in her eyes?"

Warwick nodded through the tears. "Yes, I do."

Briggs didn't waver, his rage poured through their bond and caused Rynn's stomach to tighten from the force of it. "If it was my choice, I would kill you where you stand. I would rip into you for every tear she ever shed."

Warwick gave him a speculative glare. "Who are you to her anyway?"

"Her husband."

"You got married?" Tarina whispered. "We didn't know."

"How would you know?" Briggs growled. "You've been strung out and living like rats. How do you know anything that has happened to her?"

Tarina's sobs grew heavier.

The last strands of Rynn's strength waned as she listened to her mother's pain. She wanted to hug her, tell them she forgave both of them and understood. She stepped forward, only to stop in her tracks when Briggs growled and snapped his gaze to her. She swore she even saw bared teeth.

"Do not even think of it, love. These two do not deserve your kindness. They don't deserve your forgiveness when they have done nothing to earn it."

She stood frozen. His tone and look had stopped her. It was more than just a word thing, it was a wolf thing. He was an Alpha male—her Alpha, and that clipped tone to his words commanded her to respond instantly. The power of it washed over her, and it took everything in her not to lie down before him. Might be a wolf thing to submit, but she'd fight against that instinct.

Briggs' gaze fell back onto her parents and he leaned in close. "Now you listen here, you're going into that building, you're going to suffer through the withdrawals, and clean yourselves up to get well. If you don't, I will hunt you down. When I find you, you will wish I hadn't."

He cocked his head. "Do you believe any of what I'm telling is not the truth?" Her parents said nothing. Briggs leaned in closer came nose-to-nose with her father. "I will do anything for her and having you in this state is not good for her. If you choose not to get well, you will leave me no choice. At that point, she will be free from you. There is only one sure way to do that. Now again I ask, do you believe me?"

Rynn did.

Both her parents visibly gulped. They were scared and why shouldn't they be. Briggs looked pretty damn scary right now. Rynn had never seen him like this, he was always so soft, sweet, kind—this was a whole other side to him. Through their bond, she felt his revulsion and anger at her parents but also the deep love he had for her. While she had started to weaken moments ago and she should be angry with him for stopping her, she knew he was only trying to protect her. Briggs loved her unconditionally. Her own parents had never done that. Rynn's devotion would always remain with her husband.

After a moment, her parents nodded.

Briggs glanced at Rynn, his eyes barely even saw her, anger within them so deep.

“Stay with Dante.” With that, he dragged her parents with him toward the building. The second they cleared the door, Rynn gasped. She stumbled back, but Dante caught her.

“All right there?” he asked.

Words were stuck in her throat.

Dante pulled her into the backseat where her mother had just been, and the second she sat, the world spun. She bolted from the car and threw up in a potted plant in front of the building.

Her body was sickened from the sight of them in such filth, the pain in their eyes, but more so, the reminder of her past.

She retched continuously until her sides were sore. As her stomach heaved for the last time, a hand ran along her back. She wiped her mouth and looked up. “Better?”

Briggs asked, no hint of his anger remained in his gaze.

She nodded, wiped the tears away that streaked her cheeks from vomiting. “I think so.”

Briggs wrapped an arm around her waist, nearly carrying her to car. He helped her into the backseat and slid in beside her. He gave Dante a nod after he closed the door, and again, they were driving down the street. Rynn attempted to reconcile what had taken place. It all happened so quick.

“Are they...” she started.

“They’re in good hands. The Doc will be in contact with us weekly to keep us updated. We won’t get the first one for at least two weeks.”

That didn’t settle her. “You’re sure they’re...”

Briggs interrupted her with a pat on the thigh. “They’re fine, love. This place is nicer than they deserve. If it were my choice, I would’ve brought them home, strapped them to the bed and made them suffer through the withdrawals that way. The pain would be good for them.”

Dante gave a sharp nod from the front seat.

She took a few minutes to process it. A nagging thought wouldn’t leave her mind. She glanced over at him to find him already watching her. “You wouldn’t really have killed them?”

“I meant what I told them.” He brushed his hand along her cheek. “I would have killed them where they stood, if you had not been with me.”

She backed away, horrified by his admission. “What?”

“They have hurt you.” He took her hand, pulled a little so that she was close to him again. “That does not sit well with me.”

Okay, that was sweet and all. He was being protective, she could understand that, but he didn’t understand the disease. “You’re being hard on them. They can’t help it.”

Briggs snorted and glanced out the side window. “In your eyes, darlin’. Only in your eyes.”

Chapter Thirteen

Back at the house, Valor gave Rynn a knowing look, his lips lightly arched up. “Since all seems well, I take it you didn’t shift?”

Briggs wondered what his speculative gaze was about. Once he pondered it for a few moments, he understood. It surprised him he hadn’t thought of it.

Rynn had stayed in control of her wolf even when she became distressed. The control she looked for, she had found.

Her eyes were wide and shock filled her beautiful gaze, her silver eyes twinkled at him. “I didn’t shift.”

He kissed her cheek, more than proud of her. For him, it ran deeper than her just gaining control, it meant she accepted this new life of hers. That pleased him most. Her wolf settled within her. “You’ve done it, darlin’.”

Valor gave a firm nod, appeared just as happy with her accomplishments. “When this is done, Briggs can take you to see your Grandfather—your control is there and there is no need for you to stay away any longer.”

Rynn’s face completely lit up with happiness, everything about her glowed. Warmth filled Briggs. Her Grandfather is just the type of man he wanted her to associate with—kind and loving. Not those two fuckers who were supposed to be her parents. Those two, he could have lived without. If he thought Rynn would forgive him, he would have done just as he said—rid her forever from the likes of them. But he knew she wouldn’t understand his vengeance. Therefore, he took the only alternative he had—to get them well. He only hoped they proved to be worth it. Those hopes weren’t high.

“We must join the others.” Valor tilted his head toward the living room. “Rainer has called for Cashton from his pack to join us in hopes he can shed some light here.”

Briggs nodded, took Rynn’s hand and led her down the hall. The second they cleared the entranceway into the living room, pure fright engulfed him. His breath inhaled deep. His gaze snapped to Rynn’s, searched for understanding.

As suspected, her gaze was frozen in fear. He followed her gaze to see she was looking at the man on the couch, who Briggs could only assume was Cashton. He couldn’t understand her fear though.

Cashton looked as most wolves did, especially ones from Rainer’s pack. Around his own age, properly dressed, dark short haircut, yet lacked a style. Of course, he looked like he needed a shave, a shadow surrounded his jaw line, but his dark eyes were kind. She should not fear him.

Needing answers, he looked back to her, nudged her arm. “What is wrong, Rynn?”

Her reaction only deepened in intensity. Her body shook, tears began to fall down her cheeks. Briggs could take no more. He grasped her arm and gave her a shake. “Tell me, now.”

Without looking at him, she whispered, “It’s him.”

Rage roared through Briggs. Those two words made him understand completely and his sense of control vanished in a need to kill. He removed his hands from Rynn, turned toward the guy on the couch who gave him a curious look. In one powerful move, Briggs held Cashton by the throat as he pinned him against the wall.

“What...” the guy started, but Briggs’ tight hold didn’t allow any more words to come.

“Rynn, what has Cashton done?” Valor’s voice was sharp and commanding.

“That’s him,” Rynn squeaked. “The guy who attacked me.”

Briggs was too focused on the wolf in front of him to see her expression, but he heard and felt her pain. That was enough to slaughter this wolf. He had enough sense to realize something was wrong, but his rage wouldn’t allow him to make sense out of it. All he wanted was this wolf’s heart in his hand.

“What is this about?” Rainer demanded.

He wasn’t surprised to see that this wolf’s Alpha had come to his aid. It didn’t matter. If he had to kill him too, then so be it. “This wolf is on his last life that’s what.” he growled, tightened his hand around the wolf’s throat.

“What has Cashton done?” Rainer demanded.

“It can’t be him. Briggs, let him go.” When Briggs didn’t comply, Valor growled, deep and low. “Now.”

Briggs gritted his teeth, annoyed. The command was clear and he couldn’t disobey it. His mind clearing, Briggs realized Valor made a valid point, it couldn’t be him. Resolved, he let Cashton drop to the floor, blue faced and gasping for breath.

“What the fuck was that for?” Cashton shouted, pushed himself up off the floor. “I am here to help, asshole.”

Hearing that didn’t calm him. If Valor hadn’t interjected, he doubted the man would still be alive.

“This cannot be him,” Valor told Rynn. “The wolf that attacked you is dead.”

“It’s him. I swear it is,” She retorted, tears in her voice. “I wouldn’t forget his face.”

“I’m a twin,” Cashton said, gave his neck a good rub with his hand. “And my brother, Dathan, is dead. You must be talking of him.”

The fear that engulfed Rynn stayed with her, but sadness began to steal all and every emotion in her body. She began to sink to her knees, but as she did, Briggs caught her in his arms.

Her body trembled and he couldn’t even begin to imagine what facing this would be like for her. He had an idea since he sensed her troubled emotions, but still, he wasn’t quite sure he’d ever understand.

Everyone remained silent while Rynn cried. Of course, they’d all realize how horrible this would be for her. For that alone, Briggs could kill Cashton because he had the same face as her attacker. Regardless that it wasn’t him, she shouldn’t have the reminder. Feeling her heartbreak and pain as she just barely hung onto reality, he was on the verge of snapping.

Briggs held her tight and waited—gave her time to accept this. Rynn eventually quieted, but stayed in Briggs’ arms and never once looked back up. Instead, her eyes stayed on Valor.

“What did Dathan do?” Cashton asked, his tone gentle. “Judging by this reaction, it was something bad.”

Valor glanced at Rynn questioning. His eyes asked permission to talk about it. She gave him the nod to go ahead and he looked to Cashton. “Your brother attacked our Rynn here when she was human, then raped and turned her.”

Cashton’s eyes went wide, his face paled until nothing was left but pasty white skin.

“He did what?”

“You heard it.” Briggs growled, a sound that came out exactly as he meant it, a serious threat. “Do not make him repeat it.” His rage still boiled.

Rynn on the other hand calmed, steadied her emotions. She backed away from Briggs’ arms and glanced at Cashton. “Sorry...”

Briggs’ deep growl interrupted her. “Do. Not. Apologize.”

She sighed. “He’s not at fault here.” She nodded toward Cashton. “He’s not him. He can’t help that his twin did this.”

“You were upset,” Briggs retorted, his jaw clenched. “He was the cause of that. That alone is reason to be angered.”

Rynn gave him an appreciative smile, brushed her hand along his tight jaw. “I’m fine now.”

Briggs let out a deep breath. With the release of her emotions, plus the calm that lay in her smile, his mind relaxed.

He’d almost killed a man who he knew had no part in her attack. At the time, his rage couldn’t see past the heat egging him on to hurt anyone who caused Rynn pain. “You’re bringing out the Alpha in me.” He gave his head a shake to clear the rest of the anger within him. “I’m not used to feeling this.”

Valor gave him a slap on the back and wore a shit-eating grin. “It’s not uncommon for a newly mated Alpha to be consumed by the need to protect his mate.” He slapped him again, harder this time and laughed. “I am enjoying this side of you, Briggs.”

Briggs snorted. “Glad to amuse you, boss.”

He wasn’t sure he felt the same. Of course, he wanted to protect Rynn, but he wanted his wits about him too. Losing his mind in anger would not keep her safe. Valor taught him that strength would only take you so far. It was a lesson he believed in. One, he needed to learn again it would seem.

Cashton stayed quiet, but then, looked up at Rynn with soft eyes. “Did he really do *that* to you?”

She nodded but said nothing. The simple gesture, the truth in her eyes—no one could debate her honesty.

Cashton’s expression tightened, his eyes fell to the floor as he took a seat on the couch. “I would apologize, but that wouldn’t be enough I fear.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “It’s good he is gone then, if this is what became of him.”

Briggs nodded in total agreement.

Rynn approached Cashton before Briggs could stop her. She knelt beside him and he raised his head, eyes full of tears. “It wasn’t really his fault. He wasn’t himself.”

Briggs growled again, but she ignored him and a sense of calmness spread through him. She needed to do this, for reasons he wasn’t quite sure. Resolved in her needs, he forced himself to remain mute.

Cashton wiped his tears, his expression curious. “What do you mean, it wasn’t his fault?”

Briggs was glad Valor stepped in to answer. “From what we’ve learned from the Otherworld, a rebellion in the Underworld led to Black Magic Witches who were bewitching wolves to kill human women. They were stealing their virginity to give a pure strength to their magic. Dathan was one of the wolves they took.”

“That is unbelievable,” Nera exhaled.

“Believe it,” Rynn retorted, her voice carried no emotion.

Briggs suspected from all she’d been through these past few days, that event must have felt like a lifetime ago now. He couldn’t disagree, the events that led to finding his mate he couldn’t regret, but reliving it was nothing he wanted to do.

Cashton sobbed a little, drawing Briggs away from his thoughts. “This all makes sense now. The brother I knew would never have done this to you.” He glanced at Rainer, imploring. “You knew Dathan, he would never have done this.”

Briggs followed his gaze to Rainer’s sad eyes. “You are right, Dathan was a good soul. It was hard to believe he would have done such a thing without the Black Magic.” His gaze fell to Rynn’s. “Never would he have harmed you.”

Rynn studied him a moment. Briggs would have given every dollar he had to read her mind. Where had her thoughts taken her? He could feel her strength build as the minutes passed. A moment later, determination sped through him. She got up from her knees and took a seat beside Cashton on the couch. “Can you tell me about him?”

Cashton looked taken aback. “You want me to tell you about the man who assaulted you?”

He wasn’t the only one surprised, Briggs was floored. What did she want to know about the man who raped her?

“No.” She shook her head, shuddered. “I want to know about the man that was stolen that night.”

Cashton glanced at Briggs, asking for permission. Briggs still hadn’t reconciled all this and what it was exactly that she needed for this conversation, but he wouldn’t question her motives. Instead, he took a seat next to her on the floor, held her hand and nodded at Cashton.

“He was a pain the ass.” Cashton laughed softly. “But he was kind and gentle. We grew up like any wolf that lived in Rainer’s Pack. Raised by two wonderful parents, educated, and had begun to settle into our careers. But just last year, Dathan started to get restless.” He winked. “We both like adventure.”

Hearing that didn’t surprise Briggs considering the trouble Cashton had been in lately and why he was here sitting on the couch.

“With Rainer’s consent, Dathan left the pack. He wanted to seek and discover the world. He always said there was more to life than living in Great Falls.”

“You didn’t feel the same?” Rynn asked.

Cashton shook his head. “I’m loyal to Rainer. My home is with him.”

Rainer acknowledged his loyalty with a firm nod.

Cashton drew in a deep breath. “Dathan kept in contact—always phoned to tell us of his adventures. He loved life. Loved living dangerously and on the edge, and traveled around the world to see all that it offered. He backpacked in Asia, sailed across the Mediterranean sea—just enjoyed life.”

Briggs’ promise to remain silent deflated. He was curious. “How did he end up in back in Plymouth?”

Cashton shrugged. “The last conversation I had with him, he said he returned to the United States and making his way across it, back home to Great Falls.” His face fell desolate. “It was four days after that call when I knew he was dead.”

Surprise filtered through their bond, Rynn’s expression equaled it. “How did you know that?”

“We’re twins,” Cashton answered. “We shared a deep connection. It was strange, really. Everything just felt wrong. I was so unsettled that whole day. Worried, although, I didn’t know why, except that he was somehow involved. I tried to call him but he didn’t answer his phone. I finally went to bed, but later that night, I awoke and knew he was dead.”

“You felt it?” Rynn asked, her tone hushed with despair.

Cashton inclined his head. “The bond was broken—gone.” His eyes welled up and his lip quivered as he looked away. “Only one thing could do that.”

Rynn sighed deeply, a rush of understanding and acceptance rose within Briggs’ soul. “For the first time, I’m discovering a reason for all this.” She reached out to Cashton, took his hand, and he glanced at her.

“It had nothing to do with me, and Dathan sounded full of spirit and heart—none of the cruelty I thought he was. This had nothing to do with him either. It had everything to do with the Underworld, the witches that caused this. They’re who should suffer because of it and I’m only too glad that they got what they deserved.”

Briggs had sensed her acceptance long before she spoke. Still, to hear it from her mouth made him happy. More than that, to feel the last tenors of guilt, hate and loss of control disappear inside her, elated him. He wrapped an arm around her and hugged tight. “Gives you peace, love?”

“To finally accept it, understand it, to know who is to really blame,” She smiled and gave a little nod. “It’s a good thing.” She glanced at Cashton.

“That night wasn’t only the worst night for me. It was for you too. And I am sorry for that.”

Cashton snapped his head up, astonishment flashed across his face. “You’re trying to console me?”

She shrugged, her cheeks flushed and her gaze bore nothing but the truth she felt deep in her soul. “We both lost something that night.”

Cashton sat for a moment, examined her, then glanced to Briggs in all serious. “You’ve got one hell of a mate here, Briggs.”

That he had. A woman who truly didn’t know the level of kindness she beheld. One that others aspired to, that is not forced or needy, but simply born within a soul.

“Aye, I do.”

Chapter Fourteen

After good food and a full nights rest, it was back to business. Cashton informed them of the location he'd last seen Kali in Plymouth. The plan was to head there. Before they left, though, Echo asked to speak to Rynn alone.

Rynn just prayed it wasn't going to be another awkward sex talk.

They sat outside, off to the left side of the house in chairs that surrounded the oval-shaped pool. Rynn watched the others, including Briggs, huddle together by the cars in the driveway.

"Nera told me what happened to you," Echo said, drawing Rynn's gaze to hers.

Not a big surprise there. "I don't want pity," she said in a sharp tone.

Echo glanced down to her hands. "Of course you don't." But when she lifted her gaze to Rynn's again that's all that could be seen in her eyes. "I guess it makes sense now why Briggs hadn't claimed you." She let out a loud aggravated snort. "It sickens me to know that because of Tiago the claim had to be forced." Rynn scowled. Echo shook her head. "No, I don't mean he forced you—I mean Briggs couldn't wait any longer, and you didn't have the time to choose."

Normally pity annoyed Rynn, but coming from Echo, it was just sweet. She reached forward and grabbed Echo's hands. "I'm not sure if I would've ever been ready. Truthfully, getting a little push was actually a good thing."

"So, it didn't remind you..." Echo began.

Rynn interjected. "No. It didn't remind me of Dathan. Briggs was so gentle, loving. Absolutely nothing of what I experienced that night."

Echo seemed reassured by that, nonetheless still appeared so very sad. "Nera tells me that his family will be completely heartbroken to hear of this."

"Then, tell her not to say anything to them," Rynn demanded.

Echo's brows rose nearly to her hairline. "You want her to keep this from them?"

Rynn nodded without hesitation. "Let them remember who he really was. It wasn't Dathan that night. He was consumed by Black Magic and wasn't in control of his actions. Don't let that be their last memory of him."

Echo gave a funny smile, leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. "By knowing you only this short time, I can truly say that I believe you're not told enough that you are undeniably special. Your heart is forgiving. Wolves do not possess this as a natural trait—especially Alpha's."

The thought was so absurd, she couldn't help but ask. "What would most of them do?"

Echo's look became very serious. "Slaughter Cashton where he stood, and maybe, even his family if they were angered enough."

Rynn shook her head, incredulous. "I'm beginning to think Isla is right. This wolf world needs some serious adjustments." What a bunch of rabid animals! Rynn went to stand, but Echo pulled her back down.

"I want you know that you *do* have friends here within the wolf packs and I am one of them," she blushed, "if you would grant me the right."

Hadn't this all taken a wild turn? Rynn thought she'd be the one begging for

friendships. Echo didn't even need to ask, she already was. "You've been nothing but gracious to me." She smiled. "That in itself makes you my friend."

Echo's grin was full of warmth, then she glanced at the others—Nera especially. "Just give them time to come around and accept you."

"I'm not so sure I want them to accept me," Rynn retorted. "The feeling is mutual."

"That a girl." Echo laughed, a loud bark of laughter that ran through the skies. "Stand strong against them." Taking Rynn by surprise, Echo grabbed her and hugged her tight. "I'm so very sorry what happened to you that night." When she released Rynn, tears rimmed her eyes. "It's so wonderful you have Briggs, you could not have found yourself a better mate."

Rynn glanced over to him. As expected, he watched them intently. Although, he appeared more intrigued than inquisitive "I know."

Echo stood, pulled her up to stand in front of her and gave her a look over. "Are you okay then, with everything?"

"I'm not sure I will ever be okay with it," she answered, honestly. "It happened. Nothing I can do will ever change that. At least, I have a reason for it all. Some victims don't ever have that closure."

"Only you, Rynn, would give the answer you just did." Echo leaned forward and kissed her cheek.

Now, Rynn welled up. It'd been so long—so very long since she had such kindness around her—such love. After Pops was admitted into long-term care, she trudged on alone, fought to keep going. Now her life was one she always daydreamed about—surrounded by love.

"Echo," Sayer's sudden shout snapped her out of her happy moment. "Let's go."

Echo rolled her eyes. "Men."

Rynn laughed, and the two made their way quickly toward the others. Once there, Briggs wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her in tight against him. Nothing needed to be said, he knew she was all right with whatever was said. If anything, he looked touched.

Echo gave Briggs a good pat on his cheek. "Good man." She made her way toward Sayer who stood just outside of the house.

Rynn sank against Briggs, truly happy. Things were good. Just as that feeling settled, another one surfaced. His closeness to her, the scent of him, the way his hand trailed down her arm, made her gasp. The funny moon business hadn't rescinded, if anything, she thought it had grown. She immediately tore herself from Briggs' arms.

He laughed loudly.

"You stay over there," she told him. She had to get a hold of herself. This was insane!

They'd just done the deed hours ago but her body seemed to forget that fact.

"Briggs, can I see you over here for a moment?" Danika called out to him. Briggs nodded and grinned at Rynn, before he walked away.

Rynn gave her body a shake, demanding it return to her normal hormone levels and walked toward the cars. She took a deep breath to settle the arousal that made her heart thump against her chest when a scent drifted through the air. A strange scent.

She inhaled again to understand it. It smelled chemical based—acidic even. She raised her head to the sky, closed her eyes and breathed deep. The scent multiplied, filled

her senses to a point where she doubted even a sneeze would clear it.

Following the scent in the air, she searched it out until she found the cause. When it became too strong, her eyes watered. She opened her eyes to see that Nera was about to open the door to the SUV. Something was very wrong. Her instincts screamed at her to run. Why, she had no idea. Going with her gut, she charged forward toward Nera.

A second later, like a bull-dozer, she collided with Nera. Since the SUV was not parked far from the pool, that's exactly where they went, her wolf-strength catapulted through the air. Nera went headfirst with Rynn close behind her as they landed in the cool water.

As Rynn held her breath, a wave of orange and a loud bang blasted above the surface. Before Rynn could even process what had just happened, or swim back up, a hand latched onto her arm and yanked her. She hit the air, gasped for a much needed breath, and coughed up water. Briggs pulled her out of the pool, and when her senses came back to her, she saw Rainer doing the same to Nera.

"All right, love?" Briggs asked, worriedly.

Rynn nodded, coughed a few more times.

Briggs helped her to sit up, gave her back a couple good pats. As her lungs cleared, her gaze caught sight of the SUV and the rapid fire that engulfed it.

"It exploded?" Rynn's voice came out scratchy. "What happened?"

Suddenly, Valor dropped down beside her, grabbed both her arms and forced her gaze to his. "How did you know that was going to happen?"

She shook her head, shocked herself. "Something smelled funny." She coughed a few more times. "I just acted. My instincts said run, so I did. I didn't think about."

Briggs glanced at Valor and gave him a knowing smile. "She's a blue blood."

"Apparently so." Valor's satisfied and amused tone was enough to tell Rynn whatever they were talking about made him happy. The joyous expression on his face was also a given.

She glanced at her wrists. Nothing looked abnormal. "I'm a what?"

Briggs chuckled, and tilted her gaze back up to his. "It's a power you hold within your blood. Female wolves that have extra gifts are known as blue bloods. It seems you have an enhanced sense of smell that is beginning to develop."

Rynn would have thought more of that, argued that this was all ridiculous and anyone could have smelled that, a soft whisper interrupted her thoughts. "You saved me." Rynn glanced up at Nera. "You saved me...after what I've...how I've..."

Before Rynn could tell her she hadn't thought it about, it strictly happened on instinct, Briggs had her up in his arms and carried her into the house.

After a couple more coughing fits to get the remaining water out of her lungs, she was dry, dressed, and rested in the living room with a steaming hot tea in hand, as she sat wrapped in a blanket on the couch.

Outside, firemen worked hard on the fire and the police investigated the attempted murder. She still tried to wrap her head around the idea that werewolves and all of the supernatural creatures were infiltrated within all of the government systems—including the police. After some contemplation, she realized it didn't involve her, so why bother thinking of it. She had enough on her plate than to consider the ins and outs of stuff that didn't impact her life directly.

A throat cleared behind her and drew her gaze away from the window. Rainer stood

just in the entranceway. “Doing better?”

She nodded. “Much.” Her voice still sounded rough, but at least the burn in her throat subsided and her nose no longer felt cleansed with bleach.

Rainer stepped forward until he stood just before her, then knelt down in front of her. “What do you need?” he asked.

Okay, this was strange. She waited for him to say something—do something. He did nothing. “Um, I don’t need anything.” She raised her cup. “This is perfect.”

“No that is not what I meant. I owe you for saving Nera’s life and I will pay you for your help.” Rainer gave her an unwavering stare. “What do you want?”

“What do I want?” He lost her the moment he opened his mouth. Maybe it was the water lodged into her brain or maybe she suffered brain damage. Nothing made any sense. “Like what?”

“Anything,” he implored. “Whatever you need, I will get it for you.”

She took a sip of her tea, studied him. Wolves are strange creatures. You save a life, you get a gift—bizarre. Sure, deep down it crossed her mind to say a pretty shiny Benz, but that was too *gold-digger* for her. After long moment, she acquiesced. “A thank you will do.”

He shook his head, resumed the same steady look. “That will not repay my debt.”

“You don’t owe me anything,” she retorted. “Trust me, I’m no hero here. If I had thought that would have happened, I never would have done it. I would’ve been too scared to act.”

She was pretty sure she wouldn’t have risked her life for Nera, but why voice that aloud. “You don’t owe me anything. I just reacted, that’s all it was.”

Rainer brows furrowed, a vein in the center of his head began to bulge. “It’s the way of wolves to repay you. By your refusal it is an insult to me.”

The wolf way was so stupid at times. There was not getting out of this. “So, you have to get me something and that will make you happy. Is that what I am hearing?”

He nodded.

She pondered that, so much to choose. What could get him off her back? Only after a moment or so, she knew, and thrilled with the idea. “I’ll take a *Hunka Chunka Burnin’ Fudge* sundae from *Coldstone Creamery*.”

His eyes widened. If she’d mistaken his appalled look before, she couldn’t have now. “You want a sundae for saving my mate’s life?”

“Hmm...” she all but purred, “It’s my favorite and it’s been years since I’ve had it. The ice cream shop isn’t far from here so you would be back in a jiffy.”

Briggs’ laugh came from the doorway. Rynn glanced at him as he said, “A sundae?” He continued to shake his head in laughter.

“Wait till you try it, then you’ll understand,” she replied. Wait, that meant she had to share, she immediately regretted those words.

Rainer stood, all business. “I will go and get it for you now.” In the blink of an eye, he was gone.

Her excitement nearly had her bouncing in her seat. *Yum! Yum!* Her mouth watered in anticipation.

Briggs knelt in front of her and wrapped his arms around her waist. “Of all the things you could ask for, you request ice cream.”

“He wouldn’t take a thank you for an answer,” she shrugged, “So, it was a good

alternative.”

Briggs’ grin remained even if his laughter ceased. He leaned in, pulled her close to him and kissed the top of her head. “Are you doing all right, love?”

She nodded against his chest. “Just shocked I think.” Of course, that might be putting it lightly. The adrenaline still rushed through her blood and caused her arms to tremble slightly and her heart to pound. “Do they know what happened?”

“No.” He sighed. “Nera is only lucky your scent has grown more sensitive. If not, we’d be picking pieces of her up from the front lawn.”

“Yuck!”

Briggs laughed softly, leaned back to look at her. “You did well, darlin’.”

The pride shone off his face, and she couldn’t deny it didn’t feel nice. Still though, she was too surprised to feel pride, and furthermore, didn’t believe she deserved it. Nonetheless, her new gift had her stunned. “I can’t believe I smelled that.”

Briggs arched a brow and added strength to the proud look. “Your scent is strong.” His look turned incredulous. “Valor hadn’t even caught the scent.”

Wow, that comparison knocked her off her axle. She hadn’t really even considered that. Could her new gift give her abilities that even Valor didn’t have? She found that hard to believe.

Whatever it is, it’s a blessing. As much as Rynn would have liked to see Nera blasted into a million pieces, she just was not that cruel. Saving her felt right.

Feeling all warm and cuddly, she snuggled back into Briggs and he reciprocated by tightening his arms around her. If only they could stay like this for hours, but no, they had this insane situation to deal with. “Looks like whoever has Kali knows where we are staying.”

Briggs sighed. Maybe she wasn’t the only that needed comfort. “And they’re going to great lengths to not have her found.”

“I’d say.” Rynn laughed at the obvious. “To blow up Nera’s car...”

Briggs cut her off. “Not Nera’s.”

She leaned back a little, looked up at him. “What?”

“It wasn’t Nera’s car.” He snuggled her back into him, held the back of her head so she stay against him. “It was Dante’s. They were coming with us.” Before she could say a word about it, he sighed again, deeply. “I believe it best that you go back to Utah, darlin’.”

Her gaze met his instantly. “You’re not suggesting that I leave you?” It surprised her that it wasn’t fear she felt. When he’d suggested a thing before, she was so frightened at the idea of it. Not now, the only thing she felt was pissed off.

He brushed a finger across her cheek, gave her a classic Briggs reassuring glance. “It’s not safe for you here.”

She pushed away from him and poked his chest with her finger. “I. Am. Not. Leaving. You. Briggs.”

He looked as if he was about to speak and she nailed him with a look that said he’d die if he did. Slowly, a smile spread across his face.

If steam shot out of her ears, she wouldn’t have been surprised. Why is he enjoying himself? “This is so *not* funny.”

He didn’t answer. Instead, he pulled her toward him and took her into one of his *what’s my name* again kisses. When he tore his mouth from hers, her entire body

trembled and not from adrenaline.

“All right, love.” He gave her a kiss on the tip of her nose. “Just stay close to me, always.”

She nodded. The big lug thought he could send her away. The whole Alpha bit seemed natural to him but he better get used to disappointment because it'd never work.

Right then, Rainer walked back through the door, carrying the waffle cone bowl with the rim surrounded by milk chocolate, ice cream, brownies, nuts and hot fudge. Drool escaped the corner of her mouth. She pushed Briggs away and he laughed as he moved aside. “Yum, yum, yum—oooohhh...that looks good.”

Rainer looked annoyed as he walked toward her. “As you requested, here is my debt to you. Do you accept it?”

Rynn's grabby hands reached out. “Gimme, gimme, gimme.”

Chapter Fifteen

“We need to head off,” Valor said from the doorway. The earlier incident couldn’t slow them down, they had a good lead with the location they’d been given and it had to be followed. “Are you done here?” His eyes twinkled at sight of Rynn with her sundae.

She took her last spoonful, licked her lips and nodded. “Yeah, I’m done.”

Briggs sat, amused as he watched her experience ice cream orgasm. He might have been jealous of the little moans, if he didn’t have the ability to make her moan louder. His little wolf loved food and he found the trait simply adorable.

“Good,” Valor smiled.

Briggs reached for the bowl in her hands. As he pulled, Rynn didn’t let go. He laughed. “Not done then?”

She smiled, abashed. “Sorry.” She grabbed the spoon again, which rested in the empty bowl. “There’s just some chocolate there.” She scrapped the bowl dry. After a finally lick, she placed it on the table. “Okay, I’m done now.”

Briggs placed the bowl on the table, took her hand as they stood and they walked out of the room. “Any progress?” he asked Valor.

He shook his head. “None.” Then, he gave them a curious look. “Something is not adding up here. I cannot figure out how they placed the bomb on the car without my scenting them here?”

Briggs hadn’t even considered that, but Valor was right. He should have scented other wolves on the property. Briggs frowned, stuck in the thought himself and concluded there was only one assumption. “Dante has been around town. Maybe he was being followed.”

Valor pondered that for a moment, then he’s expression turned agreeable. “I suppose that is possible.” He gave Briggs a glance he’d seen a thousand times. “For the life of me, I cannot comprehend who would do this. Why they would be so intent on keeping Kali hidden?”

Briggs snorted. “Someone with a death wish.”

“Either there is more going on here that Hendrix hasn’t told us or Kali has gotten herself into some serious trouble.” Not waiting for a response, Valor spun on his heels and headed toward the front door.

Briggs and Rynn followed. None of it made sense to him either. He suspected the answer would only be found when Kali was. As they exited the house, the others waited by the cars. Dante’s SUV, now gone, pleased Briggs. There was no need to have a visual memory of his mate nearly killed by the explosion.

Once spotted, Echo raced forward and wrapped her arms around Rynn in a fierce hug. “That was something brave on your part.”

Rynn patted her back, embarrassment not only showed on her face, but flew through their bond. “As I keep telling everyone, I just acted. It wasn’t a thought. If it had been, I would’ve run in the other direction.”

Echo backed away and kissed her cheek. “Still brave.” She looked Rynn over from her head to her toes and even spun her around once. “You’re not hurt at all, are you?”

Rynn smiled a glorious grin. “Better than okay, I just had the best ice cream known

to man.” She gave her belly a rub.

Echo laughed loudly. “Your request provided some good laughs around here.”

“Echo, nuff talkin’, woman,” Sayer shouted, from the car. “Let’s go.”

She rolled her eyes. “Briggs, take note. Never talk like that.”

Briggs chuckled, gave her a nod. Not like he needed to be told. He took Rynn’s hand again and led her to the new borrowed SUV.

She slid into the back and he joined her, just as she inhaled deep. “Mmmm, fresh air never smelled so good.”

An understatement. He’d had enough of bombs exploding and his mate being in danger. Just as he settled back in his seat, Dante drove off.

The SUV whipped through the rural roads of Plymouth until they stopped at a house located downtown. The voices of the shoppers drifted along the wind only a short distance away. In front of him, the two story home sat in a quiet neighborhood, but wasn’t anything to look at. Vinyl siding, worn shingles and cracked pavement. Made sense that whoever was doing the job that involved such apprehensible actions obviously needed the money.

Without pause, Valor lunged from the car and started up the drive. Quickly, Briggs did the same and looked back at Rynn. “Stay here until I come and get you.”

He didn’t wait for a response, he ran up behind Valor, just as he made it to the door. With a hard kick, the door flew open and he charged in. Only two men stood inside, shocked expressions on their faces. With more than enough Alphas here, the men didn’t hesitate and dropped to floor in submission.

Briggs poked his head back out the window and waved Rynn in. Immediately, she hopped out of the SUV and trotted toward him. “Is everything okay?” she asked.

He nodded.

She breached the doorway, the sense of fear that gripped her fled. The two men cowering on the floor were nothing to fear, and he sensed none of it from his mate. The one man was a skinny wimpy looking guy, if his employment involved computers, Briggs wouldn’t have been surprised. The other was a chubby guy, rough-looking, who obviously cared more for the X-box than he did for his own appearance.

Rynn glanced at Briggs, confused. “They’re not gorgeous?”

Not at all the reaction he expected. He didn’t know if he liked her looking at other men in that regard. In fact, he knew he didn’t. “And why are you asking that, love?” His tone came out as he intended, not happy.

She shrugged, smiled innocently. “It’s just—you’re all…” she pointed around to the other men in the room, “...very easy on the eyes, if you know what I’m saying.”

Briggs’ tension drifted away. She made a valid point and he had yet to explain this to her. “It’s because we’re all Alphas—bred from long lines of powerful wolves.” He winked. “They tend to carry the looks as well as the strengths.”

“Oh,” Rynn said softly.

When Briggs glanced back, Valor stood over the men, with no misunderstanding that if they moved they’d regret it.

Rynn took a long deep breath, then tension filled within her and his breath shuddered from the intensity of it. His gaze snapped to her, just as she said, “She’s been here.”

Hendrix rushed toward Rynn, grabbed her by the arms and turned her to face him. “You scent her?”

Briggs growled deep. If he wanted to keep his arms, he had one second, to get his hands off her.

Hendrix immediately let go and gave Briggs an apologetic look. He looked back to Rynn, gently. "Is she still here?"

Rynn shrugged. "How should I know? I do smell that peachy creamy scent of hers." She glanced at Briggs. "Do you smell that?"

He inhaled, all he smelled was a house that needed to be cleaned and old food. How could werewolves live in such a state? He suspected they'd grown used to it. It disgusted him. "No darlin', I can't."

Rynn looked at Valor. He shook his head.

Hendrix's eyes watered, if only for a moment. Quite quickly, he's face filled with rage as he turned his attention to the two men on the floor. "What have you done with my daughter?" he shouted. "Is she injured? Where is she?"

Fear rose on both of the men's face as understanding set in. "We don't know where she is," one of them said.

"You better hope like hell you can find her." Hendrix lunged for the guy. Sayer stepped forward and blocked his path.

"He is not lying to you."

Rynn nudged Briggs and he looked down to find her curious gaze. "How does he know that?"

He leaned down toward her, kept his gaze on the two men and whispered, "Alphas are bonded to their packs. Sayer would scent out a lie if he was telling it."

"Wow," she quipped. "That's kinda neat. It must suck being a teenage wolf, unable to tell a lie. Sure takes the fun out of the teenage years."

Briggs couldn't help himself, he smiled.

"Tell us what you know." Valor's commanding tone brought his focus back. The computer geek shrugged which sent his skinny shoulders to rise almost to his ears. "Not much of anything. We gave the girl and a group of guys a place to stay. A couple days ago the others did not return, and that's when Colbat left with the girl." He nodded toward Cashton. "He was one of them who stayed here."

So far, they were indeed being truthful. Identifying Cashton's involvement only proved that. Briggs could only assume the reasons this Colbat left, is because he suspected his friends were dead.

"What about the girl?" Valor asked. "Did she appear frightened?"

"Frightened?" The men exchanged a surprised look, then met Valor's gaze again. "Sorry, I think we're missing something here. The young girl that stayed with us was very comfortable, happy in fact. She didn't appear to be harmed in anyway if that is what you're insinuating."

Hendrix began pacing the room, glancing at the floor then to Valor, and the men on the ground. Finally, he stopped, fixed the guys with a hard look. "Who is this Colbat?"

Both men laughed. Not a smart move Briggs thought. Hendrix too, didn't approve. Rage burned in his eyes. Valor quickly stepped in. "It'd be wise to explain."

"Sorry, we don't mean to make light of the situation," the computer geek said. "But Colbat is from your pack."

Hendrix sucked in an angry breath that nearly rumbled along the floor with contempt. "My territory?"

The other man nodded and avoided Hendrix's eyes. "That's what he said, but he's not a friend of ours, he's Cashton's buddy."

When every pair of eyes landed on Cashton, he said, "We'd met a while back through Dathan. Just a short time ago, he contacted me, wanted to come to Minnesota and needed a place to crash. He asked if I knew anyone who could keep them hidden."

Dante snorted a thoroughly disgusted sound. "And you didn't ask hidden from what?"

"Sounded exciting." Cashton's voice fell with shame. "So, no I didn't ask questions."

Finding it a little coincidental, something nagging at Briggs. "Was there a reason Colbat had chosen Plymouth?"

Cashton shrugged slightly. "If he had a reason, he didn't say." He inclined his head toward the men on the floor. "Hoby and Lanien are pals from way back. I asked if they could shack up with them for a while."

Valor hummed a moment, then asked, "Did they look to be a couple?"

"No," gamer extraordinaire, Hoby said. "But one thing I can tell you is that Cobalt is mated, or so he said. He appeared to be more of a protector to her, if I had to say."

Valor's brows rose. "Protector?"

Briggs could understand his reaction. The deeper they got into this, the more peculiar it became. If Briggs had no sense of the meaning behind this before, he definitely didn't now.

Danika interrupted with a small cry. "Enough talking about this, they know nothing. We need to move on, find my baby." Her gaze landed on each of the Alphas, pleading, then looked back at Hoby and Lanien. "Do you know where they have gone now?"

Briggs stole a quick glance at Valor to see if he was going to stand for such an interruption. Normally, he wouldn't. Instead, of finding an angered Valor, he only looked intrigued. She did pose a good question. He figured that's why Valor tolerated the outburst.

"They never said," Hoby replied. "They left a couple days ago, said they needed to move on and appreciated that we put them up, even left a few extra bucks for their troubles."

Valor leaned toward them, all Alpha. "We have been attacked recently, more than once. Are you responsible for that?"

Both Hoby and Lanien glanced at each other with blatant confusion, then answered in unison, "Hell no."

Valor glanced at Sayer, who shook his head. He frowned, straightened up and met Cashton's gaze. "So, at the time, when you heard of the impending violence, you left?"

Cashton nodded. "I hadn't known at the time all the information regarding this. I was looking for a little adventure, is all. When Colbat told me that we were expected to kill wolves coming into the Minnesota territory, I booked it."

Briggs found that statement as ludicrous as he'd ever heard. "And they let you?" No wolf, Alpha or not, would release anyone if they knew they had goods on them.

"It wasn't their choice," Cashton answered. "When I heard of his plan, I left, just like that, and have been glancing over my shoulder ever since."

Valor appeared satisfied by his answer, looked at Hoby and Lanien. "Did they say anything useful while staying here?"

“Nah,” Lanien replied. “Honestly, they weren’t here much. The girl would go off on her own a lot.”

Rynn leaned against Briggs, her hip looked for support to carry her weight. He suspected she grew tired. It’d been a long couple of days and he could feel her tiredness. To aid her, he wrapped arm around her waist, pulled her closer. The moment he did, she gasped and her arousal wafted through the air.

Briggs looked down at her to find rosy cheeks and hooded eyes. God, she smelled luscious. Her arousal was full of heat and the scent across the air, rich and thick. He could spend an hour just letting the scent taunt him. The Alpha in him roared to see her squirm with need. The moon had given her reaction, but it did him too. He could hardly wait until tonight when he could spread her, taste her, and sink himself deep inside her.

Rynn took a step away, gave him a chiding look, and leaned against the wall for support.

Hendrix lowered his head and sighed. “What do we do now?”

“We keep looking,” Valor responded.

Danika took a few quick deep, unstable breaths. “I thought they would know...” Then, she sobbed. “Where is she?”

Hendrix wrapped his arms around his mate. “Quiet now, we will find her.”

“It sounds as if she is in no danger. Let that ease you.” Valor patted Danika’s back reassuringly.

Danika glanced to him, her face streaked with tears. “Why would one of our pack have her?”

Good question, Briggs wondered that himself. Colbat obviously wasn’t her lover, so that scratched that theory. Cashton had said that he looked to be her protector. Protector from whom? Could whoever had attempted to kill them also be trying to kill Kali? The idea just seemed too farfetched to be believable. It was just another theory. What they needed was something more substantial.

Hendrix removed his arm from his mate, took his phone from his pocket, dialed a number and then lifted it to his ear. “Find out who Colbat is.” He flicked the phone closed.

Sayer pointed to Hoby and Lanien. “What do you want to do with these two, Valor?”

“I have no qualms with them. They are yours to punish, Rainer.”

“Punish for what?” Rynn gasped.

Briggs looked at her, she was utterly repulsed by the suggestion. He wished he had the time to make her understand. He figured he’d fuddle it up. Instead, he told her the cold hard truth. “When wolves come into a territory they need to clear it with the Alpha first. By allowing these wolves to stay, they went against protocol. With that disloyalty, Rainer has the right to punish them as he sees fit.”

Rainer started toward them.

“Wait,” Rynn shouted and rushed forward to take a protective stance in front Hoby and Lanien. “This is what I want as my payback.”

Rainer gave her a look of unhappiness. “I already gave you that, if you remember.”

“Well I want more,” she said with a stomp of her foot, her hands out to her sides if she was going to stop this Alpha herself.

Briggs chuckled as he watched his mate’s determination and strength—she’d never looked so beautiful and he’d never been so proud. At her first introduction to the Alphas,

fear ran through her, now she declared her position of power, even if she didn't realize it.

"Your request then is that I spare these two?"

"Yes, that's my request. After that, you'll owe me nothing. Promise." She even crossed her heart for added effect.

Rainer glanced at Nera and she nodded. When he looked back at Rynn, he wasn't smiling, but his eyes were. Briggs could understand it. Rynn was different from other female wolves. Her wants were so unusual. As sweet as he found it, it also amused him.

"This young wolf just saved your life." Rainer's gaze turned cold as he looked at the men. "Best you make something good out of it. If I hear of any further trouble or disloyalty to me, you will not have her to save you. Am I clearly understood?"

Hoby and Lanien let out a deep breath and nodded. They both gave Rynn a smile of thank you. She let out a deep breath and smiled in return.

Briggs knew this was hard for her, to accept rules that were violent, but they enforced these rules because the consequences were severe and kept order. He wasn't sure what she'd do when the option to avoid those rules weren't hers to make. In time, he hoped she'd understand the need for such penalties.

Valor opened the door and headed out and the others followed, leaving Hoby and Lanien still shaking and sweating on the floor.

Rynn came back to Briggs, gave him a proud smile. He reached arm out and tucked her into him. That scent which enticed him came thick through his nose.

"So, where to now?" she asked as they exited the house.

"Nowhere," Valor answered. "With the full moon tonight, it's pointless to continue. We'll start again in the morning." He looked around and met every pair of eyes. "Agreed?"

Of course, everyone nodded. Even Hendrix did not argue. Truth was, the hold of the moon was impossible to control. None of them would be of any use here until the sun rose. Only Valor, whose mate had passed away years ago, and Dante—being a single wolf—would be unaffected. They also had nothing to go on. Waiting it out was the best idea.

As Briggs opened the car door, Rynn asked, "What happens tonight then?"

Briggs gave her bottom a pat as she made her way through the door. "You'll just have to wait and see, darlin'."

He could hardly wait and craved this as much as she did. Probably more in fact because he knew what was in store for them. Never being mated before, he'd never experienced the moon before, but he'd heard stories. The Alpha in him demanded her and anticipated a fun night ahead.

Chapter Sixteen

The sun began to set as Rynn sat on a patch of soft grass and glanced out to Medicine Lake. The night was very warm and quiet with only the sounds of bullfrogs around her. She finally tore her gaze from the splendid view and looked at Briggs. "Are you going to tell me what happens now?"

A sensual smile grazed his lips. "Our wolves will call to each other."

"Call like how?"

"To mate," he said, simply.

She hadn't even considered that a possibility. Images of the worst sort flashed through her mind. "We're going to *do it* as wolves?"

He shook his head, grinned at her. "As much as I would love to, we can't."

Okay, she wasn't so sure she'd agree with him. The idea of doing anything in her fluffy form that had to do with sex just seemed 'off limits' to her. His reply confused her. "Why couldn't we do that?"

He gave her a knowing look. "You want a child?"

"No!" she exclaimed.

His eyes twinkled in amusement at her quick response. "Then, that's the reason."

For an instant, she swore she saw a bit of longing in his gaze. Did he want a child? The idea hadn't even crossed her mind. At only twenty-four, the idea of becoming a mother held no appeal to her, especially considering her circumstances before. But now, things were different. Briggs was older by four years, was this where his mind lingered?

He continued, drawing her away from her thoughts. "We procreate through mating as wolves—you cannot get with child in human form." He glanced up to the sky, each minute that passed, growing darker. "The full moon is connected to your cycle."

She was appalled at what he was suggesting. "So I'm ovulating right now?"

Briggs nostrils flared, his eyes burned with lust. "Aye, you are."

"And you can smell that?" she gasped, mortified.

"You smell like fresh ripe woman to me, love." He leaned in, his features fading against the dark skies and laid his lips across hers.

His words would have embarrassed her, if his mouth hadn't drained all thought from her mind. The heat within her was almost cruel. Her body sizzled, simmered in need of him. She wasn't the only one. Briggs' mouth hardened against hers. The gentleness about him vanished, replaced by his enduring kisses.

He drew away, her mouth remained parted as she gasped. He chuckled and when she opened her eyes to meet his gaze, she laughed too. Good gracious, her body responded more like a horny teenager than a woman who had just been satisfied recently.

"Why didn't I feel any of this during the last full moon?"

"We hadn't mated then. The bond wasn't completed." He glanced up, the sunset created a glow along his skin. He looked back at her, his brow arched. "Now it is."

Well, that made sense. When she experienced the full moon before, they'd only been united by the moon, but hadn't yet sealed their bond. Pondering a moment, she realized not to question it. She was a werewolf now, the full moon and wolves just fit.

"Have you experience this before?"

“No, it’s only something shared between mated wolves.” He winked. “It’s quite intense.”

“Intense?” She chortled. “That’s saying it mildly.” Then, a thought occurred to her. “So, after this I won’t feel like this anymore?” She prayed in fact. It was one thing to lust over the one you loved, but to be out of control every time he touched her, it wasn’t a livable state.

“Yes, you will not be as overwhelmed, but we’re newly mated and you’re new to lovemaking—I’d imagine we’ll stay lost in each other for a while.”

Wasn’t that just all types of sultry yumminess. Hearing it sent a wave of desire through her blood and settled in her gut. She took a deep breath, forced herself to have an ounce of control.

“Have you ever felt like this before—you know with others?” He’d never gone into specifics about his past and she never asked. A man like Briggs wasn’t likely to remain unnoticed by the ladies though.

Briggs smiled as if he knew the question was long overdue. “No.” He brushed his fingers across her cheek. “I am in love you, Rynn. I’ve never experienced that before with any other, nor have I been mated.” His fingers were deeper against her skin as he traveled along her jaw line. “It makes me want you in ways I’ve never experienced. You bring the Alpha out in me—that makes me want to ravish you until you can’t take more.”

She gulped, his deep husky tone seduced her as her gaze bore into his yellow eyes, which burned with lust. It sounded good—like *get naked now* good. She closed her eyes for a moment and settled herself.

The sun dropped lower and the sensual energy only grew. Briggs was right there with her. They no longer talked, only stared at one another, since that was all that was possible between them now.

It only took minutes for the sun to settle, and the moment the sky grew dark, Rynn’s shift was instantaneous. Surprised her really, since Briggs said they wouldn’t mate as wolves. The power took her so quickly, she couldn’t ask the *whys* and the *what happens now*.

Briggs growled, low and deep in his throat. When Rynn’s gaze met his, his legs were stiff, tail erect—dominant Alpha in every regard. In a response that came from deep within her soul, she lowered her hips, kept her head low to the ground and a soft whimper escaped her mouth.

He growled again. Her body responded without thought as she lay on her back, exposed her throat and belly to him. It displayed her trust in him since the position was very dangerous for her to be in. The instinct lived right down into her soul that he needed to see this from her. She whimpered again.

Briggs howled loudly to the moon. When he lowered his head, his eyes shone of rightness, protection, and happiness. He leaned down, nudging her with his nose. But more than that, they showed playfulness. He nudged her side with his nose, nodded toward the forest.

She immediately caught his meaning. She jumped to her feet, returned the look of play and pounced forward. As she ran, she glanced back to see Briggs hitting the ground with his paws in anticipation and wagging his tail. She focused in front of her and ran as if her life depended on it.

His howl came loud, but far away. He let her have a head start, but as she rushed

through the trees, she could hear him fast approaching.

She lunged faster, continued to run harder. Her paws barely touched the ground as her speed increased. Her ears twitched back and he began to close the distance. Briggs' wolf was three times the size of her as a wolf. Needless to say, it didn't take him long to catch up.

She had an advantage, though, her small size made her slightly quicker. She could weave through trees with impeccable speed while he had to go around them. He couldn't catch her. He ran to her right, but she never looked back. She didn't have to. His presence was there, and she could feel his playful banter coursing through her. For wolves, she suspected this was about as fun as it came, and she felt silly right along with him.

Suddenly, he moved faster—lengthened his stride.

Oh crap! He was only humoring her that she could out run him. Before she knew it, he was behind her and gave her backside a little nibble. She skidded to a halt and glanced behind her. He rested, head down and rump in the air, tail wagging.

The wolf within her knew exactly what to do. She lunged toward him. He jumped out of the way to rest in the same position and waited for her attack. Even in his wolf form, his eyes were so amused. He enjoyed this and so did she.

He growled, the sound rumbled through the air as he called her forward. She pounced again, but this time she ended up right on her butt as he maneuvered away from her.

Determined, she crouched down in the position he displayed—the declaration of an attack. She lunged forward. This time he let her. When she collided with him, they rolled around within the leaves and dirt, nibbling at each other.

After a final tumble, she jumped away. When she met his gaze, his eyes were smiling. She couldn't deny how fun this was. As wolves, this was happiness. She'd needed this. Just silly fun. No danger, only them.

She positioned herself with her rump up, tail wagging, and Briggs instantly did the same. Both let out low growls of excitement.

Rynn wiggled her rump once, then she pounced forward again, and it sent them rolling down a hill. Just so happened, at the end of that hill was a cliff. The moment she hit the edge, she soared off to see Medicine Lake resting below. Relief filled her. At least, it wasn't going to be a hard fall.

As she fell, her legs kicked wildly. Then, she crashed into the water. The second she went under her shift came with it. Wolves apparently didn't like water since fear consumed her at first contact and being under was in no way comfortable.

She shifted and respite came with it. She began to swim back up to the surface in search of air. Halfway there, Briggs' hand reached down and pulled her the rest of the way. When she hit the surface, she sucked in a deep breath, and burst out laughing, as did Briggs.

The water was warm tonight. The night calm, quiet, which left the water so still that the only a ripple was caused from their gliding bodies.

He pulled her forward and brought her in close to him. "Did you like that?" he asked. She wrapped her arms around him, brought her legs around his waist, while he ran his hands up and down her back. "I loved it."

"Never has the Alpha in me been so playful." He winked. "He likes it."

The sensual energy hadn't rescinded. If anything, it'd grown. Seeing her Alpha, all

wet and sizzling with desire, just increased the burn. “My wolf likes when your wolf is playful,” she purred with intent. She couldn’t wait any longer. She reached down to his shirt and yanked it over his head. The moment it left his body, he pushed her away as they freed themselves from the rest of their clothes.

After a bit of push and shove, and some interesting swimming moves, she got out of her jeans and he pulled her close back to his body. He grabbed their floating clothes, and threw them to the shore as he took her mouth deliciously as the water rushed around their bodies. He pulled her even closer, holding her body tight against his, and gripped her bottom with his hands.

With all the tension that had built within her, she needed him immediately. Briggs read her message loud and clear. With a quick move, he slipped inside her. She squealed a little as the rush of water came with him.

She gripped her thighs around him as he swam closer to shore. Once there, he steadied his feet against the rocky floor, grasped her hips and rocked her against him.

“Oh,” she moaned. “Do that again.” He did, only harder this time.

He rocked her quicker, kept her body close to his so that the water would stay out. The sensation of the hardness within her, beating the inside of her walls was enough to kill her.

He groaned deep as his hands tightened on her hips and rocked her firmly against him until she gasped out in pure pleasure. Her eyes watered from the force of his strength. The hardness within her touched every part of her. Shivers of an erotic nature coursed through her. He rocked her back and forth, swirled her hips, and she let him move her wherever he wanted to. His intentions created a whirlwind of sensitivity to her core. By the time she suffered one slice of bliss, he hit another part of her core that would make her only feel more and gasp out louder.

Diving toward her mouth, she became lost in him. The harder he rocked her hips, the deeper his mouth got against hers. She grabbed his face, hit back with an intensity of her own, and put a bit of oomph into her hips. It was exactly what she needed, her body tightened and pulsated. Her release was so very near, and goodness, how he got her there so quick.

Briggs growled. “Stop that, love. You’re gonna make me come.”

As if Rynn had a choice in the matter. The way his body slammed inside her, her body had a mind of its own, and without even a little hint of explosion, she blasted into orgasm. She buried her face in his neck and shuddered as her body soured with pleasure. Feeling Briggs stiffen around her, he hadn’t lied about his earlier statement. His roar of completion was loud next to her ear, but she couldn’t look to him. Not yet.

It took many minutes to recover, and when Rynn finally had the strength to look up. Briggs’ wore his mischievous grin that was sexy enough to make her want another round. Judging by the hardness that still rested in her body, she wasn’t the only one. *Yee Haw!*

Chapter Seventeen

By the time their wolves were sated, Rynn was sore, tender, and finally without a single ounce of sensual energy. Only took five—no, six rounds, to get that relief. She lay cuddled into Briggs in a secluded part of the forest. To her total surprise, the sky began to lighten. Time flies when you're having a romp of a good time. "Full moons are fun," she exhaled.

Briggs chuckled deep and low then kissed the top of her head. "With you—they are."

Going at it for hours with just little naps in between the heated moments, Rynn expected to feel dead on her feet, but she didn't. In fact, she felt rejuvenated and full of energy. She glanced up to Briggs who smiled down at her. "Why do I feel so good?"

Briggs arched his brow, gave her a knowing look. "After a night like that, you have to ask that question?"

She laughed softly, snuggled back into him. "No I mean, so exhilarated. We've hardly slept and we've used up lots of energy. I'd expect to feel more drained."

"The moon restores us—gives us a little juice," he replied, resting his cheek against the top of her head.

"Mmmm," she hummed. "It feels good."

Briggs wrapped his arms around her tight, trailed his finger along her spine.

"Everything about last night felt good. You were incredible."

"Not so bad yourself, wolf."

He chuckled deep. "I was not expecting you to..." he hesitated, then, finally said, "come out of your shell so fast."

She glanced up at him and gave him a sexy grin. "What can I say; you bring out the bad wolf in me." She never knew touch could be so good. He never once made her feel amateurish, just guided her along, orgasm after orgasm, in positions she never knew two bodies were capable of being in.

He kissed her lips softly. His tongue swirled with hers a while, then backed away. "You'd think after last night, I'd be settled." He glanced down at his erection. "But the moon seems to have lasting effects on me."

She rubbed her thighs together and felt the heat right with him. Insane really, but there it was, neither of them could get enough and she was perfectly fine with that—being lost in Briggs' body was not a bad place to be.

"Mmmm...I have to agree."

Suddenly, the wind shifted from west to north sending a gust of breeze across her warm skin earning a little shudder. Briggs held her tighter to secure her warmth. She leaned in to kiss him again and inhaled deeply. Just as her lips connected with his, she shot straight up to sit.

Briggs reacted instantly, got to his knees and took her by the arms. "What is it?"

She inhaled again, wondering if maybe she smelled something that wasn't there. She was sleep deprived and all. After a few more breaths, her mind couldn't be swayed for the scent. "Do you smell that?"

His nostrils flared. "Smell what?"

"Kali..." Before she could even finish what she was going to say next, Briggs had

shifted, raised his head to the sky, circled around and scent the air.

Within seconds, he shifted back. “I cannot smell her.” He gave her an inquisitive glance. “You are sure that it is her you are scenting?”

She inhaled again. Yes, peaches—young, it couldn’t be mistaken. The scent seemed burned into her memory now. Maybe because she wanted this over with, once and for all. She wasn’t sure, and didn’t care. This needed to end. “It’s her. I don’t doubt it.”

Briggs reached down, grabbed their clothes, and tossed hers to her. “Dress quickly, we must go.”

That’s just what she did, and within seconds she was dressed. Briggs shifted and she followed right behind him. She might have been pleased with herself since this was the first time her shift came so quickly, if Kali’s scent hadn’t overwhelmed her senses. It rushed against the wind, it came steady through her snout. Now, it was so strong that Rynn could have sworn Kali stood right in front of her. After a moment of searching, she wasn’t there. Briggs gave her a nod, and Rynn took the hint, she punched forward toward the direction of the scent. Briggs of course, took a protective position close to her, but stayed a little behind her. She suspected to allow Kali’s scent to lead the way.

The forest floor swept under her paws, and soon, she hit a protected wetland area in Plymouth that Pops had taken her many times. Being a wilderness buff when his mind was well, he’d loved to show her all the creatures that call a wetland home. She knew this area well.

Kali’s scent came stronger as she pushed through the wet grounds. The Cattails brushed against her side as she continued forward, mud flew around her, her claws dug deep into the ground with each stride.

It was endless display of Plymouth beauty around her. Funny thing, the smells, the familiarity, comforted Rynn in a way. This was her home, and coming through this area set memories to springing about. Happy memories.

The longer they charged along, the stronger the scent became. With each lunge, it engulfed her. Soon, the scent was all around her. Judging how Briggs rushed forward, he had caught the scent too. His body was tight, tension filling him as he bolted toward Kali, while Rynn stayed close to his flank.

Briggs let out a bark, and she glanced back to him. He had stopped. She trotted back over to him. Briggs shifted in a second, then, grasped her hand, and she followed right behind in the shift. Obviously, he drew on their bond magic to force the shift so quickly, she didn’t mind the help, even though she suspected she’d do just fine on her own.

“We need to go take a look,” Briggs said, then, he gave her a curious look. “Are you okay to come with me? This is your choice to come any further, but we have to see what we are up against here.”

“I...” Rynn hesitated. She knew that just past the trees was an opening—she could see it from where she stood. Was Kali and whoever else going to be thrilled with their appearance? Did she want to go? No she did not. They had already proved to be dangerous and she didn’t doubt would kill her in a second. She was no fighter. She felt scared, unprepared and frightened.

Briggs put his hands on her shoulders, turned her to face him and squared her shoulders. “I will not let harm come to you.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a spray bottle. “Come here.” He pulled her closer toward him and sprayed her with a horrible scent.

“Yuck,” she gasped, covered her nose and breathed through her mouth. “What is that?”

He spun her around and sprayed the back of her. “This will mask your scent. The wolves will not detect us.” Then, he sprayed himself quickly.

“It smells disgusting,” she ground out, her hand still covered her mouth. “What’s it made of?”

“You do not want to know.” He grimaced. “To them,” he nodded toward the opening in the forest. “We’ll smell like a decaying animal.”

That didn’t help the yuckies. She decided to think no more about it. Her only thought was to get this over with and take a shower. “Why haven’t I heard or seen this before?”

“Because we haven’t needed to use it.” He took her hand from her mouth, held it in his and they started toward the opening of the forest. “You must listen to what I say.” He gave her a stern look. “Understand?”

“Trust me,” she retorted. “I’m not about to play hero.”

“Good.” He started forward, lowering his voice as they began to draw closer to the end of the forest. “Kali could be there with only Colbat, and if that is the case, I can deal with him. If this happens, hide and stay clear. If you can get to Kali then do so.”

Rynn nodded quickly. Nerves raked her. It was one thing to stay in the background while the Alphas go off and kick some butt. Not having the protection of the others around her did not come as a very settling thought. The only thing that reassured her was she that did believe Briggs would take care of her. She was his priority and that is what she trusted in now.

Just before they cleared the trees, Briggs’ hand tightened around hers and the magic rippled through her and caused an instant shift. Rynn was shocked. He’d never done that before. She didn’t really have a full appreciation for just how strong the bond magic was. She realized this was the first time, that if he chose it, he could have complete control over her. She wasn’t sure she liked that.

The nice part, Briggs never did it. She began to appreciate how many rights he allowed her and that warmed her soul. Besides, the worry around him right now told her that his actions were all about his need to protect her. That’s all this was. She released the lingering effects of annoyance within her.

As they cleared the trees, Rynn froze, stunned by what stood in front of her. This had to be some serious sick joke or she was seeing things. Maybe her sleep deprivation was worse than she thought.

Briggs glanced at her, confusion heavy in his eyes. Without any warning, he touched her snout with his and she heard. “*What is it?*”

She jumped back, startled. “*What was that?*”

“*I was waiting to show you this.*” Briggs answered, nodded her over to a large boulder that rested beside the gravel road. “*I didn’t want to frighten you.*”

She joined him as they hid from watchful eyes. “*We can communicate as wolves in our minds?*”

“*Aye, we can. It is a gift given to mates. This is urgent. We cannot talk of this now. What is wrong?*” His wolfish eyes were firm. “*Now love, tell me, what upset you.*”

“*That,*” she nodded toward the cream stucco siding colonial house, “*is where I grew up.*”

Even in his wolf form, Briggs appeared flabbergasted. “*You lived here?*”

Rynn nodded. Out of all the places that Kali would be, she was here at Rynn's childhood home. Why was she here?

Briggs gave his head a shake. *"Peculiar, which doesn't surprise me, this whole event has been strange."*

Wasn't that the truth. Ignoring the stab of emotions that came with being back here, she focused on the house. There was no question in her mind that Kali was in there. She could also smell others, more than one, she guessed ten.

"There is no fear here," Briggs said, thoughtful.

She snapped her gaze to him. *"And you know that, how?"*

"Smell the air, love, it is peaceful" Briggs lifted his snout to the sky. *"No harm is going on here. Kali is not afraid."*

If he said so, but this whole scent thing left her befuddled. Sure, she could catch scents, but indentifying them was impossible. The only scent that mattered to her was Kali's. Before moving on, she had a serious point to make. She nailed Briggs with a hard look. *"By the way, you are going to tell me everything else I don't know when this is over."*

He winked, amusement alighting his amber eyes. Rynn sat on her hind legs and watched Briggs. He inhaled deeply. She did the same. Even if she couldn't smell there was no danger here, she could hear it. The conversation was light, no hint of someone being held against their will. She also heard laughter.

After a short time, Briggs let out a low growl. *"There are too many here. I will not risk you. Let's head back into the forest and contact the others."* Briggs nodded back toward the forest. *"Go on, love."*

Rynn didn't argue. Just because Kali wasn't being hurt didn't mean they were going to let her be found easily. They had gone to great measures to make sure she wasn't, and she really had no interest to come face-to-face with these wolves. With a last look at her childhood home, she turned on her paws and ran back to the forest.

The only thought on her mind was why they'd chosen that house to stay in?

Chapter Eighteen

Fifteen minutes later, Valor and the others had followed their scent through the forest and had joined them. Valor stood and gave Rynn a curious look. "You grew up in this home?" Rynn nodded and Valor's gaze only deepened in curiosity. "That is very strange."

Hendrix let out a loud snort of annoyance. "It doesn't matter. All that matters is we have found her." He started toward the tree line.

Valor grabbed his arm to stop him. "Wait. There is something odd here."

Oh yes, this is a big bucket of strange, Rynn thought. What was going on here? The entire wait for their arrival she just couldn't wrap her mind around this. Her home had become a rental property. Whoever owned it had bought it for that purpose. That made sense. But of all the places Colbat could rent, he chose this home. The coincidence didn't sit well with her.

Hendrix snarled back at him, tore his arm from Valor's grip. "My daughter is in there, we must..."

Valor raised his hand and growled in return which sent Hendrix to take a step back. "She is alone in that house."

Rynn glanced through the trees out to the house. Her heart clenched. It looked so much the same. Tulips lined the front garden while Spireas and Weigelas filled the rest, even the paint chipped off the wood trim was still flaked and worn.

Briggs brushed against her arm. When she glanced up to him, her pain was raw and exposed. Nothing in her could hide it. He pulled her toward him, wrapped his arms around her tight and growled, "They will suffer for this."

Being back here was hard. Rynn had said goodbye to this place years ago. She never wanted to return or the reminder of all that was lost. She gulped and forced the tears to stay away.

"If she is alone what are we waiting for?" Hendrix snapped.

Valor glanced over to the trees and pointed to the west side of the house. "There is a barn just over there, and where the men you're looking for are."

Briggs pulled Rynn back a little then kissed her very tenderly. The embrace was kind and sweet and showed nothing of the tension that she could feel within him. He backed away from her, his eyes soft and filled with remorse. "Stay and wait for us here, we will not be long."

Rynn glanced around. Echo watched her with a pained expression, Danika looked urgent, yet appeared slightly annoyed at Rynn's display. It was just what we needed to snap out of her funk. She hated pity and didn't like the fact that this had become about her. She looked back to the house through the trees.

It was just a house—once a beautiful happy house, but now just a house. It wasn't hers anymore. Her home was with Briggs. She wasn't the same person who left this house and her life had changed for the better. She cleared her throat a little and pulled herself together.

"No. I'm fine." Briggs gave her a rebuked look. She dismissed his concern with a wave of her hand. "No, really, I'm fine. We need to go and get her." Not that she was

excited about the idea of helping with this, but she didn't want to appear weak in front of the Danika or Nera. Besides, Briggs wouldn't let her get hurt, and she was surrounded by Alphas. She wasn't concerned—well, not really anyway.

"What do you want to do?" Sayer asked Valor.

Echo interjected. "We ladies will go find Kali in the house. If she's alone, we'll be safe enough and can provide protection for her."

Valor nodded. "I agree."

"I want to join you," Nera exclaimed.

Rainer turned on his mate and gave a chastised look. "This is no place for you, woman."

"The more we have the better," she retorted. "By my count there are ten in that barn. Echo, Danika and Rynn will do fine in the house. There's no reason for me not to join you, I'm a strong fighter."

Rainer gave her a proud wink, then glanced to Valor, who nodded in return.

Briggs gave Rynn a quick kiss, then, stepped away "You will be safe with Echo and I'll be along shortly."

Rynn cupped his cheek and he leaned into it. "Be safe." It surprised her she wasn't more concerned for him, but she didn't doubt his power as a wolf. Maybe it was the fire which burned in his eyes that made them appear more amber than yellow. She didn't doubt for a moment that they would all be safe here and soon he'd return to her.

He gave his mischievous grin. "Always."

As if on cue, she was surrounded by a very strong group of Alphas and one very tiny Nera. With a last look back from Briggs, they pounced off, running full speed toward the barn.

Echo grabbed Rynn's hand and they followed Danika through the forest and rushed toward the house. It sat on a quiet road that held a little over two acres between each house. After a quick look around, not even a car was in sight. Being just after dawn, she wasn't surprised the streets were quiet.

At the house, she followed Echo up the steps. Danika suddenly stopped dead in her tracks and looked back to them. "I can't go in there."

Rynn gave Echo a perplexed look, which she returned. Shouldn't she be happy to know her daughter was still alive? "You don't want to go and see your daughter?"

Tears streamed down Danika's face. "What if she has been harmed? I cannot see that."

"But if she is well," Echo said. "She'll need her mother."

Danika's eyes turned pleading. "I can't. Please don't make me go in there."

Echo glanced at Rynn, sighed, then looked back to Danika and placed her hand on her shoulder. "Of course, just wait here and we will see that everything is all right."

Rynn didn't understand any of this. She sniffed the air. Not that she knew for sure, but she couldn't smell anything out of the ordinary—like blood or anything that would show Kali was injured. Instead of voicing it, she just stepped in behind Echo as she opened the door to leave Danika behind.

The moment she entered, a sense of sadness gripped her. It even smelled the same. A little musky with a scent of old things, just the way grandparent's homes should smell. Echo took her hand, pulled her forward and guided her into the living room.

Kali was on the couch, lying on her back, legs crossed with her foot dangling as she

read her teen magazine. When she caught sight of them, her brows raised. “Echo?”

“Yes, Kali, it’s me.” Echo rushed forward, placed her hands on her shoulders for her to sit up, knelt next to the couch and examined her. “Are you safe?”

Kali giggled, swatted her away with her hands. “Of course I’m safe. I thought I smelt more wolves out there. What are you doing here?”

Echo gave Rynn a bizarre look, which she returned. Nothing made any sense here. And something felt terribly wrong. If she’d been taken, she’d be terrified right now. If she left willingly, she’d be guilty. None of that lived in her eyes. She looked completely baffled.

“What happened to you?” Echo demanded.

Kali placed the magazine on the couch next to, her puzzlement only deepened across her face. “What do you mean, what happened to me?”

“Were you taken from your home or did you leave on your own accord?” Echo snapped.

“Taken—leave?” Kali’s brows rose almost to her hairline. “Echo, whatcha talkin’ about?”

Echo glanced at Rynn, uncertainty hit every part of her. She stood up and glanced around a few times. “What is going on here?”

Rynn shrugged. “I haven’t a clue.” Her mind raced in an attempt to find reasons for all this, but nothing added up.

Kali squealed, jumped up from the couch, smiled brightly as she approached Rynn. “You must be Rynn, Briggs’ mate. How’d you do?” She reached her hand out and Rynn shook it. “I’ve heard so much about you, but you don’t look gross or anything.”

“Thank you.” Rynn chortled.

Kali giggled in shame, then headed back to the couch. Once she plopped down, she continued, “I mean, the way they all talk about you, I thought you’d look funny or something.”

Now they were just getting off track. Rynn gave her head a shake to focus her thoughts. There was something she just had to ask, compelled to know the answer. “Why are you staying at this house?”

“Isn’t it so charming?” Kali glanced around, ran her hands along the couch cushion.

Rynn snorted at the comment and nodded. Not at all happy about whatever was going on here was happening in this house, a happy house filled with great memories.

“Mother sent me on a wilderness adventure with Colbat,” Kali continued. “She wanted me to see a bit of the world.”

“Your mother?” Echo gasped.

“Yeah, the first couple days I just got to hang with some new friends I made,” Kali replied. “After that Colbat said we needed to stay here for a few days before we could move on.”

Echo’s brows furrowed, a suspicious look met her face. “Who is this Cobalt?”

“The wilderness guide.” Kali rolled her eyes. “He’s from home. Mom met him through one of the pack meetings and said he gladly agreed to take me.”

Rynn gave her head another shake in hopes to make sense out of this. The answer was right there in front of her, waited for her to grab it, but her mind just couldn’t process what was being said here. “So, Colbat is out in the barn?”

“Yup, he’s back there with some others from our wilderness group. They’re playing

around back there in the barn.” She grimaced. “It’s dirty.”

Rynn tried to come up with appropriate questions to find answers for all this, but it confused her too much to come up with anything. Just then, Danika stepped out of the kitchen. Her mother sent her here. What in the heck was going on?

“Mother,” Kali squealed, jumped up from the couch. “I didn’t know you were coming.” She ran forward and leapt into her mother’s arms.

Like a million pieces falling into place, reality hit Rynn right in the face. The truth was so unbelievable, Rynn was sure she had it wrong. Danika couldn’t have been responsible for all this? Could she?

“What is this, Danika?” Echo snarled.

Danika released Kali from her arms, pushed her behind her and glared at Rynn. “You just couldn’t die.”

“What?” *Did she just say...*

“Kali was to be mated to Briggs.” Danika spat, hatred oozed from her. She started toward Rynn. “That was their destiny.”

Rynn took a giant step back at the rage coming from her. “She was his mate?” What was going on here?

“We had chosen him for her.” Danika’s voice came out as low growl. “But then, you came along and ruined it all.”

“Mother, what are you doing?” Kali shouted.

Danika didn’t tear her angry gaze from Rynn as she continued forward. “Taking care of your future.”

Rynn continued to back away from her, never had she even thought of this as a possibility. Why would she? There was no hint.

Echo took a protective stance in front of Rynn, shielded her from Danika’s approach. “This is ridiculous Danika, what are you doing?”

“You have befriended this atrocity,” Danika spat. “You should stand beside me to see the end of her. By doing this I’m saving our pure blood lines.”

“She’s Briggs’ mate,” Echo snarled in return. “He’ll kill you once he discovers you are behind this.”

Danika’s look came sly. “He’ll never know. You think I’ve come this far in my plan to slip up now. A dead wolf lies in the kitchen. When the others come, I’ll tell them it was him who attacked her and Kali destroyed him. Briggs will be grateful to her, and thus, will be the beginning of his adoration for her.”

Rynn couldn’t grasp this at all. Her mind was too horrified by this truth. “You were behind all of this? This was all a plan to kill me?”

Looking back, she could see that the first attack was directed at her with the poison. Were all the others too? When Mateo was shot, he had stood close to her. Was that bullet actually meant for her? Dante’s car... That didn’t make sense, Briggs would have been in it too. Then, it dawned on Rynn, Danika had called him over. She would’ve gotten into the car without him if Nera hadn’t approached it first. With that, all the pieces fell together—it was her plan all along.

Danika’s expression remained cruel and measured. “If you would have just eaten the poison like I planned at Wolf Creek, many lives could have been spared.”

Questions filled Rynn’s mind as she searched for reason, but only one stood out. “Why did you send Kali to Plymouth?”

“You have a traumatic history here.” Danika stopped only a few feet away from her and Echo. “I thought the distraction of emotion would cause you to be unaware of attempts around you. With your mind occupied elsewhere, you wouldn’t notice any attacks that came at you. Your wolf instincts would be hindered.”

“That obviously didn’t work out so good for ya,” Rynn snapped, rage began to seep into her pores. Danika was one sick bitch. “And why this house?” The thought that Danika purposely brought Kali here infuriated her. The fact that anyone would use such a special place for cruel intentions, Rynn gulped back fury.

Danika appeared all too proud of herself. “It was the safest place for her, I doubted you’d come back here.” Her expression turned annoyed. “Your scent was one thing I hadn’t counted on. If it’d not been for that, you wouldn’t have thought to come here.”

She was dead on about that. Never in Rynn’s wildest dreams would she have expected to find Kali here, nor, would she have come back to this house on her own accord.

“Does Hendrix know of this?” Echo demanded.

Danika shook her head. “He’s too soft to do what is right. I knew what needed to be done here, and how to fix this problem. I didn’t need his help.”

Echo growled low in her throat, pushed Rynn away and took a step toward her. “I will not let you hurt her, Danika.”

“You do not have a choice,” Danika replied, then pulled a pistol from the back of her jeans and aimed it at Echo. Without a second’s hesitation, she fired and Echo fell to the floor.

Rynn screamed and fell with her. “Echo. Oh God, what have you done?” Blood poured from her stomach. Rynn grabbed Echo’s face in her hands, but her eyes clouded, her life began to fade away. Blessedly, she still breathed, but her breaths were sharp.

“Mother, stop this!” Kali hollered.

“No,” Danika shouted back at her. “This polluted being has taken your destiny from you. Briggs’ position, wealth, loyalty, this is what you deserved and she stole it.”

Rynn couldn’t take her eyes off of Echo. She’d been so kind to her, the only one who welcomed her and she just took a bullet for her. She couldn’t even blink or think to move when she felt the gun press against her head. Her friend was dying.

She pressed her hands to the wound along Echo’s stomach, in hopes it would give her time. Maybe a few more moments someone would come to their aid. The second she applied pressure to her stomach, Echo gasped and her eyes snapped back to life a little, the sense of shock faded.

Danika snickered cruelly, the end of the gun cold against Rynn’s head. “I paid others to do this, but obviously, they are useless and the only way to finish you is for me to do it myself.” Then, she cocked the trigger, the sound loud in Rynn’s ears.

Each second that passed seemed like hours, and when Rynn finally glanced up at Danika, all that surrounded her was peace and happiness. She had it good, even if it was just for a little while, and those memories filled her here. Surprisingly, she wasn’t afraid. Maybe shock had a helping hand in that. But nonetheless, she accepted her fate.

Danika’s eyes were dark and determined. She gave a half smile then closed her finger on the trigger. Rynn slowly closed her eyes, heard the sound of gun’s explosion, and felt the bullet connect with the side of her head. It wasn’t painful as she expected. It stung, much like a burn.

Instantly, the side of her face soaked with blood. Wait, how could she feel that? She opened her eyes, raised herself up, and lifted her hand to her head. She felt quickly, it appeared the bullet had just grazed her. She could feel the little groove in the side of her scalp. Her hearing was gone, though, the sounds muffled. But she wasn't dead.

Her gaze roamed the room to understand what had happen. To her surprise, Nera had just saved her life. She and Danika were in a fierce fight, both in human form, fighting to gain control of the gun. She couldn't tell who had the upper hand.

Then, she remembered Echo. She glanced down beside her to see that Echo had blacked out, but still breathed. Instantly, she tore off her shirt, ignoring her bloody injury and pressed it deep into Echo's stomach. Rynn was no doctor, but the fact that Echo wasn't dead yet meant the injury wasn't as bad as it looked. The second Rynn made contact with Echo's stomach, her eyes opened and a horrified scream of pain erupted from her.

Suddenly, a loud deep growl roared through the room. Sayer barreled into the room, his attention immediately finding Echo. "Echo," he roared and rushed forward to kneel next to her. "You've been shot? What the fuck is going on here?" He quickly jumped to his feet and assessed the scene.

"Danika," Rynn shouted, the only word she could vocalize. "It was Danika!"

Sayer's face darkened and in a two long strides, he grabbed Danika at the back of her neck and punched her with more force than Rynn had ever seen. Danika hit the wall and slid to the floor, knocked out cold.

Okay, Rynn had always been against violence toward women, but in this case, seeing her being knocked out felt damn good.

Sayer immediately ran from the house, and returned a second later carrying a bag and rope. He threw the rope at Nera. "Tie her up." He knelt beside Echo. "Rynn, you must help me."

"Of course, anything," Rynn replied through the tears. What had just happened? Her mind couldn't reconcile the past moments. One thing she did know, she needed her mate. "Where's Briggs?"

Sayer tore open Echo's shirt to expose the bloody mess of her body. "He's still fighting the others. I heard Echo's pain and came for her."

"Mother, why?" Kali screamed out in horror. "Why?"

Echo was semi-comatose now, her eyes blank. Rynn touched her forehead, the skin cold and wet. She suddenly began to throw up bloody fluid from her mouth.

Oh, this was bad. Really, really bad. Sayer didn't appear fazed. He jabbed her with needles, too many for Rynn to count, and Echo didn't even flinch.

Tears spilled over and trailed down Rynn's cheeks. "Echo, stay with us."

"She will not die," Sayer growled. He tore off his shirt, jabbed himself with an intravenous needle and put the other in Echo's arm. His blood instantly began to drain into hers.

Rynn hadn't known he was a doctor, but suspected he might be because he seemed to know what he was doing, which was a relief. He grabbed a small container from beside him, opened it and unwrapped sterile instruments—scalpels, clamps, needles and surgical gloves.

"Keep hold of the wound tight," Sayer told her.

Rynn pushed in harder, barely able to breathe. How could this be happening? How

could all of this be true? Her mind swirled in confusion.

Seconds later, Sayer knocked her hands out of the way with gloved hands and took a scalpel to Echo's stomach.

From there it was clamps and digging into her abdominal cavity. "Clamp," Sayer shouted at Rynn, and she handed it to him immediately. All that remained was the urgency to see that Echo survived.

For the next few minutes, Rynn became a robot—no thought only action. She assisted Sayer as he healed his mate and her friend. She and Echo had just become close, she couldn't lose her, not when she needed her so much. While she had Briggs, she needed more than just him in this wolf world.

Danika moaned from her hog-tied position on the floor. Rynn looked behind her. Nera did nothing but glare at Danika with a look that clearly said she was a dead woman if she so much as moved a finger. When Rynn glanced back to Echo, Sayer had managed to get all the bleeding from the passage of the bullet to stop, but he still didn't look pleased.

"The bullet didn't hit anything vital," he said in a calm, monotone voice. He angled Echo onto her side to face him as he examined her back. The bullet had gone straight through. He rolled her over onto her back, "Grab the liquid from the bag there. Spray it along the wound."

Without hesitation, she reached in, grabbed the bottle and started to spray the open wound. Whatever it was, it smelled antiseptic. As Rynn continued with that, Sayer took sutures from the sterile container and motioned for Rynn to move away. Then, he got right back to business and, stitched up the bleeders where the clamps were, then removed the clamps.

His hands worked quickly and within no time, he had the front of her completely stitched up. "Help me turn her over," he asked.

Rynn assisted him, and once Echo lay on her stomach, he went to work on the back of her. Less bloody, but still something Rynn could live without seeing again.

Minutes later, he was done, and jabbed a needled into her arm. Instantly, she gasped and her eyes shot open. "Echo." His tone filled with worry.

Echo blinked several times, finally able to meet his eyes and smiled. "Ouch."

He sat back on his legs, let out a long breath and laughed.

"Rynn," Briggs shouted. She glanced up just as he rushed into the living room. "Why are you bleeding?"

Rynn reached up, felt wetness soak her hand, she pulled it back to find blood completely covered it. Blood dripped from her fingers in thick droplets. When she looked down to her chest, her white bra was also red.

With everything that had happened to Echo, her own injury was the furthest thing from her mind. Now that Briggs mentioned it, a headache larger than the world itself started to develop.

"Oh, I forgot, a bullet grazed me." The shock of this situation took a backseat to the reality of what had just happened.

Suddenly, the world spun and her eyes clouded with darkness.

Chapter Nineteen

When Rynn woke next, it was to a steady beep that came from next to her ear. She strained to open her eyes, but she did eventually able to. When she did, she was blessed with Briggs' soft smile shining down at her.

"Urgh," she groaned. "I feel awful." More than just run down, she was utterly spent. Simple movements were difficult. Even to blink used up too much effort.

Briggs brushed a hand across her forehead, the warmth of his touch reassured her. "You lost a lot of blood—it took ten stitches and a couple pints of blood to get you back into shape."

Her mind felt hidden under a cloud of fog. The last thing she remembered was blood on her hand. But why? A second later, the haze cleared. "Where's Echo?"

Briggs nodded beside him and she followed his gaze. Echo gave her a wave from the hospital bed where she was hooked up to an I.V.

"Fancy seeing you here." Echo laughed softly.

"I'm so glad to see you're okay." Rynn sighed with relief.

"Thanks to you," Echo replied. "Sayer said you'd make a good nurse."

She snorted over that ridiculous notion. "If I never see into someone's insides again, my life will be fulfilled." She groaned a little as she attempted to get comfortable. She'd never felt so weak. Rynn glanced back at Briggs, dumbfounded.

"Can you believe this? All the attempts were actually meant to kill me because Danika wanted you mated to Kali?" The shock of that hadn't worn off. It was almost impossible to believe that anyone would go to such lengths when the world was not scarce for powerful werewolves.

His jaw clenched. "No, Danika is a stupid woman." He took Rynn's hand and squeezed it tight. "To think that all those attempts were meant for you." He shook his head. "Danika is lucky she got off so easy."

"What?" Rynn screeched. Danika should be punished for her actions. "They let her go?"

Echo laughed loudly. "Now that would be the day."

Rynn ignored her laughter, focused on Briggs. "So, what happened then?"

"The witch is dead," Echo exclaimed.

Rynn slowly glanced toward her again, unsure if she heard her right. "Clarify please."

Briggs touched her arm, drew her gaze back to his. His expression was hesitant but determined. "When Hendrix came back and discovered what had been done, he dealt with the matter appropriately."

Rynn's eyes went wide. "He killed her?"

Briggs nodded. "Not only did she endanger your and Echo's life, but innocent lives were also lost because of her actions. Hendrix gave her mercy by finishing her off quick. I would not have been so generous."

So many thoughts ran through her mind it was hard to figure out what to say. An unpleasant thought suddenly struck. "Kali didn't witness this did she?"

"Of course not." Briggs brushed his fingers across her cheek. "We had taken her

back to the house and then after, Hendrix took her home.”

“Is Kali okay?” To know her father had to kill her mother, no matter what the circumstances were. Kali must be devastated. What Rynn had seen of the girl, she appeared gentle and sweet. Rynn couldn’t decide how she felt about the whole thing.

Briggs brushed the hair off her face and gave her a soft look. “This is the way of things. Of course, she will mourn her mother, but these are the consequences. Her mother’s actions are not usual things, she understands this and will not hold it against her father.”

Rynn just couldn’t grasp it. “He killed his *mate*?” To do such a thing had to be heartbreaking. It’d be like ripping your soul in half. How could he do that?

“What else would you have him do?” Briggs’ voice asked, soft and reserved.

“Call the police,” Rynn snapped. “Have her charged with attempted murder. That’s what they’re for.” At least then Kali could have seen her mother again. Danika deserved to be punished, Rynn believed that, but to kill her. It seemed so extreme.

“The woman almost killed us, Rynn,” Echo said. “It’d be unlikely she would be shown mercy.”

Briggs ran his finger over her furrowed brows as if to ease the tension. “I know the violence troubles you, love, but this is the way we deal with these matters. Danika not only risked many lives, but she attempted to kill Alpha mates. Forgiveness cannot be given in these matters.”

“She got what she deserved,” Nera’s voice snapped from the doorway.

Briggs backed away from Rynn to make Nera’s entrance visible. She held a couple glasses of water in her hands. She went to Echo’s bed first, then to Rynn’s, a smile on her face. “It’s cold.”

Briggs reached out for the hospital bed-control handset, and raised Rynn into a sitting position. “Thanks,” Rynn smiled at Nera, took the glass and took a sip.

The cold liquid slid down her throat and quenched her parched throat. She took another couple sips, then handed it to Briggs, who placed it on the bedside table.

Rynn owed Nera her life. If it wasn’t for her intervention, she wouldn’t be here now. She felt humbled that Nera felt compelled to help her. Days ago, she doubted she would’ve done the same. “Nera...” Rynn began.

Nera interrupted, holding up her hand for Rynn to stop. “Think nothing of it.” She winked. “Makes us even now, doesn’t it?”

Rynn snorted. “I guess it does. How did you know Danika had attacked us?”

Nera tapped her ears, gave her a knowing glance. “You’re not alone in your gifts. I’m a blue blood too. My gift is the ability to hear from long distances. I heard the conversation between you all.” She glanced at Echo. “I only wish my speed was as good as my hearing.”

Echo took a sip of her water, then placed it on the table which sat across her lap. “Lucky we had you at all. If it wasn’t for you, we’d be dead and buried.”

Nera shrugged a little. Apparently, taking compliments wasn’t something she was used too either. Maybe they had more in common than Rynn originally thought.

Suddenly, Briggs stood, approached Nera on the other side of the bed and knelt before her. “I owe you for saving my mates’ life.” He gave her a look that declared his gratitude. “What is it you ask of me?”

Nera pondered that for a moment as she studied him, then glanced at Rynn with a

huge smile. "I'll take three *Hunka Chunka Burnin' Fudge* sundaes."

Briggs glanced at the floor and laughed.

Rynn nodded her approval. "Good choices." She returned Nera's smile. Things between them had changed. It took two near-death experiences to gain this level of friendship, but friendship wasn't always easy. Sometimes the strongest bonds came from difficult beginnings.

"If you have ice cream on the mind," Valor said from the door. "You're obviously feeling better."

"Hey it wasn't my request," Rynn retorted. "But it's a darn good one."

Valor looked over at Briggs who still knelt on the floor. "Dante and I will go and fetch this treat for the women."

Briggs let out a deep sigh and his relief soared through Rynn. The idea of him having to leave her, apparently, did not bode well. "Appreciate that, boss."

"I'm very pleased that you're both on the mend, ladies. Our Pack would be lost without you." Valor gave a gallant nod, spun on heels and left.

As he left, Sayer walked through the door. "How are the patients?"

"Alive," Echo responded.

He reached out to her, took her hand in his and laid a soft kiss on it. "That's a relief." He let go of her hand and made his way to Rynn. "Got some color back in you."

Rynn nodded. "I've got ice cream on the way." Seriously, the knowledge of what was ahead, gave her a whole bunch of rejuvenated juice. Vanilla ice cream, a thick brownie, hot fudge, she could already taste it.

Sayer gave her a puzzled look. "You've got what?"

"Another pay-off." Echo laughed.

Sayer shook his head, checked over Rynn's monitors and read the results that printed out. "Looks good here." He placed his hand on her forehead. "Feeling better?"

"Like I said, I've got ice cream on the way, I feel great!" Amusement flicked through her, Briggs obviously enjoyed this. When she glanced at him, he grinned from ear to ear.

Sayer chuckled, drawing her attention back to him. "You made quite an assistant—very brave of you."

"You all seem to be under the assumption that I think while I'm doing these things. I don't know how many times I have to say it, I don't. If I'd had time to think about it, the last thing I would've been doing was staring into Echo's guts."

"Nonetheless," Sayer retorted. "Quite brave." He patted her forehead again, gave Briggs a firm nod then moved over to kiss Echo. "Fuckin' rounds," he growled. "I promise I'll be back to stay with you shortly."

Echo glanced around the room, lifted her hand attached to the I.V. "I ain't going anywhere."

With that, he smiled at Rynn, then left. She glanced back at Briggs. "Don't you owe Echo something? She saved my life too." As stupid as this tradition was, Echo deserved whatever she wanted and Rynn would see she got it.

"We saved each other," Echo interjected. "It equals each other out." She laughed loudly, but cringed in pain and grasped her side. "Besides, if this ice cream is as good as you make it out to be, what more will I need?"

The scent of warm chocolate fudgie goodness filled the air. Echo's eyes widened and Nera smiled. Rynn's stomach growled. A minute later, Valor and Dante entered the room

with the sundaes.

"I think you might be onto something here, Rynn." Echo waved Dante over. "Bring that to me." He started walking and she waved again. "Quicker."

He rolled his eyes, but complied.

Rynn laughed, then, glanced at Nera. "Come sit." She wiggled her feet to the side to make some room for her on the bed.

Nera happily obliged, eyeing the sundae with a smolder in her eyes. "Mmmm...that does look scrumptious."

Valor gave Nera her sundae, then handed the last to Rynn. Just the smell was enough to make Rynn sigh with pleasure. She lifted the spoon and at the same time, all of the three women placed a bit of that delectable sweet goodness into their mouths and moaned in ecstasy.

With, Valor and Dante on their way to do something Rynn cared nothing about, the women indulged in the treat. The only sounds from the room for the next ten minutes were sighs that were only produced by something filled with calories.

By the time they were done Rynn felt ravished. Echo and Nera looked to be in agreement with flushed cheeks, hooded eyes, and satisfied to the bone.

"That was simply marvelous," Nera said, licking the spoon.

"Told you," Rynn handed her bowl to Briggs who tossed it into the garbage.

"Wow," Was all Echo said.

Briggs' chuckle was the only other sound. He looked to Nera. "We all squared up then?"

She nodded with delight. "Yes, oh yes, that was certainly enough."

Just then, Rainer stood in the doorway. "Nera, are you done here?"

Nera got up, circled around the bed and tossed her bowl into the garbage. "I am now."

Rainer glanced at Rynn, then Echo. "Recovering nicely I hear?" They both nodded and he smiled in return. "Good." His gaze fell back on Nera. "We must go. We have some trouble at home."

Nera let out a deep sigh and looked at Rynn. "Welcome to our world, it truly never ends."

Rynn sighed. Whatever happened to the good guys win and then deserve some time to rest? Obviously, television shows didn't have it right, the danger never stops. As much as this world might shock her with its violence, this is her life now, so she would just have to accept that.

After quick goodbyes, Nera and Rainer were on their way.

Echo cringed a little. The fullness of her tummy couldn't have felt good against her stitches.

She grabbed the morphine drip control that rested beside her and punched it with her thumb a couple times. "Time to sleep." She smiled. By the time she pulled the blankets up she was already higher than a kite and on her way to happy land.

Briggs brushed his fingers across Rynn's cheek. She loved him more now than ever. Near-death experiences could do that. Having him with her, seeing the adoration in his eyes, filled her with enough love she could burst.

Their lips met in a way that was passionate yet gentle. The love that had grown between them had started from nothing more than two strangers meeting. Yet it was born

on a level more than soul deep.

Briggs drew away from her, looked at her, his eyes filled with love and protection.

Their bond had never been stronger as they looked deep into one another's eyes, and the heat smoldered.

Rynn felt like she'd come home.

The End

About the Author:

Stacey Kennedy is an avid lover of the paranormal romance and urban fantasy genres. If she isn't plugging away at her next novel, tending to her two little ones, she's got her nose deep in a good book. She lives in Ontario, Canada with her husband. Be sure to drop her a line at www.staceykennedy.com, she loves to hear from her readers.

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