



Think a vampire-hunting bloodhound is dangerous? Try threatening his woman.

Bloodhounds, Book 1

Wilder Harding is a bloodhound, created by the Guild to hunt down and kill vampires on America's frontier. His enhanced abilities come with a high price: on the full moon, he becomes capable of savagery beyond telling, while the new moon brings a sexual hunger that borders on madness.

Rescuing a weapons inventor from undead kidnappers is just another assignment, though one with an added complication—keeping his hands off the man's pretty young apprentice, who insists on tagging along.

At odds with polite society, Satira's only constant has been the aging weapons inventor who treats her like a daughter. She isn't going to trust Wilder with Nathaniel's life, not when the Guild might decide the old man isn't worth saving. Besides, if there's one thing she's learned, it's that brains are more important than brawn.

As the search stretches far longer than Wilder planned, he finds himself fighting against time. If Satira is still at his side when the new moon comes, nothing will stop him from claiming her. Worse, she seems all too willing. If their passion unlocks the beast inside, no one will be safe. Not even the man they're fighting to save.

Warning: This book contains a crude, gun-slinging, vampire-hunting hero who howls at the full moon and a smart, stubborn heroine who invents mad-scientist weapons. Also included: wild frontier adventures, brothels, danger, betrayal and a good dose of wicked loving in an alternate Wild West.

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Samhain Publishing, Ltd.
577 Mulberry Street, Suite 1520
Macon GA 31201

Wilder's Mate
Copyright © 2011 by Moira Rogers
ISBN: 978-1-60928-380-3
Edited by Anne Scott
Cover by Kanaxa

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First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: March 2011
www.samhainpublishing.com

Wilder's Mate

Moirra Rogers

Dedication

This is for Molli, the fastest beta in the west—er, or anywhere, for that matter, and KA, for answering our horse questions even though she was on her way to Hawaii. As always, thanks bunches, ladies.

This is also for Joy, who is the only person we actually hang out with who's allowed anywhere near Wilder.

Chapter One

Satira would have been on a horse and halfway into the sunset by now if the lift from the laboratory hadn't broken.

Steam from a broken pipe billowed up from beneath the lift's cab, heating the metal walls until sweat slicked her skin and curled wild strands of her hair. The furnace that powered the lift would burn through its fuel before dark, but that wouldn't help her now. Not with the temperature rising and the new bloodhound due within the hour.

At least she had her tool belt. Satira pried the last corner free from the panel covering the lift's controls and sent it clattering to the ground. The floor was hot enough now to be uncomfortable, even through the thick soles of her boots. She dug her teeth into her lower lip and eyed the tangle of copper wires, wishing she'd paid more attention the last time Nathaniel had tried to teach her how their elevator worked.

There's more to life than weapons, my girl. How many times had he said those words, his gentle old voice chiding and fond at the same time? Nathaniel wasn't content with life as a Guild inventor. He wanted to bring modern comforts to the wild plains, as if people who dared live along the border had time to worry about steam-powered carriages and flying machines when vampires stole through the night.

They might not care, but Nathaniel did. He cared hard, about damn near everybody, and it made it awful hard not to care right back. Especially when she shifted aside the bulk of the conductors and found a tiny diagram, etched in Nathaniel's precise hand.

One phrase jumped out. *Pressurized doors.* Satira followed the diagram back to the coil that held the doors closed while the lift was in motion. A little more work with her screwdriver revealed a tiny lever, and she whispered her thanks to her ever-organized mentor as she flipped the switch.

With the pressure released, the doors responded to the spring wedged between them and popped open, letting in a welcome burst of cool air. Satira dragged in a deep, grateful breath, then let it out on a curse when she realized the doors had opened with the lift trapped between floors.

Worse, she was staring at an expensive, dainty pair of heeled satin slippers. "Oh, damn."

Ophelia was too ladylike to kneel, but she did bend at the waist, tendrils of her long blonde hair spilling down over her shoulders. "Surely you're not doing what I think you're doing, Satira."

The floor sat just below eye level. Satira scooped up the saddlebag she'd filled with weapons and ammunition and hoisted it up, her arms straining under its considerable weight. "Can you help me with this?"

Her friend took the bag. "I'm not giving it back."

"Ophelia." Satira tucked the screwdriver back into her belt and lifted her foot, balancing it precariously on the low railing inside the lift's carriage. "At least help me get out? The floor's getting hot from all the steam."

"Reason enough to confine oneself to taking the stairs, is it not?"

Ophelia had never considered Nathaniel's inventions to be particularly reliable. Perhaps her concerns held merit, if one broken pipe could wreak such terror. Satira caught the edge of the floor and struggled to lift herself up without touching the too-hot walls. "Next time I'm sure I will. *Please*, Ophelia?"

It wasn't her friend's soft hand that reached down and gripped hers. It was a strong hand, tanned and rough, followed by an even rougher voice. "You must be Nate's little one."

Damn it all. The bloodhound was early.

He dragged her up to the floor as if she weighed nothing, deftly maneuvering her body so she didn't bump her head or scrape her skin on the hot metal. After he set her on her feet, he stepped back to study her through narrowed eyes. "Why are you dressed like a boy?"

If she'd had any feminine pride left, it would have withered under that assessing gaze. He was dark and forbidding, a large man wrapped in the savagery of a hound. Some hid their other natures well, but this one... Satira met his eyes, and a beast stared back.

Not a man to be trifled with, which made the reply that tumbled free reckless. "Why are you dressed like a man?"

But he only raised one eyebrow in a slow arch. "You're not going to fool anyone with that getup. You've got tits."

Ophelia smothered a noise that had to be a laugh, so Satira crossed her arms over her chest and glared at her traitorous friend. "You could have warned me he'd arrived."

"You didn't exactly ask, did you?"

No, she hadn't, not that asking would have done any good. Ophelia would be pleased by the arrival of the one man who could lay waste to Satira's desperate plan—if she let him.

She wouldn't. She *couldn't*. Squaring her shoulders, she met the man's gaze again. "Are you here to go after Nathaniel?"

For some reason, the corner of his mouth twitched. "Let me guess. You want to go with me."

The sorry bastard was laughing at her. Pride turned her spine to steel as she dropped her arms. Let him stare at her breasts until his eyeballs fell out. "Yes. I know more about Nathaniel's weapons than anyone else alive. And I can use every damn one of them."

"I reckon that's so." He nodded quickly, just a little, almost as if the gesture had been meant only for himself. "You do what I say when I say it. Got that?"

She'd expected more argument. Bluster, maybe, or to be told to put on a dress and mind her tongue. A fatal mistake, because it meant she still judged him as a man. She knew better than to ascribe a man's motives to a bloodhound.

Agreeing to obey one's orders implicitly was another mistake, but one not so easily avoided. Tense seconds ticked by as she listened to the blood pounding in her ears and wondered if she was foolhardy enough to step across that line, to trigger that savage instinct that would put her completely at a beast's mercy.

Maybe not, if she hadn't owed Nathaniel everything. For the man who'd all but raised her, she would risk her very life. "What you say, when you say it."

He watched her as if he could read her thoughts. For a moment, she thought he might still say no, but he only held out his hand once again. "My name is Wilder."

Ophelia watched them both with raised eyebrows and stunned disbelief that would surely break at any moment. Before her friend could protest, Satira reached out and grasped the hound's hand, any self-consciousness about the work-roughened shape of her hands swallowed by the firm grasp of his callused fingers. "Satira," she whispered. "I'm Nathaniel's apprentice."

Wilder released her. "I know who you are. You've got ten minutes to gather whatever you need, or I'm leaving without you." He tipped his hat to Ophelia as he turned. "Ma'am."

She stared after him. "He's letting you go with him."

There wasn't time. Satira closed her fingers around Ophelia's wrist and dragged her toward the broad staircase that led to the second floor and her suite. "Because I'll be useful. Nathaniel is famous. Infamous. We have the best tools for fighting vampires."

"That man *is* the best tool for fighting vampires," she argued. "You won't be back before the new moon. Do you have any idea what that means, Tira?"

Satira stumbled over the first step, but caught her balance with one hand on the banister. "I lived under a bloodhound's roof. Levi might have been old—" The past tense tripped her up for a moment, swept her away on a wave of grief, but she forced it down. Levi *had* been old, for a hound. His death was sad, but not unexpected. "I know about full moons and new moons. I'm not a fool."

"So what are you going to do when he starts humping your leg?"

"*Ophelia!*"

Her friend snorted. "It's a perfectly valid question."

They reached the landing, but there wasn't time to pause and argue the point. Wilder would leave without her, and his mission from the Guild had to be to keep their new technology from falling into vampire hands. She was the only person left who truly needed Nathaniel alive.

She turned toward her rooms, dragging Ophelia behind her. "I'm not a virgin, and I'm not puritanical. I've bedded hounds before."

"Not during the new moon." Ophelia yanked at Satira's hand, forcing her to stop. "Be careful, that's all I'm saying."

Her friend's blue eyes held nothing but desperate worry and too much experience for her tender years. Ophelia never pretended that life as a whore was anything but dangerous, an unglamorous profession that *might* earn you coin enough to make a life for yourself—if you could hold it together.

Satira's mother had held it together. Long enough to attract the eye of the bloodhound who bedded her every new moon, more regular than any clock. The beast inside turned men into monsters with the full moon, but a different sort of savagery came to light when the moon fell dark. Sexual hunger. Feral need.

Ophelia would know the answer to the only question Satira dared ask. "Is it violent?" Surely not. Impossible to imagine Levi laying a violent hand on her mother. And yet...

"No, not exactly. Not like—" Ophelia bit her lip. "The physical demands are almost the least of it. Do you understand what I mean?"

Warmth filled her cheeks as she remembered the last bloodhound to take her to bed. A cocky young stranger, new to his power and full of himself and life. He'd still had an edge, an intensity that expressed itself with dark looks and teasing games. He'd plied her with dominance and control until she was ready to sob from the relief pleasure brought.

Her knees hadn't worked right for days, and he'd been barely more than a boy. The man waiting downstairs was anything but. "I—I think so."

"I *hope* so."

"I suppose we'll see." When they were far enough from town, she'd simply ask him. It wasn't as if he'd proven himself eager to curtail coarse language in her presence. If letting a handsome man between her thighs was the only way to save the man who'd raised her, she'd consider it a fair price.

She might even enjoy it. If that made her as much of a whore as her mother or Ophelia, her closest friend... Well, she'd been called worse.

At least she couldn't be called a coward.

The girl came running out of Nate's house with two bags and a harried look on her face. She'd taken more than the time he'd allotted her, and he would have left, had he not already chosen and prepared a mount for her.

He jerked his head toward the horse. "Saddled this one for you. What's all that?"

Color rose in her pale cheeks. "The things I need to keep myself alive against a vampire."

"You lame your horse before we find Nate and it won't matter," he admonished. "Keep it light."

Her jaw tightened, but she didn't flinch away, just turned her back on him to see to her bags as she muttered something that was probably meant to be too low for him to hear. "We're not all carrying around fifty pounds of muscle and twenty pounds of ego."

He wasn't about to let her get away with it. "Which is why you have to do as I say. It's up to me and my muscle to keep you alive. All the newfangled shit in your bag there isn't going to get that done."

"So you're one of *those* hounds." Disapproval dripped from the words, but she dragged open one bag and began to discard things. One or two items she clipped to the wide belt buckled around her hips. "You're not interested in anything we have?"

"What?" The words startled him, because he'd been wondering how the hell she'd expected anyone to look at her and see a boy just because she'd put on a pair of trousers. "Weapons, you mean?"

Stiff pride filled her eyes as she pulled a heavy gun out of the bag, hefting it with two hands. "Nathaniel is the best there is. I brought this to show you, but if you don't want it..."

It looked like an automatic-fire revolving rifle, its oversized cylinder chambered with glass rounds that glistened brightly even in the afternoon sunlight. Wilder drew his horse closer to her and reached for the firearm. "What's in the rounds?"

She lifted it higher, and a frown formed between her brows when he picked it up in one hand. "A chemical compound. There are two chambers, and the chemicals mix when the glass breaks to create a focused burst of light. If you hit a vampire in the right place, one will take him down."

"Which place is the right one?"

"The head. Maybe the neck or gut. The chest, if the heart is already exposed."

He nodded his understanding and offered her a smile. "All right. This newfangled shit might keep you alive."

She swung the bags across her horse's back, and one small hand fell to the pistol holstered at her hip, fingers brushing it for an instant before she scrambled up onto her horse. "Mine's a modified six-shooter, but the ammunition works the same way, and I'm a fair shot. I wasn't planning on getting myself killed."

He was starting to see that, and it made him feel like a jackass for assuming she couldn't take care of herself. "Sorry."

Surprise widened her green eyes, like she couldn't quite believe the word had crossed his lips. She tightened her fingers around her reins and nodded her acknowledgement. "Nate and Levi all but raised me. Levi wasn't tender with anyone's feelings, especially if he thought flattery might put someone in harm's way, so I'm plenty aware of my physical limitations."

From where he sat, it didn't look like she had any. "You don't have to be at a disadvantage when it comes to fighting. Bigger usually means slower. Use that."

"Nathaniel always told me to use my head." She guided her horse forward, riding like it was second nature. "I'll do whatever you tell me when it comes to a fight. I only want to bring him home."

"Then we just might have a chance." He nudged his horse and headed for the edge of town. "Where are you from? Nate never said."

Something about that made her laugh. "Of course not. I've lived in this town all my life."

"Local girl, huh?"

"Something like that. How do you know Nathaniel? I know bloodhounds come to visit him sometimes, but I don't think I've seen you."

Nathaniel had been one of the first people he'd met when he'd started hunting. "Levi trained me. Back when he still lived up north."

"Almost eleven years ago." The number came so fast it had to have been burned in her memory. "Levi was...fond of my mother. We came to live with him not long after he arrived."

There was only one woman Levi had ever valued enough to keep near. "Ada was your mother?"

Satira stiffened so fast her horse sidled before she tightened her hands on the reins. "Yes."

Another thing Nate had never mentioned. "Levi talked about her sometimes. He..." He'd loved her, as much as he'd been able. "Yes, he was fond of her."

"Yes, he was." Her voice held tension, and loss. "He didn't have to take us in. He didn't have to give me a home when she died."

The old man hadn't often spoken of things like sentiment. "You were family."

Her lips twitched. "I was Ada's girl, and as welcome most days as a stone in his shoe."

Levi hadn't been a particularly warm man, but he was ruthlessly practical. "He may not have been handing over pretty words and hugs, but he provided for you. With a man like that, it's all the same."

"He never saw much use for pretty words and hugs." A brief hesitation, and Wilder picked up the rapid beat of her heart, fast and nervous enough to belie her calm expression. "If you brought me with you intending to have a warm body during the new moon, I'm not unwilling."

Wilder's jaw clenched. She didn't think much of him, if she thought he'd plan to take that sort of liberty without asking. "Takes a damn sight more than 'not unwilling' to heat my blood, girl." He grinned because he knew it would fluster her. "I like my women enthusiastic."

Color rose in her cheeks, but her eyes glinted with stubborn challenge. "It's a wonder you find any, unless you take care not to speak to them first."

"Funny," he murmured. "I've never had a problem, discussion or no."

"I was wrong. *Thirty* pounds of ego, and I pity your poor horse."

Wilder laughed. "He's accustomed to my insufferable bullshit."

"I suppose he would have to be. Do you think we'll be able to rescue Nathaniel and return before the new moon, then?"

Despite her light tone, she was eyeing him with unmistakable interest. Perhaps her questions about the moon phase had less to do with her low opinion of him and more with her own curiosity. “If not, I’ll make arrangements,” he told her.

“I see.” She rubbed the palm of one hand against her dusty trousers, a nervous gesture that matched the quick way her gaze jumped away from him to her horse’s ear. “I’ve never crossed the border before. Nathaniel took me out to the Deadlands a few times when I was younger...”

“But not after you...blossomed?” It was the most polite way he could think of to refer to her considerable curves.

Satira looked like she wanted to cross her arms over her chest again, but she only shrugged. “He said it wasn’t a good place for a young woman.”

Wilder had seen women traded and sold there, either as whores or meals, and not enough of them had been willing participants in the transactions. “He’s right.”

“I know. I’ll do what I have to do, just like anyone.”

She would have run off, unaccompanied. She’d planned on it. The knowledge made Wilder’s gloved fingers tighten around his horse’s reins. “Remember what you agreed to, honey. What I say, when I say it.”

“I remember.” And she sounded grumpy about it too.

The afternoon sun gilded her pale skin, and a hint of breeze ruffled the golden strands of hair that curled around her face. She’d burn without a hat or bonnet, but something told him she wouldn’t appreciate him pointing it out.

They made it out of town before she spoke again, glancing at him with both eyebrows raised. “The plan isn’t to walk the horses the entire way, is it? I can handle a hard ride.”

Leading words, ones she’d meant to make him think of fucking. Of sweat and bare skin and the delicious, wet grip of an eager cunt around his cock. “Hope to hell that’s true, sweetheart.”

He urged his horse into a gallop without turning or waiting to see if she could keep up. If she wanted to play dirty, so could he.

Chapter Two

Wilder didn't hold the gallop for long, but he pushed them hard enough that Satira knew her bluff had been called.

Not that she wasn't a decent rider. Levi had made sure she could sit a horse and stay in the saddle no matter how rough the ride, but she wasn't accustomed to it.

By the time they stopped—to camp, not in a town where she might enjoy the luxury of a hot bath—Satira thought it might be a blessing if she died on the spot. Almost better than facing the humiliation of trying to dismount and ending up in the dirt.

“Having trouble?” Wilder slid from his horse with enviable ease.

“No.” *Liar*. She stroked her horse's neck and gathered every bit of stubborn will she possessed, everything that held her together.

Then she swung her leg over the horse's back and almost cried.

He caught her before her feet hit the ground. “You don't know when to admit you've had enough, do you, little one?”

If she'd thought she could stand on her own, she would have driven her heel into his balls. “Don't call me that. I'm not a child.”

The sound that passed his lips was half laugh, half groan. “I know. You're rubbing your ass up against me.”

Her aching thighs had provided suitable distraction from their relative positions until he called attention to it—and the sheer power that resided in him. Strong hands spanned her rib cage, holding her effortlessly. She wiggled one foot, trying to reach the ground, and let out a frustrated noise when he held her there, snuggled back sweet as can be.

He was warm. And hard. Hard all over and getting harder by the second where his hips bumped against her ass. “It appears you like our respective positions just fine.”

“I'm breathing, aren't I?”

“So far.” The threat lacked heat—she didn't *want* him to put her down.

Wilder laughed and eased her down until a little of her weight rested on her feet. “Take it easy. You'll need to.”

“I know.” A better woman might have pulled away and kept a shred of dignity, but her body wasn't interested in the state of her pride. Few decent men were willing to be caught dallying with the daughter of

a notorious whore, and few indecent men had been eager to brave Levi's wrath, not when they could pay a few coins for an uncomplicated fuck from a far more experienced woman.

No, her bed had been cold for a good, long while. Her life had been cold since the last time a hound had come to town and bedded her with the enthusiasm of any untamed creature. Perhaps she'd developed a taste then for wild, inappropriate men. It would explain her current madness.

"Ready?"

If she said no, he might keep holding her. If she said no, she'd look like a fool. "Yes."

Wilder released her, though his hands lingered, sliding from her rib cage down to the flare of her hips. "Got your footing?" he asked, his voice a low rasp.

Enough was enough. "Hard to get my footing with you gripping my hips like you're ready to take me for a different sort of ride."

"My apologies." He sounded anything but sorry as he pulled his hands away.

The loss of his touch hurt more than her aching body, and it was only then she realized that sex wasn't driving her. It would be a welcome distraction, to be sure, but the hot press of his body had been something else entirely: proof she wasn't alone.

Her fingers tightened around the saddle, and she swallowed hard. "I should see to my horse."

He caught her arm. "Are you all right, Satira?"

Weakness was unacceptable. How many times had Levi pushed her to the edge of tears and sighed his disappointment? Bloodhounds were strong. Unwavering. To earn Wilder's respect, she had to convince him she was both. "I'm simply tired. It has been a difficult day, and I worry for Nathaniel."

His expression was impossible to read in the waning light. "You didn't answer the question, just listed off a bunch of reasons why you *wouldn't* be all right."

"I suppose I did." She tugged away, trying to free herself from his grip before she collapsed and clung to him like a desperate fool. "I'd be grateful if you could help me with my bag. I can admit that I may not be up to managing it just yet."

Wilder let go of her with a short nod. "I'll handle everything."

Of course he would. Bloodhounds always did.

She tried to help him, but even staying busy couldn't disguise her misery. Finally, after watching her struggle for far too long, Wilder sat her down on a fallen log by the fire he'd built. "Wait here. I've got something for you."

Her brash façade faltered under a wince as she drew up her knees. "I'll be stronger tomorrow."

"Hush." A quick dig through one of his packs yielded the paper-wrapped bundle he sought. "I'll get some water in the kettle and make you some of this tea. It'll help."

"Thank you." She rested her chin on her arms and watched him, that wild curiosity filling her eyes again. "You're not much like Levi at all."

And she hadn't expected that. Wilder held his tongue as he set up the spider and filled the kettle with water from his pack. "You mean because I'm not a hundred years old and mean as a rattlesnake?"

The corner of her mouth kicked up. "He'd call what you're doing right now babying me. Wouldn't think much of it, either."

"There's a difference between babying someone and having a little compassion," he argued. "Besides, if you get stove up, we won't be able to ride on tomorrow morning."

"You could send me back home. That's what Levi would do."

"Thought we'd established I'm not Levi."

She tilted her head, sending loose strands of blonde hair tumbling over her sunburned cheek. "Why did you let me come with you?"

She was still looking at him like she half-expected him to abandon her on the trail. "Because Nate's a hell of a lot more important to you than he is to me," he answered honestly. "If I ever turn up missing, that's who I want looking for me. Someone who gives a damn."

"I see. And I do. Give a damn, I mean." Her eyes drifted shut. "I don't have many people left, just Nathaniel and Ophelia. Now that Levi is gone, the house and all of his things will belong to whichever hound replaces him. It might not be one who wants his weapons tended by a girl."

He couldn't argue with that, though he wanted to. "Where will you go?"

She didn't answer. Not directly. "I'm bringing Nathaniel home. Wherever he goes, he'll take me with him."

If Nathaniel came home. "Fair enough."

Silence lasted all of twenty seconds before she came up with a new question. "I assumed, but I didn't ask. Are we going to the Deadlands? I have no idea how far it is on horseback. Nathaniel always took the train as far as he could, even though it took us out of the way."

"We'll be there by tomorrow afternoon."

"You have contacts there?"

Every good hound did. "I know people."

She nodded to her bags. "I brought a few trinkets for trade. I knew I'd have to buy information somehow."

Trinkets wouldn't buy much of anything in the Deadlands. "You would have ended up having to offer your neck to a vampire. You're damn lucky I came along."

"Maybe." Her green eyes turned hard. Old. "I'd have done it, if I had to. I still will. I don't have much to lose."

It chilled him. “Well, curb your reckless fucking behavior, because I like life and I want to keep living it.”

She held his gaze for one second before dropping hers to the ground. “I wasn’t being reckless because I wanted to, or because I didn’t know any better. I’m not a foolish girl. I’m a desperate one. Levi died from some horrible full-moon complication that no one will explain to me, and Nathaniel could be suffering or *dying*, and if it were me, he’d know how to save me. He’d find a way.”

So no one had yet told her the truth. “You want to know what happened to Levi?”

Her head snapped up. “Of *course* I do.”

Wilder poured hot water from the kettle into a tin cup and dropped in the tea. “When did your mother die?”

“A little over four years ago.” She hesitated. “Levi was...kinder before that. Or at least more patient with me. I think it hurt him to look at me.”

“Maybe.” He handed her the cup. “It’s important you understand something. If your mother died four years ago, so did Levi, after a fashion.”

She curled her fingers around the battered tin and took one careful sip. Her nose wrinkled at the taste, but she closed her eyes tight and drank again. “Levi was fond of her,” she said after a moment. “It was never more. Losing her hurt him, but it couldn’t have killed him.”

“She was his mate, Satira, and he didn’t let her go, even when she died. That’s what killed him.”

Confusion furrowed her brow and brought her eyebrows together. “I don’t understand. My mother came to the house as his housekeeper because it was against the rules...for...” Comprehension. “Oh. That’s why it’s against the rules?” A tentative question, hesitant and uncertain.

She was so brazen in some ways, and so innocent in others. “Most hounds won’t walk away, even after a mate dies. The loss can kill them quick or drive them crazy, but it gets the job done. They join their woman soon enough.”

“I see. But how does—” Her cheeks were pink from the sun’s glare, but her sudden blush lit up her whole face. “These are personal questions. I shouldn’t be asking them.”

“Suit yourself. I’d tell you whatever you wanted to know, though.” Better for her eyes to be uncomfortably open.

Her lips pursed as she tilted her head. “It’s not just sex.” She sounded confident about that. “But saying it’s about love seems rather...well, far-fetched, to be honest. Sex, at least, might have a biological explanation.”

“It’s about...” Wilder searched for the right word. “Need, I think.”

She worried her lower lip and stared down into her mug. “I see. Thank you for explaining.”

Her expression was one of loss—and loneliness. “Nate never told you?”

"That would have required talking about sex." She finished the rest of her tea in one gulp. "We pretended I didn't know why he had to sneak out some nights to visit the nice widow on the other side of town."

"And what of your own visitors?"

She shivered, and it was hard to tell if it was a response to the cool night wind or to his question. "They were never *my* visitors. Bloodhounds came to visit Levi and Nathaniel often enough. Some were amiable. Levi pretended not to notice, and Nathaniel never spoke of it."

A dangerous thing to think, that she might have enjoyed her romps. That it might have led her to ask him if they'd be together during the new moon. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"The hounds. Did you seek them out, or were they convenient?"

"Both." She peered up at him, her eyes wary. "Does it trouble you? Would you prefer me wide-eyed and liable to swoon at the sight of a naked man?"

The very thought made him laugh. "No. It arouses some women, that's all. I wondered."

"Why does it—" Her mouth snapped shut, but she trembled as though only a great effort kept the words from tumbling out. A few seconds later, the dam burst. "Is it so different, then? I mean, do human men...do things differently?"

"Sometimes." Wilder shrugged. He wasn't about to tell her everything his lovers had told him, because then she'd want to know where he'd heard it.

"Interesting." Her gaze lingered on his face for a heartbeat before drifting down his body, a speculative curiosity filling her eyes. "I think I should turn in."

Tread lightly, boy. "It's the tea. It makes you sleepy."

Amusement sparked in her eyes as she pushed slowly to her feet. "Rest easy, hound. I have no intention of climbing into your bedroll like a lost puppy."

"Good." He grinned up at her. "I bite."

Her breath caught, either at his smile or his words. She pivoted too fast, wobbled, then caught her balance and moved to the small, rough blanket he'd laid out on the opposite side of the fire.

She shivered in the night air. Wilder told himself he was seeing to her comfort—and not to his own carnal curiosity—as he curled up behind her. "Too cold to sleep alone."

"No biting," she murmured sleepily, but snuggled back against him with a contented sigh. "Bloodhounds have a core body temperature several degrees warmer than that of humans, you know. Perhaps the women who chase after you simply dislike a cold bed."

Wilder was glad she couldn't see his smile. "Perhaps they do."

"Mmm. You should tell me the plan for tomorrow."

“The plan? First we’ve got to get you a disguise.” If anyone involved with Nate’s disappearance recognized her, they’d never make it into the Deadlands.

“If we must.” She was clearly too exhausted to be concerned what that might mean. “I’ll figure something out tomorrow.”

“I know someone who can help. Now sleep.”

Chapter Three

They rode into the edges of the border settlement just after noon, and Wilder led them straight to a whorehouse.

Not that it was advertised as such. No, the building looked boring enough on the outside, like a ramshackle hotel that had taken to selling liquor to fill its common room every evening. The clues were in the small things, like the way the damage and poor repair were merely cosmetic, and a closer look revealed that underneath the weathered boards were sturdy walls that would keep out the heat and cold. There was a knack to hiding wealth with squalor, a skill the border madams had taken to the heights of artistry. Old paint, crooked signs, tables with one wobbly leg—understandable, since it wasn't wise for women to appear *too* prosperous in these times.

Most people wouldn't notice the subtle signs that a brothel was doing well. Then again, most people hadn't grown up in one.

Satira dismounted, struggling to hide a wince as she got her feet on solid ground. The discomfort was better *and* worse today—better because at least she could move a little, but moving certainly hurt more than sitting still. She surreptitiously stretched her legs and almost smiled to think of what Levi would say to her now, his gruff voice exasperated beyond measure. *If you can't walk it off, don't stand up to begin with.*

Wilder, of course, seemed perfectly fine. She pushed down an irrational surge of envy as she tied her horse next to his. "Does one of your contacts work here?" It wasn't inconceivable, she supposed. Her own mother hadn't spoken of such things but, if Ophelia was to be believed, whores heard more secrets than any preacher.

He gave her a maddening half-smile she already recognized. "You could say that."

The front door crashed open, and Satira flinched at the noise as it rebounded against the board wall. A voluptuous woman stepped out, boots creaking on the porch as she shouldered her shotgun and eyed the pair of them.

She was wild. Untamed. Corkscrew curls sat high on her head, held in place by who-knew-what sort of alchemy. She looked old enough to be Satira's mother, but the body on fine display in her low-cut corset had curves, the sort men never seemed able to tear their eyes away from.

Her shrewd, assessing gaze lingered on Satira, too long for comfort. Then she shifted her attention to Wilder with a throaty laugh. "Wilder, honey, where you been hiding yourself? The girls have been crying into their pillows every night, they surely have, thinking you'd forgotten all about us."

“Juliet, the day I forget about you will be the day they lay me in the sod.” He removed his hat and offered the woman a playful bow. “I’ve come to ask a favor.”

An unmistakably fond smile curved the woman’s painted lips, and Satira felt the first stirrings of an odd, nearly foreign emotion.

Jealousy.

She fought to keep her expression politely blank, but Juliet’s too-sharp eyes narrowed. Fortunately, she didn’t remark on anything she might have gleaned, just nodded. “Why don’t you round up that poor girl and bring her inside. She looks like she might like to sit a spell on something that isn’t moving.”

Juliet turned and retreated inside, and Satira glanced at Wilder. “Is it safe to leave our things here?”

He shrugged. “Safe enough. If you’re worried, I can fetch your bags.”

Combined incorrectly, some of the contents of her bag could set off a violent explosion that could level a good part of this settlement. After a moment’s thought, she flipped open one pack and dug through the contents until she found her kit, wrapped in one of her shifts. Each chemical was sealed safely in a nearly unbreakable container, but it wouldn’t stop a curious human from twisting off the tops and setting off a catastrophe. “This should stay with me.”

Wilder arched one dark eyebrow. “What the hell is it?”

She slipped the narrow leather strap of the small padded bag over her head. “You might be able to fight your way through a horde of vampires, but I planned to kill them a little more indirectly, if possible.”

“You’re not going to blow up Juliet’s place, are you?”

As if she’d be foolish—or suicidal—enough to ride with the bag behind her if it were liable to explode at any moment. “Not unless someone takes the bag from me, opens up everything inside and starts combining chemicals at random.”

“I meant on purpose.” Again, that wicked smile. “You haven’t seen what I’ve got planned for you.”

The pieces fell into place a moment too late. A whorehouse. A favor.

A disguise.

Juliet’s voice roared from inside the brothel. “Wilder, I told you to bring that girl inside.”

Satira flinched. “I think I might hate you a little.”

“No you don’t, sweetheart. You just wish you did.”

A woman met them just inside the door. “Wilder Harding, how did I know you’d—” She stopped short when she caught sight of Satira. “Hello there.”

She was beautiful. Perfect brunette curls swept back from her heart-shaped face to frame an elegant neck. Juliet might be hiding her wealth on the outside, but she’d clearly lavished it on the girls, if the cut and quality of the brunette’s corset and skirt were any indication.

Satira became painfully aware of her own appearance—her sunburned nose, uncombed hair and the dusty, ill-fitting clothing she'd worn for more than a day. She felt like a gawkish child as she averted her gaze. "Hello."

The woman held out her hand with a friendly smile. "I'm Polly."

"Satira." Her own hand was dirty and far from elegant, marked from chemical burns, with chipped nails even Ophelia had given up trying to keep neat. She shook Polly's hand gingerly and wished Wilder far, far away before her growing awareness of him turned her into a witless fool. At least she could still remember her manners. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

Polly cast a sidelong glance at Wilder. "Surely you didn't bring the girl here just to scandalize her, you terrible man."

"On the contrary. I have your boss's marker, and I plan to call it in."

"What did you have in mind?"

Wilder's hand slid up Satira's back to toy with her hair. Her body reacted with embarrassing speed, a shiver claiming her as his fingers stirred the strands of hair that lay against the sensitive back of her neck. One fingertip graced the side of her throat, and her nipples tightened with the first whispers of true arousal, so ill-timed she barely heard the rest of his words. "A disguise. We're headed to the Deadlands."

The whore's eyes widened. "She's got an awful pretty neck for that kind of destination."

"So little faith in me, Polly Ann."

She rolled her eyes. "Come with me, Satira. If you've been riding with this scoundrel, you could undoubtedly use a respite."

Satira stepped away from Wilder's hand, crushing the tiny jolt of loss under the boot of her ruthless practicality. "Thank you. I'd appreciate that."

"I know you would, honey." The woman led her down the hall and up the stairs. "Ever fancied having another hair color?"

She hated herself for wondering—even for a moment—if Wilder preferred his women with dark hair. "Not particularly. It would make for a useful disguise, though, I imagine."

"That's why I asked." She stopped outside of a closed set of double doors and eyed Satira. "You'd make a pretty redhead. Nothing brassy like Juliet, but something darker."

Her hair had never been important enough for her to balk at the idea. "I'll trust your judgment."

"Mm-hmm." Polly tapped her chin. "And clothes..."

Only two types of human women roamed the Deadlands—those whose time was rented, and those who were outright owned. A free woman who set so much as a toe across the border was all but asking to become the latter. "I think I might murder him in his sleep."

"Bet you won't be the first woman to try." Polly turned and pushed open the double doors. "Though I think I have an idea that might put Mr. Harding in his place."

“What idea is—*oh*.” Satira’s mouth fell open as she stepped over the threshold and into the most glorious room she’d ever seen.

Warmth radiated from the far wall, where a shining row of drums must have held enough heated water for every person in the settlement to take a bath. Elegant copper pipes had been worked into the design of the room itself, framing wide, beautiful mirrors where they ran along the wall before curving down to feed three spacious tubs.

Plants grew from copper planters in the corners of the room, with wild, exotic blossoms that reflected and multiplied in more silvered mirrors. It looked like a little slice of paradise in the midst of a hard, barren land, and her fascination lasted all of two seconds before her mind began to unravel the puzzles. Whoever had designed the room had been *brilliant*, and they’d turned that sharp intellect toward making a beautiful, comfortable place for women who needed a bit of peace in their arduous lives.

All she’d ever built with her knowledge was weapons. “This is... It’s beautiful.”

“Juliet’s son designed it.” Polly opened a cabinet and pulled out a white cotton robe. “He’s back east now, studying under some inventor in New York.”

As well he should be. The tiniest tug of envy stirred, but repressing it had become habit. The best apprenticeship a girl could hope for was the sort she had—informal and indulgent. “Juliet must be proud. He must be very successful.”

“She’ll talk your ear off if you ask about him.” Polly gestured to one of the bathtubs. “Do you need help with the spigots? Some of the girls have never seen hot and cold taps before, but I’m guessing you won’t be one of them.”

Satira had almost forgotten about the promise of a bath. “No, no I can manage.” She accepted the robe and moved to a smooth wooden bench, settling herself gingerly as her abused muscles protested. “I hope.”

“Looks like Wilder’s been riding you too hard.”

If only she’d been a little more innocent, the words wouldn’t have brought fire to her cheeks. If only there was some way to convince herself that she didn’t *want* to ride Wilder until her knees gave out, until he took over and used all that preternatural strength and wild animal instinct to fuck her past the edge of reason.

She muttered an unconvincing denial and turned her attention to her boots, too embarrassed to meet Polly’s eyes. There had to be something aberrant about a girl who liked beasts more than decent men, but at least it offered a comforting reassurance that Wilder wasn’t anything special—even if his ego might not agree.

Polly hesitated beside the bench. “I’m sorry, do you want me to step out or stay and talk? I confess, I’m not quite sure which a woman from relatively polite society might prefer.”

It was the first time in her life anyone had mistaken her as anything of the sort, and a startled laugh bubbled up. “I couldn’t say which they’d prefer either. I don’t mind talking at all, but I don’t know Wilder

nearly so well as you. I only met him yesterday. I'm a bit..." She trailed off helplessly, unwilling to say the one word that seemed to fit. *Witless*.

Polly smiled. "Flabbergasted?"

"Yes." Satira dropped her boot and curled her toes with a sigh. "I need a disguise that will make it easier for us to mingle with the vampires and their representatives without seeming suspicious."

"Of course you do. You're going to the Deadlands."

"You have an idea?"

"Yes, I did say that." A hint of a smile played at her lips. "There are only a few options. The best, I believe, is for you to dress and act as though you've hired Wilder to escort you out to the border in search of a vampire patron."

It was impossible to keep her horror from her face. "People *do* that?"

"Oh, yes. More than you might expect, really."

Perhaps Levi's influence had instilled her with prejudices she would never overcome, because the thought made her queasy. It had been difficult enough to think that she might have to offer her neck to save Nathaniel, impossible to imagine doing so willingly. Regularly. "I think I'm more naive than I imagined."

Polly shrugged. "It takes all sorts of people to make up the world. There are those who would be equally disgusted by the thought of taking someone like Wilder to bed."

There were, and plenty of them. She'd often heard the slurs cast at her mother. "Wilder's mentor took my mother into his house as his new moon companion. I've spent most of my life around bloodhounds. They may not behave like men, but they're trained to protect us. They fight and die for us. It's not the same."

"Not to you," Polly answered with another shrug. "But perhaps to others it is. Regardless, it will make the perfect disguise."

She eased off her other boot and set them both aside. "Then I imagine we have a great deal of work ahead of us."

"That depends on what sort of actress you are."

There'd never been occasion to discover such a thing. "I think we should assume I will try my best, but we might not want to rely overmuch on my ability to spin lies under pressure."

Polly grinned widely and began to assemble cosmetic items at the vanity. "Then we shall say you don't speak a word of English, so all you have to do is look confused. Where do you wish to be from?"

Satira left her kit on the bench and moved to one of the tubs, sliding one hand along the shining brass rim before reaching for the hot water handle. "I can speak a few words of German, if it helps. Not many—please, thank you and what I assume are a few impolite curses. Nathaniel always used them when he dropped something delicate or smashed his thumb with a hammer, in any case."

"Prussia is a suitably war-torn area," Polly mused. "That will do nicely."

"If you say so." Hot water flowed smoothly from the spigot, and Satira lost interest in anything but the promise of immersing her dirty, aching body in a warm, luxurious bath. Polly continued to talk, chattering about dresses and corsets and a dozen other trivialities that would probably be very important later on.

Not now. Not as Satira stripped off her dusty clothing and climbed into a slice of paradise more magical than any weapon she'd ever cobbled together.

Perhaps she could stay in the tub forever. Forget the world where she had to save Nathaniel, where her future depended on a man trapped at a vampire's mercy. Without her mentor, she'd be cut loose. Abandoned. She could sketch out an ugly, brutal life trying to sell her skills to men who would discredit her, or suffer an even worse life selling her body. She didn't even have the beauty and skills needed to aspire to Ophelia's class.

A common whore. Like her mother.

Unless Wilder—

No. Satira forced the thought away. Such fancies would weaken her resolve. Her desperation was a tool to be used, one that could be mixed with her stubbornness and her wits, same as any of the chemicals in her kit. She'd turn herself into a weapon and unleash it on anyone who got between her and her goal.

Even Wilder Harding.

The women had been upstairs for nigh unto an hour, and Wilder had no idea how much longer he'd have to wait. "Juliet, what the hell is Polly doing up there?"

Juliet lifted a crystal decanter that had proven itself full of fine whiskey and refilled his glass. "I reckon she's dreaming up ways to torture you with low-cut corsets and a pretty little neck all bare for the biting."

The very thought made his skin prickle and his trousers tighten. "Polly *would*, wouldn't she? Pernicious wench."

"Mmm." Juliet slid the glass across the bar, her eyebrows coming together as she watched him. "I hope you know what sort of game you're playing at, venturing into the Deadlands with a little lost lamb and you watching her like a wolf who can't wait to sink his teeth in. Maybe you should go upstairs and take a ride on someone who can handle you."

And Satira would know exactly where he was—and what he was doing. "Don't have time, Juliet. I'll make it back before the new moon, though. You have one of your girls ready for me then."

Amusement crinkled the corners of her eyes. "Only one? You must be slowing down."

"Getting old, maybe," he conceded.

"That so?" Juliet poured herself a whiskey and studied him, her sharp eyes seeing far too much. "You've been fighting a long time, one way or another. There's no undoing what they did to make you a bloodhound, but you could always settle down."

"Like Levi?" He snorted. "No thanks. I wouldn't do that to a woman."

"I didn't say you had to repeat Levi's mistakes." She sipped her drink and tilted her head. "Though it seems to me that girl would let you. You explained the harsh realities to her yet? She's got the widest eyes I've ever seen this close to the border."

"She's not as naive as she looks." Still, guilt stabbed at him.

"She's the daughter, isn't she? Ada's girl? Last time Levi came through was six months back. He asked me if I needed someone around to see to the boilers and all the other little luxuries Anthony built for us before he went to New York. Didn't think much of it at the time, but after I heard he'd died..."

Of course he'd made arrangements for her. Not the hugs and warm words Satira seemed to expect, but exactly what Levi would see as taking care of her. An option that didn't include winding up in the gutter or selling herself on the streets.

An unrecognizable tightness in his chest eased, and Wilder exhaled slowly. "Good, that's good. I'm glad."

Juliet blew out a sigh. "Sure you are, honey. If you're not fucking that girl by the full moon, I'll be mighty surprised. She's got her fingers around your balls already."

He almost choked on his whiskey. "Jesus Christ, Juliet."

"Fine time to turn into a prude. If you don't want to repeat Levi's mistakes, you leave her here with us. We'll look after her."

He was genuinely tempted, but... "You don't know her. She won't stay. If I leave without her, she'll strike out on her own."

Juliet looked like she wanted to argue, but soft footsteps echoed behind him and her gaze slipped away. A moment later, her eyes widened. "Oh, Lord save you."

Well, shit. Polly had poured Satira into crimson satin. The tiered skirt swayed fetchingly as she walked, but Wilder couldn't tear his gaze away from the buckled corset and the way it somehow molded itself to her breasts.

And those breasts were perfect, full and pale and nearly spilling over the top of her bodice. With the tiniest bit of encouragement, a man could have their velvet weight in his hands. A few careful, gentle caresses, and her nipples would be hard. Ready for a man's mouth.

Satira cleared her throat. Loudly. "As I recall, noting that I had tits was damn near the first thing you said to me, so it strains credulity to imagine you didn't realize they were there."

Nothing like the truth to throw someone off balance. "Well, sweetheart. There's tits, and then there's *tits*."

Juliet laughed heartily. “That’s just a man seeing something he wants, honey. Best get used to the expression if you’re headed into the Deadlands.”

Satira braced her hands on her hips and managed to look prim. “My mother always told me there’s nothing flattering about a man’s desire, since he possesses an unlimited supply.”

“That we do, sweetheart.” Better if she didn’t take his admiration too personally.

She looked like she couldn’t tell whether to be relieved or disappointed. She brushed her fingers over her skirts in a self-conscious gesture and looked away from him. “We’ll be renting a carriage, I hope?”

“You can’t sit a horse in that getup.” She didn’t look like a prostitute anyway. She looked like... “What’s the story you cooked up? You’re on the make for a bloodsucker? A consort?”

Color darkened her cheeks. “Polly thought it best. I doubt I’m a gifted actress, but she thought I could pretend not to speak much English. Or any, really. I don’t—I’ve never been skilled at lying.”

“Well, I’m damn good at it. You just stand there and look pretty, and I’ll do the talking.”

Juliet circled the bar and looked Satira up and down. “You’ll do, child. Wilder, I’ll have the groom fetch your bags and transfer your belongings into something more fitting for a wealthy lady. He can bring them down to the coach station while you secure passage.”

“Thanks, Juliet.”

“I owed you this one. Run along, the pair of you.”

Wilder held out his arm to Satira. “Ma’am?”

She hesitated before curling her fingers around his arm, clearly uncertain. “No one will expect me to act a proper lady, will they?”

“Honey, they won’t know what to expect.” He patted her hand and tried to explain. “For all they know, you could have gotten rich last week and not have a damn clue how to act, or you could be goddamn European royalty and just not care. Either way, you’ll be fine, even if you fuck up.”

Satira nodded and let him lead her out onto the creaking steps. “I feel foolish,” she admitted under her breath as soon as the door swung shut behind them. “I *look* foolish.”

It was the last word that came to mind as he stared at her. In fact, words didn’t really come to mind at all. “You’re fine. Stop fretting.”

Her mouth twisted into a wry little smile. “These aren’t the assets I planned to utilize in my daring rescue.”

Wilder flashed her a lascivious grin and glanced at her cleavage. “If you ask me, you should use those bountiful assets more often.”

Her eyes rolled skyward, though she seemed to have gotten past the urge to blush. “Let us hope the men we wish to distract prove to be as taken with them as you are.”

“Not a man, alive or dead, who won’t be, Satira. I can promise you that.”

A team and buggy clattered by, kicking dust into the air as Wilder led her away from the brothel. The stagecoach station sat at the end of the street, a sleek building with two squat, odd-looking steam-powered coaches lined up next to it.

Satira perked up as they drew close, fingers tightening on his arm in her excitement. “The one on the right is the new model. You can tell because of the wider wheels. They help accommodate the shock absorbers.”

“If you say so, honey.” Wilder nodded to the coachman and helped Satira climb the carpeted steps. “All I know is these things are supposed to make for a mighty smooth ride.”

“How do you manage to make everything sound obsce—*oh*.”

The outside was ugly and plain, but inside was ostentatious luxury. Deep, thickly cushioned benches lined each side, so long that Satira could have stretched out on one. Everything was polished and gilded far past the bounds of good taste, and Satira seemed at a loss for words. “This is—”

“Pretentious?”

A laugh bubbled up, but she dug her teeth into her lower lip. “I suppose I’m to wait here while you secure passage?”

“It’ll only take a minute.” Wilder leaned against the edge of the doorway and blew a silk tassel away from his face. “Got a name you want me to give ’em? Something impressive?”

She plopped onto one of the seats and shook her head. “Make something up. You’d know what would work, I’d wager.”

“I’ve got an idea.” Something that would limit questions, but generate plenty of gossip to precede them.

“I’ll trust your good judgment then. In this.” Her gaze dropped to her dress. “Which might indicate that *my* judgment has been rendered questionable.”

Only one thing would put her back on comfortable footing—clear and sincere irritation. “Who needs good judgment when you’ve got tits like that?” Then, whistling, he headed for the coach station.

Chapter Four

She was going to stab Wilder Harding in his sleep.

They'd waited an hour in the coach before the driver had declared them the only passengers. Then he'd climbed up into the awkward enclosure housing the controls and left Satira trapped in an absurdly gilded cage with the crudest, most aggravating man she'd ever met.

And if he made one more comment about her breasts, she was going to—

What? Hit him? Oh, she wanted to pretend violence was on her mind, but too-taut nerves had driven her past the boundaries of sanity. Losing her grip on her fragile self-control might result in acts more carnal than violent.

That self-control took another hit when she glanced from the window and found his gaze had strayed to the bare skin exposed by her corset. How very unfair that the attention stirred heat and longing, when he'd made it so very clear that his appreciation meant as much as a man's admiration for a fine table or expensive liquor. She was a pretty object to be used and set aside. Nothing flattering in that.

Nothing *personal* in that, no matter how much loneliness and her own unsuitable attraction might drive her to pretend otherwise. Anger at herself made her voice sharp. "Would it help our situation if I stripped naked and let you stare? Would that assuage your curiosity?"

For a moment, he looked nothing if not startled, but he recovered quickly. "If the urge strikes you, sweetheart, you be my guest."

Perhaps he thought her too cowardly. Too modest. She *was* too practical, so it must have been madness that forced her hands up. She lifted her chin, held his gaze—a dangerous challenge to a bloodhound—and deliberately pushed the stiff edges of the corset together, far enough for the first hook to pop free.

He didn't move, but he watched her closely. "Feel like playing with fire, Satira?"

Yes. Her capacity for self-delusion must be boundless, because she'd even come up with a rationalization, flimsy though it was. "It might help you keep your thoughts on your job instead of my breasts. Or do you still doubt my enthusiasm? None of the other bloodhounds complained."

"Really, now?" He shook his head and looked away. "First off, I don't doubt anything about you. Second, my mind *is* on the job, so you don't have to do me any special favors."

Any fantasy that her fancy clothes and prettily styled hair might catch his eye withered under his pointed lack of concern. Inspiring lust in a man was apparently a far cry from gaining his interest, but she supposed she should know that better than any.

Her fingers trembled as she carefully fastened her corset. *Need*. Three bloodhounds had taken her to bed and left without a backward glance. Whatever stirred that mating hunger in bloodhounds, she clearly hadn't inherited it.

"Satira."

Humiliation was an unwelcome emotion. It made her unkind. It made her lie. "I probably wouldn't have been enthusiastic enough for your tastes in any case. You're not the type of man I favor."

"I don't doubt that." His dark eyes had cooled, and he leaned back against the seat. "You seem to be used to a different sort of man. One who wouldn't be offended that you didn't really want to fuck him, but you'd do it so he could think straight."

He didn't know.

Relief pounded through Satira, leaving her light-headed. Somehow the fool man was oblivious to the painful yearning twisting her up inside, and she had no intention of handing him a weapon capable of devastating her pride. "I'm used to the normal sort of man," she said stiffly. "The kind who doesn't seem to care why a woman's spreading her legs as long as he gets to make himself comfortable between them."

Wilder snorted. "That's charming, honey, but it ain't *me*. If a woman doesn't want me there more than she wants her next breath, the ride isn't worth it."

Arrogant bastard. "And how is that fair? For a woman to want a man that much, to need him, when he doesn't need her? When he'll take her to bed and leave her there, aching and alone? Is breaking a heart what makes it worth it?"

"I'm not talking about that kind of need," he retorted. "Sex doesn't have to be about undying love, but it damn sure better be about hunger."

She'd never confused the two things before. Maybe she'd simply never known that her lovers' very ability to walk away meant they'd found her wanting. How foolish to feel the lack of something she hadn't known possible, the ghost of rejection after the fact.

Satira folded her arms over her body as if she could shield herself from the uncomfortable turn of her own thoughts. "You don't know the first thing about what I'm hungry for."

"An undeniable truth." He turned his gaze back to the window.

All his warmth and good-natured affection had vanished, leaving a hard man. No, not a man—a bloodhound who had shown an unnatural tolerance for her thus far. She'd do well to remember that, and to keep in mind that tolerance could fade and leave her at the mercy of a beast.

Worse, her recklessness might endanger more than her safety. Nathaniel's life rested in Wilder's hands, and she'd spent the past quarter hour antagonizing him. She cleared her throat and fixed her gaze on his feet, a subtle bit of body language that had usually worked on Levi. "I'm sorry if I—"

"I don't blame you," he interrupted, his voice steely. "You think less of me than the mud on your boots, and that's fine by me. No reason to pretend otherwise. But if you start talking like you need to make nice with me so I don't leave Nate out there, I'll spank your ass."

Holding her tongue had never been her specialty. "Is that a threat or a promise?"

His answer was flat. Hard. "It's a threat."

Anger and guilt formed a hard knot in her belly as she curled her fingers around the edge of the seat. "You're a bloodhound. I was raised to respect your temper and know that it is not always within your control. You make it too easy for me to forget."

"You mean that I upset you." He leaned forward, his elbows braced on his knees. "You're so mad you could spit."

"Yes," she agreed readily, still staring at his legs. "Because you treat me like I'm one of *them*. I think you're an unholy, arrogant bastard, but I've never thought for a moment that you're beneath me."

"No, you think I'm mercenary and mindless, which is even worse."

Her temper snapped. "You *are* mindless if you can't tell that I look at you and see the only safe thing left in my world. It's not my fault you're a fool!"

He surged across the coach so fast it swayed. One strong hand curled around the nape of her neck, and his breath blew hot across her cheek. "I should kiss you now, show you what a fool I really am."

The heat of him burned through her, leaving need in its wake. She pressed one hand to his chest, fingers spread wide as if she had a hope of holding him back. "And I'd be one to let you, if you're so dense about women that you think I don't want you."

"You're a prickly sort. Hard to figure you out."

So strong. So close. She closed her eyes and rubbed her cheek against his, though his rough stubble scratched her skin. "I'm lonely."

Just like that, his touch gentled. "Shh, you're all right. Safe."

"Be a fool," she whispered. "Kiss me."

His fingers tightened for a mere second, but then he released her and retreated to his own coach seat. "That would be a damn bad idea and you know it."

The warmth of his hand lingered on her skin, but the rest of her was cold. Aching, even if she knew he was right. "Then only one of us proved herself an idiot."

"You're too hard on yourself."

Simple words, but they made her uncomfortable. "I can't afford to forgive my own mistakes when they might cost Nathaniel his life."

His eyes shadowed. "Are we back to that? You not trusting me unless you give me what I want?"

"No," she said quickly, not allowing herself to consider the subtle shift. *What I want*. "No, I simply mean—I want to help. I *need* to help, so I can't make mistakes."

Wilder turned to the window once more. "Everyone makes mistakes. Convincing yourself that you're different doesn't help anyone."

"I suppose it wouldn't." She dropped her hands to the smooth fabric of her skirts and closed her eyes. "What will we do when we reach the border?"

"If I played my cards right, someone will come to us."

"Someone who will lead us to wherever they're keeping Nathaniel?"

His jaw tightened, as if in anticipation of the fight to come. "Someone who will lead us to someone important. That's where we start. If it also happens to be whoever has imprisoned Nate, all the better."

Wilder was smart. Skilled. For the first time it struck her as odd that someone so valuable had been sent on a rescue mission. Her willingness to risk her life for Nathaniel made sense. Perhaps his did as well, if he'd forged a friendship during his training.

But bloodhounds were not their own masters, and the Guild had better uses for them than rescue missions that would only save one man, no matter how brilliant that man might be. "Is this what you do? Save people who have been spirited away into the Deadlands?"

"I solve problems," he answered simply. "Doesn't matter where they are."

"And Nathaniel..." It felt traitorous to even imply that he wasn't worthy of rescue, but he was the one who'd taught her to assume the Guild was always looking out for their own best interests. "Is it because he's good at his job? Or because of whatever secret project it is that he kept locked away where I could never see it?"

He glanced at her, just a little too sharply. "What sort of project?"

She'd only glimpsed inside the private workroom once—an accident Nathaniel had been careful never to repeat. Curiosity might have led her to snoop once—or twice—but when her mentor wanted to secure a room, he knew all the ways to do it. "I'm not sure. I thought it was one of his pet projects."

He watched her, his gaze intense. "What do you know? It could be important, Satira."

"Nothing," she repeated, dread uncurling inside her. "But I'm beginning to suspect you know more than you've said."

"All I know is that Nate was working on something big. Something important to the Guild."

To the vampires too, presumably. Levi's death during the last new moon had given them the perfect opportunity. A well-planned attack, under cover of darkness... "So that's why they left me alone? Because they were only there for Nate?"

His hands closed into fists. "I don't know."

Satira wrapped her arms around her body and fought back a shiver. “He managed to set off our alarm before they took him. I was still half-asleep when they reached my room, but I’d already—” Guilt very nearly choked her. “I have a safe room. Levi taught me to lock myself in if anyone attacked. Perhaps it wasn’t worth it to break their way in once they had who they’d come for.”

His voice lowered to a tense rasp. “It means they came in with a very specific objective. A task to complete.”

“And they completed it.” She closed her eyes and drew in a slow, careful breath, desperate to settle her nerves. “So he’s more likely to be alive, then?”

“The Guild seems to think so.”

Looking at him was more difficult this time, but she forced herself to do it. To reassess what she’d seen of him, and the conclusions she’d drawn. It had been easy to believe the Guild wouldn’t waste a competent asset to rescue one lone man who was likely already dead. But with an important project at stake... Oh yes. They’d send their best.

Perhaps it was time to assume Wilder might deserve a little bit of his ego. “Then I owe you an apology. I made certain...assumptions about your qualifications as a rescuer.”

Wilder actually laughed. “Yes. Yes, you did.”

Satira pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes. “I wasn’t the only one.”

He acknowledged the truth of her words with a small nod. “So we’re square now, right?”

As square as they could be with no mention of how very close they’d come to kissing. Or that she’d slept in his arms the previous night, safe and warm and more at peace than she’d been in weeks. “I believe we are.”

Again, he nodded, this time as if her words settled the matter. “Then we can get on with what needs doing.”

Saving Nathaniel. For the first time since he’d been taken, Satira honestly believed they might manage it.

They reached the border just after nightfall, and the main street through the rough-and-tumble settlement blazed with gaslights and lanterns hung from windows. More than half were red, though there was no telling whether they advertised sex for sale...

Or blood.

Wilder climbed out of the carriage and held a hand out to Satira. “I know which hotel we should go to. I’ll do the talking, you just stand there and look put out if it takes too long.”

She slipped her hand into his and stepped down, still a bit uncertain in the heeled slippers Polly had provided. Her gaze swept the street, taking in the details in a slow, methodical fashion until the first piercing whistle split the night air.

A dirty, intoxicated gunslinger leered appreciatively at her from the opposite side of the street, and Wilder was close enough to hear the tiny, nervous hitch in her breath before she tightened her hand around his and lifted her chin.

He bared his teeth, and the drunk man sneered but backed down. "Keep walking," Wilder whispered to Satira. "You don't notice his sort, because that's my job."

She nodded, the barest whisper of movement. "I'm ready."

He nodded toward the saloon, a three-story affair that surely had rooms upstairs for all sorts of things she'd never considered. "Even ready for that?"

"The men won't do more than look at me, will they?"

Over his dead body. "Not a chance."

If she pressed any closer to his side, she'd be climbing him. "Then I can stand anything."

They both had to stay calm and hold their ground, because the last thing she needed was to watch him fight to defend her. So Wilder took a bracing breath and climbed the wide steps up to the swinging doors.

Deafening silence didn't fall when they walked in, but those at the tables closest to the doors turned to stare, mostly at Satira. More than a few covetous gazes, male *and* female, followed her as they walked to a small table near the bar and sat.

It took the space of three heartbeats for his gambit with her alias to pay off. The bartender appeared at his elbow, bowing so low as to be obsequious. "If I might inquire... Could this beautiful flower humbling my establishment be the lovely Lady Rothschild? Word of her arrival has preceded her. Several have already left messages, requesting the honor of an interview."

Satira looked at Wilder, her widened eyes saying more loudly than words that she thought he'd lost his mind. "The lady is fatigued from her journey," he told the man gruffly. "She'll only consider interviews and offers once she's had some rest, but she would like some refreshment."

The man shifted his attention to Satira, who managed to plaster a haughty look on her face, though her jaw clenched so tightly it looked like it hurt. When it became clear she had no intention of saying anything, the bartender looked back to him. "Of course. Only the best for our distinguished guest."

Wilder mustered a dismissive nod and went back to studying the room. When the bartender had gone, he leaned close to Satira. "Gonna make it?"

Her lips barely moved with her whispered reply. "I'm suitably occupied planning my revenge."

"It got their attention, didn't it?" The look she gave him was worthy of any outraged heiress, and he rolled his eyes. "It worked. Now we just have to play it out."

She parted her lips, glanced around the bar at the dozens of eyes staring at them in abject curiosity, and snapped her mouth shut. Color crept its way up her neck and into her cheeks, but she clung to her aloof demeanor until the barkeep returned with bread and stew and a vinegary wine that a true aristocrat wouldn't have let within a stone's throw of her lips.

Satira ignored everyone else in the saloon as she ate. Though her discomfort was plain to him, he doubted anyone else would notice. When she finished her meal, he tossed several crisp bills on the table and rose to offer her his arm.

Half the bar watched her slide her hand into the crook of his elbow and rise, her back held stiffly straight and chin high. Wilder got more than a few irritable looks from men and a couple of come-hither smiles from women whose eyes promised they'd give him a better time than any stuck-up blueblood.

It wasn't unusual for guards and escorts to extend their duties into the bedroom, and many of them probably figured he'd be climbing into Satira's bed with her tonight. His dick grew hard at the thought, and he didn't have to feign a dour expression as they walked out.

If only they knew.

Chapter Five

He'd almost managed to get to sleep when a timid knock sounded on the door that led to Satira's adjoining room. "Wilder?"

He fought the urge to slam a pillow over his face. "Yeah?"

She must have taken his reply as permission to enter, because the door inched open and she slipped through, a slight shadow wrapped in a blanket. The floorboards creaked as she took a step closer to the bed. "Do you mind...?"

She looked like she thought he'd growl at her until she ran screaming from the room. "Come on in."

"I can't sleep." Her voice held more than a little shame at the confession. "If people are expecting you to bed me, it can't hurt our disguise if we sleep in the same room, can it?"

Now he wanted to slam a pillow over his lap. "Can't hurt our disguise." It could only hurt *him* if he had to control himself around her. She grasped her blanket tight around her shoulders, but the gauzy fabric brushing the floor as she walked was sheer, flesh-colored silk.

She stopped next to the bed. "If you don't want me here, I'll go. I'll understand."

"Do you?"

"I think so." She stared at the floor. "Men have needs, but you're not interested in complicating our already difficult situation by giving in to them."

If he was a snake... "Did you come over here for sex, or because you'd sleep better if you weren't alone?"

"The latter." She shivered and clutched at the blanket as it began to slip. "I know you could get to my room quickly enough if anything happened, but the way some of those men were watching me..."

She was scared, and he felt even worse about his lust as he patted the blanket beside him. "Climb up. You don't have to be alone, and you don't have to worry about me."

"Thank you." The blanket gaped open as she scrambled onto the bed, revealing that the damn flimsy nightgown Juliet had packed for her was transparent all over. She shivered and pulled the blanket up to her chin.

Wilder shook his head. "That scrap of nothing isn't warm enough."

Satira choked on a laugh, a little hysterical but genuine. "I know. If it gets much colder tonight you'll have to kick me out of your bed to keep me from cuddling as close as I can."

The laughter was better than the way she'd looked at him before, hesitant and wary and almost ashamed of her fear. "If you put your cold feet on me, I'll scream like a little girl."

Icy toes poked at his leg, and he laughed and shoved her away.

She squirmed right back, and this time he got an entire foot pressed against his knee. Her breathless laughter cut short on a little moan of pleasure. "You're so *warm*."

"Won't be for long." He affected a growl, one he ruined by laughing again. "Jesus, woman. What were you doing, hanging your legs out the window?"

Satira huffed, but it didn't stop her from tucking her other foot against his shin. "My feet get cold."

"You're a walking icebox."

She echoed his words back, laced with drowsy contentment. "Won't be for long."

Quick as a rattlesnake bite, his protective shell of humor faded, leaving him in bed with a sleepy, scantily clad woman whose body made his knees weak. "Then it'll be my turn to freeze."

One small hand crept back across the covers until her fingers brushed his. "I'd keep you warm."

His balls ached. "Better watch what you promise, sweetheart. I'm not a noble man, no matter what you think."

Satira twisted until she faced him, eyes wide but unafraid. "It's been eleven months since a man took me to bed. I don't want noble."

His first thought was to turn her over his knee and spank her. That led directly to his second thought, a mental image of her bent over in front of him, her pale ass red from his hand, her cunt glistening and wet. "Satira."

She squeezed her eyes shut and went still, her slightly ragged breaths and too-quick heartbeat the only sounds for long moments. Then she breathed out a tiny sigh. "You make me feel like such a fool, throwing myself at a man who doesn't want to have me. Over and over again, and I'm supposed to be intelligent."

He urged one of the thin straps of the nightgown from her shoulder. "You worry too much."

"I know." With her eyes still shut she missed his mouth the first time, her open-mouthed kiss landing on his cheek.

His cock jerked like she'd licked him, and he turned his head far enough to meet her second kiss head-on, opening his mouth under hers. He swallowed her tiny little moan, and for a moment she seemed shy. Her tongue darted along his lower lip, then returned to stroke deeper, teasing against his.

He moved before he realized it, rolling them both and pinning her to the bed. "I'm not a boy. You know that, right?"

A short, jerky nod, and she wet her lips. "You're not just a man, either. I know that too."

No fear, and he trembled at the thought of being able to let go. *Really* let go. "No, not a man, either."

She craned her head up and kissed his chin, then the corner of his lips. "I will enjoy your attentions. Even if you wish to bind me, or order me to my knees, or take me across yours."

"Shh." Right now, there was only one thing he wanted to do. He slid one hand into her hair and tilted her head back, opening her mouth wider so he could kiss her deeply.

There was nothing quiet about her moan this time. Her fingers found the back of his head, clutching at him as if she could pull him closer. She reacted more quickly than he thought she would, melting under him.

He trailed his mouth to her neck and collarbone. "What if I do something else entirely? Will you like that?"

"I won't know until you do it." Her fingers stroked down to his shoulder, exploring with unabashed curiosity. "I like an adventure. And learning new things."

"If what I have planned for you is new, you've been bedding the wrong men."

Her bare shoulder lifted in a shrug, but her voice held a soft vulnerability. "They found me pleasant enough to tumble. Perhaps I didn't inspire them. None of them had seen me in my fancy hair and expensive dress, after all."

"Like I said..." He skimmed one hand down her side and gathered her sheer gown high on her leg. "You've been bedding the wrong men."

She laughed and bent one knee, sliding her foot along his calf. "Perhaps. So how do you intend to prove that you're the right man?"

"I could." His fingertips tickled over the top of her thigh. "Spread your legs."

No hesitation at all. She opened for him with a quiet, eager noise, her hips lifting toward his hand. "And here I was, certain you'd want to see my breasts first. You seem so fond of them."

"I know how to take my time."

Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Are you going to take me?"

Wilder slipped his hand under her gown, between her legs. "You mean am I going to fuck you?"

"Yes, are you—" A gasp, and her fingers clutched at the back of his head until her nails pricked his scalp. "I don't have—I didn't br-bring anything..."

Of course she'd be concerned about a child. "I won't put my dick inside you." Instead, he rubbed two fingers against her and groaned at her slick wetness.

Her breath hitched in and came out as a quiet moan, so sweet and innocent it made the words that followed unimaginably dirty. "You can put your cock anywhere you like as long as you don't come in my cunt."

He delved deeper, slipping one finger into her. "What about my tongue?"

"Where do you want to put it?"

Wilder grinned. "Where will you let me?"

Satira's eyes fluttered shut. One heel dug against the bed, pushing her hips up and forcing his finger deeper. "If you keep doing that, I'll let you put it anywhere."

He leaned over her so his mouth was close to her ear. "You want me to fuck you with my fingers while I tease you with my tongue?"

She turned her head so fast their foreheads bumped together and kissed him, hungry and desperate, and Wilder didn't need an answer.

She liked kissing him, and he knew he could get her off plenty fast. He guided her tongue into his mouth and thrust a second finger inside her. Wet as she was, she was tight too, gripping his fingers as she made low, pleased noises against his mouth.

He forced himself to lift his head. "Nice and easy, right?"

Moans turned to a whimper of protest as she dragged him back. "Don't be careful with me. Want me."

And that was the heart of it, simple. Primal. Everything that excited him would do the same to her because what she really needed was to *be* needed.

Wilder pulled his hand away and sat up. "Do you want to know what I see when I look at you?"

Wildly dyed red hair fell around her face in a tousled mess as she pushed up to her elbows, looking flushed and debauched with her gown falling from her shoulder and her breasts all but visible through the flimsy, clinging fabric. "Tell me." Not a command. A plea.

He brushed the hair back from her face. "I see a beautiful woman who thinks she's plain. But you're not, Satira. You're gorgeous, and your body could melt a man in his boots."

"I don't want to melt a man," she replied, nothing more than a whisper. "I want to melt you."

She had been, since the moment he'd dragged her out of the busted lift. "Then kiss me again."

The darkness couldn't hide her trembling as she rose to her knees and hooked one arm around his neck. Her body pressed close, rubbing silk against his naked skin as she kissed him.

He kissed her until the blood pounded in his ears and she clutched at him hungrily. Then he tilted her back to the bed and distracted her with a quick nip at her throat and a tease of his fingers as he slid down her body.

Arousal made her shameless. Her fingers twisted in her flimsy nightgown and eased it up until it pooled around her hips. Wilder urged her legs apart and lay on the bed between them. "Relax."

She lifted her hips, straining up toward him in silent yearning, and he pressed her down to the bed. By the time he let her come, she'd be begging. "Touch your breasts."

Her eyes widened, but she obeyed, bringing both hands to stroke along the curves barely hidden by her nightgown, circling closer and closer to the peaked nipples without ever touching them.

He wrapped his hand around the inside of her thigh and watched her. "Your nipples. Pinch them, just a little."

This time she inched her gown lower, off one shoulder until the strap lay tangled around her elbow and nothing protected her pale skin. Not from his gaze and not from her fingers. She gasped as her fingers closed on the tight bud, then caught his gaze. "How would you touch them? Harder?"

He shook his head and licked her hip, determined to seduce her with his words as much as his touch. "I'd make them wet with my tongue."

Without tearing her eyes from his, she lowered her hand until her fingertips brushed his lips. He closed his mouth around them, watching her as he sucked her fingers gently.

She liked it, that was beyond doubt. Her teeth sank into her lower lip but couldn't hold back her sweet little yearning whimper. After a moment her hips twisted, testing his grip.

Wilder held her still and released her fingers. "I'm going to put my mouth on you now."

"Oh..." This time her fingers brushed his hair, tangling in the short length as she whispered one more trembling word. "*Please.*"

He parted her with his fingers. She was wet already, slick with passion, and he teased the tip of his tongue slowly over her folds. "Scream if you need to. Don't hold back."

"Please, Wilder..." Her voice had gone husky and low, and her body moved restlessly, as if she couldn't hold herself still. "It's been so long since a man touched me. Waiting is a torment. Help me come, please help me..."

Fast wasn't his style, not like this, but he drew the flat of his tongue over her in a slow, firm lick. "Right now?"

"Yes!" Not quite a scream, but a satisfying exclamation.

Wilder growled, eager for more, so he dipped one finger inside her as he focused his attentions on her clitoris. In moments her restless movements shifted, gained a sharp eagerness that grew along with her whimpers. Then she gasped, and her slick cunt clenched tight around his finger as her body trembled.

"More?" He slicked his finger down to her ass, probing her tight, tense flesh. "Easy, sweetheart."

Her shoulders came up off the bed, her body propped on one elbow as she stared down at him with eyes glazed from pleasure. "Do you want to take me that way?"

His cock jumped at the thought. "Maybe someday, but not tonight."

A nervous nod as she wet her lips. "I—I have heard there can be pleasure in it, but I've never—"

"There can be pleasure in a lot of things." He pressed a little harder, and his fingertip slid into her ass.

For a moment she hovered, her lips parted on a silent moan. Her eyes drifted shut and her head fell back. "I want to feel them all."

"First you," he promised, his voice low, "then me." He bent his mouth to her once more, determined to taste her release again and again before he let her touch him.

Satira lost count after the third orgasm.

She was feverish. Wild. Pleasure twisted inside her, dug into her and tossed her about until she found herself clutching at the iron headboard so she wouldn't fly away.

Wilder was insatiable. And wicked. The sound of her broken pleas must have been incredibly pleasing, because she was limp and trembling before he finally pulled his hands and mouth from her body and climbed up beside her.

“All right?” he asked, brushing her hair from her damp forehead.

How could he possibly be so gentle when arousal must be a torment? Satira traced her shaking hand down his chest until she found the hard length of his erection, hot and ready under her fingertips. “I’ll be better when you’ve felt a fraction of the pleasure you’ve given me.”

He hissed in a breath and thrust against her hand. “You’re so eager.”

“I was always eager.” She released him and rocked up to her knees. The flimsy length of her nightgown lay tangled around her body, caught on her hips and falling from one shoulder. Without taking her gaze from his, she curled her fingers in the fabric and eased it up and over her head. “You make me shameless.”

He clenched his fists around the sheets. “How shameless?”

So shameless she was tempted to risk conceiving. Tempted—but unwilling to take the chance. Instead she dropped her hand to the hard muscle of his thigh. “What would please you most?”

The corner of his mouth ticked up. “Not trying to sleep with this hard-on.”

She wrinkled her nose. “Are you shy now, Wilder? Too shy to tell me where you want my hands or my mouth or any other part of me that tickles your fancy?”

“Want to hear the naughty words, huh?” His hand slid up over her cheek and into her hair, then closed tightly, pulling. “Put that sweet mouth on my cock and make me come.”

Not quite rough, but his grip still commanded. She let him urge her head down, bending over him even though the angle was awkward. Scooting her hips toward the head of the bed helped, but she still found herself off balance, one hand braced against the bed between his knees, the other resting on his stomach.

Her position might be vulnerable, but there was power in taking him between her lips. He went rigid, whispering encouragement as she savored the taste of him with slow, lingering licks.

Far too soon, his grip in her hair grew almost painful. “I said for you to make me come,” he rasped. “Stop teasing.”

The thread of desperation in his voice was better than the pleasure he’d given her. *Need*. In that moment he needed her as badly as she needed him, their mutual satisfaction assured.

Well, almost assured. She’d been bedded thoroughly and skillfully in the past, but never repeatedly. Most affairs had lasted days at most, and a wide variety of experiences didn’t precisely translate to *being* experienced.

Still, she had enthusiasm. Parting her lips, she took as much of his cock as she could manage. He arched up, groaning her name, and she shivered at the giddy pleasure of seeing a hard man undone beneath her touch.

She worked him until her own arousal had built again, then lifted her head and watched his face as she reached for his free hand. "Help me," she whispered as she moved their twined fingers toward his cock. "Tell me what you like. Show me how to touch you."

Wilder wrapped both their hands around the rigid length of his erection and thrust up into their shared grip. "Harder."

His hand tightened around hers, showing her what he wanted. A firm, rough touch, his hips driving with enough force to make her body weak. Too easy to imagine him taking her like this, the way he'd fill her so fully that no amount of arousal would diminish the sweet friction of a demanding claiming.

The ache between her thighs blossomed into a throb. She shifted her body and tugged lightly against his grip on her hair. When his fingers slipped free she sat up and knelt astride one of his thighs, one hand still trapped beneath his and the other smoothing down her body. "Would you like to tell me how I should touch myself, or shall I do what pleases me?"

He grinned, feral and hungry, and the muscles in his thigh flexed under her. "I can make you come just like this."

Maybe he could, at that. A bit of squirming was all it took before his next thrust rubbed his leg against her so hot and perfect that her mouth fell open. It was hard to decide where to rest her gaze—on the large, rough hand curled around her own, or on Wilder's face as he watched her, hungry and sure.

His hips bucked against their hands, and he groaned again. "Fuck."

The quickened pace and hard press of his thigh were too much. The tension trembling inside her twisted into an impossible knot, so tight and heavy she thought she'd go mad from it. She got out half of his name on a breathless pant before heat turned to fire.

Then she came, so hard and fast her toes curled and her body jerked. Her free hand smashed against the bed next to his hip as she struggled to keep her balance.

Wilder's hoarse groan rose in time with her own gasping cry, and his fingers clamped down, jerking their hands up the length of his cock with frantic urgency. Another shudder rocked her body as his thigh clenched. She fisted her free hand in the covers and whispered his name, and he rewarded her with a shout and the hot spill of his seed across her chest.

His mouth crashed to hers in a kiss almost bruising in its intensity. His teeth sank into her bottom lip. "Satira."

She smiled against his mouth. "Wilder."

His chest heaved with a rough laugh. "That was hot as hell."

“Mmm.” She eased to the side until she was kneeling next to him, then straightened slowly. “I suppose I should be relieved you secured a suite with a bathtub for me.”

“Right.” His head hit the pillow. “Jesus.”

Satira traced idle circles on his chest with her finger, feeling oddly shy considering the sorts of things she’d just done. “You could come with me. If you wanted.”

“To the bath?”

Without the blankets, the room was too cold. She stretched out on her back beside him, head pillowed on his shoulder and her side tucked firmly against the warmth of his body. “Unless you like me like this.”

“It has its appeal.” He reached over and brushed his knuckles up her arm. “Come on. I’ll draw you that bath.”

Experience prompted her, a wisp of memory, from a cocky young bloodhound who’d gone wild at his own scent on her body. She caught his gaze and lifted her fingers and rubbed his seed into her breasts.

Wilder caught her wrist, guiding her fingertips to her parted lips. “The next time I come, I want to be in you.”

Her good intentions must be doomed, because she wanted that too.

Chapter Six

Seventy-two hours passed in a blur of uncomfortable tension and unbridled passion.

By day Wilder haunted the inn's common room, acting as her armed guardian and business manager. He brought her books to while away the long hours in-between fretting about Nathaniel, and she did him the courtesy of pretending they helped. Nothing could stop her from considering all of the ways Nathaniel could be suffering now. Hurting. Dying.

In her worst moments she wondered if Wilder had any plan at all, but helplessness kept her trapped. Even at her best, she was still a scientist. Not a fighter. Running off on her own would get her killed more surely than waiting, and Nathaniel would hardly be served by her death.

So she waited. She gathered her nerves every day, until Wilder escorted her downstairs in the evenings to be paraded about like a prized jewel to be won. They dined in a different establishment every night while men made increasingly elaborate offers that Wilder pretended to consider before taking her upstairs.

To bed.

Always his bed, though hers was perhaps more luxurious. But there was something meaningful about the moment she stepped through the dividing door, something that turned him from protective escort to a man hungry to possess her.

And he did. On the first night he stroked every inch of her and teased her until she was begging. She came around his fingers and whimpered helplessly when he slicked his thumb into her ass and made her come again. But he wouldn't use his cock, not then and not on the second night when he coaxed her astride his face and thrust into her mouth while he drove her to four painfully sharp climaxes.

By the third night she was praying that he'd turn his attention toward procuring a condom, and counting the days frantically on her fingers. Instead he used *his* fingers, two so thick and wide the stretch danced the line between pleasure and pain until he added his clever tongue and made her see stars. She begged for him to fuck her and he laughed and made her come again. Then he put her on her knees and whispered dirty promises while she worked him with her mouth, illicit words about the way he'd push his cock deep until he was slick and wet, then take her ass.

Which made the fourth evening's dinner torturous. She hated herself for wanting to escape the cloying confines of the latest common room and retreat to the darkness of a bedroom and a plain mattress. A better woman would be focused on her mission. The man she'd come to rescue, and whatever mysterious

information Wilder swore he would soon have within his grasp. But as long and troubled as her days were, as soon as he walked into her room at night she could think of nothing but the moment when he'd take her back upstairs and drown worry in bliss.

Perhaps wanton behavior bred true.

"You're distracted," Wilder murmured, his mouth close to her ear. "You're starting to look antsy instead of bored."

She shivered as his breath danced over her skin. Distracted was a mild, ineffectual word. She was frantic. Foolish. She inched her chair to the side and tried to summon a glare. *Don't make it worse.*

"Now you just look angry."

Probably because she *was* angry—at herself. She reached for the banged-up goblet holding wine so tart it wasn't hard to let her puckered lips and wrinkled nose pass as disdain.

"That's my girl." He leaned back, sweeping his gaze around the room. "I'm starting to wonder if this is going to work."

At least the words concerned her enough to banish thoughts of sex. She waited until a particularly amorous gunslinger stopped gaping at her, then chanced a reply, moving her lips as little as possible. "Then what next?"

Wilder shrugged. "We try something else."

They had resources. Their wits. Wilder's strength. Her stubbornness. She took another slow sip of her wine and gave a small nod.

Several moments later, Wilder tensed beside her as a blond man approached the table, his hat in his hand.

He was tall. Shaggy hair and a rough beard gave him a wild look, and dark, feral eyes made every instinct she possessed sharpen in recognition. She'd seen enough bloodhounds to recognize *something* in the way they walked, as if they owned the world and had nothing to fear from anyone in it.

The man stopped next to the table and bowed low before glancing up. He winked at her, a sly, amused smile curling his lips as if they shared a secret, then straightened and turned his attention to Wilder. "I have an offer for your lady."

Wilder kicked out a chair. "My lady will listen."

His *lady* wasn't supposed to understand English, which meant Satira had to keep her expression blank and not let on she knew anything was different about this particular man, aside from her protector's willingness to let him sit.

The new bloodhound spun the chair around and straddled it, crossing strong arms across the back. "A hundred dollars a week," he said without preamble. "Her own suite of rooms. Two lady's maids, three servants. Two nights to herself out of every seven."

For the first time, Satira understood why a woman might offer her neck to a vampire.

"One-twenty," Wilder countered. "Two maids, three servants, and a coach of her own."

"Horse-drawn or steam?"

"At your master's discretion."

The stranger glanced at Satira, his gaze sliding over her in a manner a hairsbreadth short of too familiar. "Is your continued presence a condition, or is this a short-term job?"

He lifted one shoulder in a casual shrug. "That point is open for negotiation."

Satira fought the urge to squirm as the man continued to study her. Instead she looked away, cultivating her best bored look as her fingers curled into her skirts under the table. After a long silence, the chair scraped across the floor. "Why don't we take our negotiations somewhere a little more private, and see what we can settle upon?"

Wilder turned to her and nodded. "The choice is yours."

If he was giving her a choice at all, it followed he wanted her to agree. She nodded once and then held out her hand.

Before Wilder could take it, the blond man rose from his chair and closed his gloved fingers around hers with another of those wicked smiles that probably set female hearts aflutter whenever he chose to wield it. Cool, firm lips brushed her knuckles, his mustache tickling the back of her hand before he glanced up. "Archer, at your service, m'lady."

Wilder's expression didn't change, but he kicked the chair again, slamming it into the man's knee. Satira was close enough to see his tiny flinch—and the odd little flash of satisfaction across Archer's face as he released her hand and straightened. "I've taken the liberty of securing the private dining room. If you care to escort your lady?"

Wilder rose and pulled back her chair before offering his arm, his sharp gaze still on the blond man. "If you please."

It seemed as if every eye followed them as Wilder led her to the far side of the common room. A heavy wooden door opened to reveal a smaller dining room decorated in golds and rich burgundy, from fabric draped haplessly on the walls to the too-large tablecloth that dragged against the floor.

Satira pulled free of Wilder the moment the door closed and braced both hands on her hips, fixing the man with her best glare.

It made Archer laugh. "Well, old man, you can still rile the ladies up, true as you ever did."

Wilder punched him on the arm. "Maybe you should keep your lecherous stares to yourself, Archer."

Her ire rose another notch. "I'm glad the two of you find this amusing."

"I'm not amused," Wilder retorted. "I'm about to kick this turd's ass."

Satira ground her teeth together until her voice came out as clenched as her jaw. "Why?"

Archer laughed. "Bloodhounds are territorial, sweet thing." He tossed his hat onto the table. "Best remember that if you plan to run with one."

Wilder turned a chair around and sat. "What the hell are you doing here anyway, Arch?"

"Undercover." Archer sprawled in the opposite chair and lifted both booted feet to the table, heedless of the damage they'd probably do to the precious tablecloth. "Been deep in the Deadlands for six months now."

"Doing what?"

"Inciting the bloodsucking bastards into killing each other off. Most of them are in a blood feud with at least a half dozen of the other ones. Keeping them stirred up isn't so hard."

Wilder chuckled. "Sounds like fun."

It sounded useful. Satira stepped forward and planted herself firmly between the two men, intent on capturing Archer's undivided attention. "Have you heard anything about a Guild inventor who's been taken captive?"

The man's humor faded, and a muscle in his jaw ticked. "I've heard rumors. Been waiting for confirmation."

Too many nights in Wilder's bed had dulled her sense of self-preservation. She'd already taken a step forward before she remembered that the man sprawled so casually in front of her wasn't a man at all. The urge to curl her fingers in a bloodhound's vest and shake him until answers tumbled out was damn close to suicidal.

Her hands shook with the effort control cost her. "What rumors?"

He watched her sharply. "That one of the younger bloodsuckers is planning a coup, but he needed a weapon. He needed a Guild inventor."

"Which one?"

Archer huffed out a laugh, and Wilder spoke. "We plan to head out, Arch, so you may as well tell us."

He shook his head. "You're heading for a fight with a lady in tow? You're a bigger fool than I thought."

"The lady can take care of herself."

That warmed her a little. Enough to let her take a step back. Toward Wilder. "Please tell us."

Archer didn't relax, though his expression cleared. "His name is Thaddeus Lowe. Ever heard of him?"

Wilder tensed again. "Some."

"Some?" Satira demanded, panic rising. Wilder's reaction was enough to scare half of the life out of her. "Is it worse than you expected?"

It was Archer who answered. "Lowe is a shrewd son of a bitch. Mean. It won't be easy getting close, but I might be able to get it done."

"I'll do anything," she whispered. "*Anything*."

"Satira." Wilder rose and stepped in front of her. "I'd be much obliged, Arch. We have to get Nate out of there."

The other bloodhound nodded and dropped his hat back on his head as he stood. "I'll be in touch. This time tomorrow at the latest."

Archer left, leaving Satira staring at Wilder's rigid back as the door clicked shut again. "Wilder?"

He turned slowly, releasing a shaky breath. "Didn't like having him so close, that's all."

It took her a moment to understand, and even when she did, she didn't quite believe it. "So close to me?"

He didn't meet her gaze. "Sorry. I'm usually much more reasonable."

Perhaps it wasn't proper to feel a kindling warmth in her belly. She reached out a hand to touch his shoulder. "I have never had a man be unreasonable about me before."

Wilder laughed a little. "You sound pleased."

"It's..." Thrilling. Exciting. Soothing, to think someone had strong enough emotions regarding her to behave irrationally. Soothing to *matter* to someone. "It's pleasing. In moderation."

His hands framed her hips, pulled her close. "I'll bear that in mind."

Satira turned her head and rested her cheek against his shoulder with a soft sigh. "Then tomorrow, we'll know how to find Nate."

He sobered. "Tomorrow. You should get some rest tonight."

It wasn't the loss of his promised wickedness that hurt, but the warmth and comfort of having his strong body curled around hers. "Alone?"

"You can sleep with me," he told her, "but I do mean *sleep*."

She tried to hide her smile against his shoulder. "As long as you keep my feet warm."

"That's the only thing hounds are good for, sweetheart."

It sounded like a warning. Perhaps he didn't care for the way she held him, the way she'd snuggled up against him. Too intimate, too expectant. Satira stepped back and reminded herself that having a man's lust could be a long way from having his regard. Her words must be lighthearted. Teasing. "You're skilled at keeping *all* of me warm."

His eyes were dark, and he closed his hands around her arms. "Don't figure you'd agree to stay here tomorrow."

If he'd bedded her for the last few nights in hopes of making her more agreeable to being left behind, he'd be sorely disappointed. "Don't figure I would."

He sighed. "Thought so."

She had one point on which she had every intention of digging her heels in. "And I'll be wearing something reasonable. So if you'd like to spend a moment admiring my tits, you'd best do it now."

Finally, he unbent enough to smile. "Tonight, perhaps, before we sleep."

So there'd be one more night of furtive touches and desperate pleasure. "Take me to bed, Wilder Harding. I yearn for your admiration."

He kissed her, a glancing brush of his lips on hers. “Now?”

“I’m only hungry for one thing.”

Wilder lifted her suddenly and set her on the nearest table, his hands hard on her hips, his breath hot on her ear. “Here?”

Her heart skipped. The hunger in his voice, in his grip... It was everything she’d craved without knowing it. Not a bloodhound interested in a conquest. A man who wanted *her*.

Oh, she was a fool. A terrible fool, because she couldn’t summon the will to build a wall around her heart. Instead she slid her fingers up his arms and curled them around his neck, drawing him down for another kiss.

Chapter Seven

The sun was low, too low, and Wilder cursed under his breath. According to Archer's message, this was the right rendezvous point, only he was nowhere to be found.

And darkness was fast approaching.

"Wilder?" Satira sat her horse more easily today, with the reins firm in her gloved hands. She seemed more relaxed in trousers and a rough jacket, though tension threaded her voice now.

Hiding his emotions and thoughts from her was growing harder with each passing day. "Archer's late."

"I take it that's not like him?"

"No." Not like *any* bloodhound to leave a comrade stranded in the desert borderlands with dusk fast approaching.

Wilder's stomach twisted with a sick sense of foreboding.

Satira stripped off her gloves and tucked them behind her belt, then reached for the gun at her hip. "Do you think something happened to him?"

"Could be." If he'd tried to set things up for them, he could have gotten—

Really, Harding? You didn't see it in his eyes? Ignore it when he tried to call you off?

He tightened one hand around his rifle and turned his horse. "Ride, Satira. Back toward town, *now*."

For one endless moment she stared at him, eyes conflicted. Then she gripped her reins. "You'd best be behind me, Wilder, or I *will* turn around."

He started to speak, but the crack of a gunshot stilled his tongue. Wilder dragged Satira closer, heedless of the way her mount whinnied in protest.

Her heart hammered so loud he could hear it clearly, but her fingers found her gun. "Tell me what to do, and I'll do it."

There was nothing *to* do until their foe showed himself. It happened a second later, when a pale, sick-looking man stepped out from behind a bit of scrub.

Satira shivered, her voice low. "Vampire?"

Worse. So much worse. "Ghoul, if I don't miss my guess."

"Enthralled to vampires, probably against their will." She rattled it off so fast it sounded like she was repeating something she'd been told a hundred times. "Levi said to kill them quick."

Which he would do, if not for one thing. “One ghoul would never come up against a hound. There’s more.”

“Regular bullets or modified?”

The vampire’s blood made them fast, but their bodies... “They’re human enough. Regular bullets work just fine.” He scanned the deepening gloom and spotted two more. “You aim for that one up ahead, and I’ll take care of the rest.”

Satira reached across her body to draw her second revolver, the unmodified one. “I can do it.”

No time for assurances, but he gave her one anyway. “You can.” And then he spun and fired off two shots, quick as he could, dropping one of the ghouls. The other ran, so fast he was almost a blur. “Shit.”

Gunfire sounded behind him. Satira bit off a curse even more vicious than his, and fired again. Wilder wheeled around in time to see the pale ghoul fall behind the stand of scrub. “*Ride, Satira!*”

She obeyed, one hand tangled in the reins, the other clutching her weapon. The wind whipped her hat off her head before she bent low, barely keeping her seat.

The remaining ghoul shot out of the shadows and reached for her, his hissing face a caricature of what it once must have been. Wilder swung his rifle around and slammed the butt of it into the side of the ghoul’s head with a crunch. The creature fell, seizing, to the dirt.

“Wilder!” Satira lifted her revolver. Four more figures appeared ahead of them, their movements jerky, as if they were fighting the compulsion. Fighting to flee.

Not a battle to be fought on horseback, not for him. He jumped down from his horse and raised his voice to Satira. “Get out of range, and for God’s sake, keep riding if you have to. You can get back to Juliet.”

“*No.*” She pulled back so hard her horse’s hooves skidded on the dirt, then leveled her pistol and fired with cold deliberation, slamming a bullet into one of the ghoul’s shoulders. “There are too many for you.”

“No there aren’t.” He could take them all, but not with her firing at them—and him. “Stay if you have to, but guard yourself. I can handle this.”

He didn’t wait for her answer. He slung his rifle over his saddlebag and headed toward the ghouls. Walking first, feeling the magic well up inside him. The new moon was too close, but he had something to replace that animal power.

Satira.

Vanquish. Kill. Protect. The words echoed instincts the danger had awakened. Satira looked at the ghouls and saw him vastly outnumbered, but this was what he was made for.

This was what a hound did.

Wilder broke into a run, roaring as he released the rage, let it flow through him. He hit the first ghoul, knocking him back into two others as a fourth reached for him. Bare hands and fists, but the rage guided him.

Fueled him.

Another wave of attackers crested the small rise, and Wilder let the rage take over.

It was a credit to Levi's training that Satira kept her revolver from slipping out of her suddenly nerveless fingers.

She'd seen bloodhounds fight. She'd seen Levi, sparring with his young visitors, beating them around the dusty practice yard behind the manor. Once she'd even seen him fight in earnest, when a band of outlaws had set upon the madam of the whorehouse where Satira's mother had worked. Levi had run the survivors out of town with regret in their eyes and terror in their hearts.

Wilder didn't seem liable to leave any survivors at all. There was a wild beauty in his precise, deadly movements, in the way he became the fight. No thought, no hesitation.

This was a bloodhound, stripped down to his essence. Violence and death.

Anyone with the slightest lick of sense would be terrified. She'd thought four ghouls were too many for him, but three times that lay scattered at his feet, a sea of still limbs and broken bodies. All quick kills. No sadism, no pleasure in it.

And it had happened so fast she'd barely gotten off her horse before he laid hands on the last one. "Wilder, stop!"

At first, she thought he hadn't heard her. Then he hesitated, one large hand around the ghoul's throat. "Kill 'em quick, right?" he rasped.

Wilder's horse had vanished into the sunset at a reckless gallop. She couldn't afford to let their only mount escape, so she wrapped the reins around her hand and approached him slowly, unsure if that might startle him into violence. "He might have information. He'll at least know where he was sent from. Where his master lives."

Wilder grinned suddenly—feral, chilling. "What do you got in that bag of yours, Satira?"

There was the terror, a sick little fear tying her stomach in knots. Wilder wasn't her gruff companion or her wild lover now—he was a bloodhound.

He was a killer.

Maybe she was something worse, because she had no excuse for answering him except her desperate need to save Nathaniel. "The chemical mixture in my modified rounds would probably burn the skin of anyone who's under a vampire's thrall."

Wilder studied the ghoul. "Do we have to resort to that?"

The ghoul was a man, pale and drawn, with dark hair and bloodshot eyes. At one time there might have been intelligence in his gaze, but now he seemed savage. Mindless. His fingernails scraped at the dirt and he snarled.

“Hand me one of the rounds,” Wilder muttered. “If nothing else, maybe the chemical will break the thrall.”

It took two tries to get her regular gun into its holster. The special rounds glinted in the setting sun as she spilled one into her hand and held it out to him.

He cracked it on a rock and let some of the compound inside drip onto the ghoul’s chest. As soon as it penetrated his shirt, he screamed and arched backwards, booted heels scrabbling against the ground. Blisters formed on his pale skin, angry red burns that she swore she could smell in the air.

Her nerves felt frayed, unraveling, as she dug her fingers into her palm. “Talk,” she whispered. *Begged*. “Tell us where your master is.”

Wilder watched the ghoul in silence for a few long moments, then held out his hand to Satira. “Give me another one.”

No pretending she wasn’t an accomplice to torture. She fixed Nathaniel’s face in her mind as she pressed another round into his gloved palm.

He wrenched open the ghoul’s jaw and shoved the round into his mouth. The glass clattered on his teeth, and Wilder’s lips pressed into a grim line as he placed his hand firmly under the ghoul’s chin. “Talk, or I smash it, and it’ll hurt a hell of a lot worse than what I just did.”

Bloodshot eyes rolled up until Satira could barely see anything but white. The ghoul trembled for an endless moment, then jerked his head up and down, beating his fists against the ground.

Wilder yanked the glass round free and sat back. “Talk.”

“Clear Springs.” The words shook. “Fifty miles past the border. He’s taken over the whole town. Rebuilt the hotel, made it his manor. There’s a lab in the basement. Keeps people there. Inventors. Hounds.” A shudder. “Us.”

“Inventors.” Wilder bit out the word, his eyes wild. “Is Nathaniel Powell one of them?”

The ghoul let out rattling breath, but his whispered response made Satira’s heart leap. “Yes.”

One rough breath and then another, and Wilder rose. “Get back, Satira.”

It wasn’t a tone that invited questions—or arguments. She obeyed and crossed her arms over her chest in a futile attempt to suppress a shiver. “Are you going to let him go?”

In a blink, he pulled his pistol and fired two shots. “They can’t recover,” he said roughly. “That’s why Levi said to kill ’em quick. It’s a mercy.”

“A mercy,” she echoed. Her heart hammered. “Are you all right?”

“No.” His hand trembled, and he holstered the gun.

The world tilted a little as she realized he felt as sick as she did. Bloodhounds were violence, were rage and vengeance, but maybe Wilder was a man too. One with a job he didn’t revel in, but would do regardless.

Not so different than her after all. She stepped forward and lifted a hand to the rigid line of his shoulder. "I'm sorry."

"Clear Springs." Wilder touched her hand, just for a moment. "I know where it is. We won't make it there before—" He turned away. "We'll have to stop for the new moon."

For all the numbering of days she'd been doing, that was one date she hadn't considered. "How soon is it?"

"Tomorrow. After I find my horse, we can backtrack a little tonight, make camp. I know a place we can stop tomorrow night."

He might as well have dropped her in an icy lake in the midst of winter. A place. A brothel. Where skilled women would give him everything he needed, all the things she hadn't.

She was six kinds of fool, because a tiny part of her hoped she'd misunderstood. "A hotel?"

Wilder shook his head. "Nothing that fancy. It's an old railroad camp left over from when they tried to lay tracks through these parts. They lit out so fast they didn't even tear down the shanties."

He didn't plan to make it easy on her. Satira wet her lips and fixed her gaze on his boots. "Am I—am I enthusiastic enough to heat your blood, or are you hoping to seek out other companionship?"

Gloved but gentle fingers lifted her chin until she had to meet Wilder's eyes. "There isn't anyone else, Satira." The words held a light sting of warning.

Not so hard to summon a smile. "It's not duty, or obligation. I'm not simply willing. I'm eager."

His thumb grazed her cheek, his own smile sudden and relieved. "We should get back. We won't make it all the way to town, but we can find a safe place to set up camp."

"It will be all right, Wilder." She closed her eyes for just a moment and let herself lean into him. "We'll get through this. We'll find Nate."

"Yeah." But he sounded bleak.

"We *will*," she insisted. "Together, Wilder."

He closed his arms around her, drawing her close. "We will."

If she kept her eyes closed, she wouldn't have to see the sprawled bodies, the broken corpses of men whose lives had been destroyed long before Wilder had ended their miserable existence. Vampires were the enemy, the monsters who stole fathers and brothers and turned them into mindless slaves. Who stole sisters and daughters and fed on them, body and soul.

The vampires were the evil ones, but she *knew*—with something beyond her mind, with an instinct born of caring too much—that Wilder felt like a brutish sadist. Like a nightmare.

Maybe it took evil to fight evil, but it wouldn't lighten the burden on his soul, or on her own. So she opened her eyes and didn't shy away from the carnage, fixing it in her mind as the price, one that should never be forgotten. As long as it hurt, it meant they were still on the right side. Wilder didn't deserve to be shut out in the dark because he did what he had to.

If she had to remind him of that fact, she would. Willingly. *Eagerly*.

Chapter Eight

Dusk was near—*too* near—when the abandoned railroad camp came into view the next evening.

Wilder's legs shook, rattling his boots in the stirrups. At least the place was still deserted, from the looks of it. The last vampire who'd set up housekeeping there had grown tired of having to procure his meals elsewhere and moved on to a more populated area.

He glanced at Satira, who seemed more curious than anything else, squinting through the gathering gloom to study the various buildings.

"Should be fine," he rasped, unacceptably distracted by the slender line of her throat. "I'll take a look around."

"Mmm." Satira pulled her horse to a stop in front of a relatively sturdy-looking little shanty. "How does this one look? I could clean it up a bit while you check the rest of the camp. Make things a little more comfortable?"

"It's fine, it's—" He had to move away, or he wouldn't, not until he'd pounded into her and slaked his lust.

Satira glanced at him, then looked away as she slid to the ground. "If you leave your horse, I'll take care of everything."

He swung off his mount with a growl. "I'll be back soon."

His body throbbed, insistent and demanding, as he stalked off. Leaving Satira, even to check the camp, turned the heat of anticipation into a boiling rage.

But there was nothing to be done.

He forced himself to cover every building, every abandoned wagon and moldy haystack, before turning back to the shanty she'd chosen. It was fully dark already, and a light burned in the open window.

Inside he found Satira smoothing the blankets from his bedroll over a thick mattress. The wooden floor was swept clean, and most of the surfaces seemed hastily dusted. She turned as the door opened, her face alight with nervous anticipation. "The furniture was quite nice, under the dust. We'll be comfortable enough for a few days."

Blood pounded in his ears, but he found himself nodding. "Yes."

Her boots sat next to the door. Her belt was already curled on the table. She stared at him from impossibly wide eyes as she pulled her hair free from its binding. "Tell me how to help you, Wilder. Tell me what you need."

One of the buttons popped off his vest as he pulled at it. "Help me undress."

She came to him, quiet and shy. Her fingers were steady as she eased the buttons on his vest free one at a time. "The mattress might be nicer than the one I have at home, though the dust hasn't done it any favors. Seems like someone made this place awfully pretty, then abandoned it. It's almost sad."

He barely found his voice through the haze of hunger that clouded his consciousness. "Must have been the camp boss's place. None of the workers' shanties would have been this nice."

"Needed a little care, that's all." She eased his vest off and reached for his belt next. "Someone to take care of it."

He grabbed her hands, hands that were too small and delicate. "Am I scaring you?" He knew he had to be wild-eyed, terrifying.

Satira smiled and shook her head, red curls falling riotous around her shoulders. "You need a little care too. Let me."

If he fought it, he could hurt her when his control finally broke—and it would. "Yes. I need you."

She stepped back. Her gaze never left his as she unfastened her rough trousers and stepped out of them. The oversized men's shirt followed. She stripped to her skin in silence, then stood shivering in front of him, pale and softly feminine, a desperate longing in her eyes. "Need me. Take me."

"You're cold." Silly words that had nothing to do with the violent way his body reacted to hers, but he had to distract himself. He had to—

Wilder swept her into his arms and crushed his mouth to hers.

His lips couldn't muffle her moan. Her trembling fingers plunged into his hair, clutching at the short strands as she kissed him with the same hungry eagerness he'd come to expect. But there was an edge to it this time, a vulnerability given voice in her quiet, gasping whimpers.

She would take him, the pleasure he could bring, and give back the same.

Wilder spilled her to the bed, her wrists pinned in one hand, and bit her throat. She twisted with another desperate little noise, then dug her head back against the bed, offering her neck to him in the basest kind of submission.

He licked the pale line of skin she bared, nipped lightly. "I don't know how long I can be gentle."

"Tell me what I need to know," she whispered, rubbing one foot against his calf. "If there's anything I mustn't do. If there's anything you want me to do."

Only one thing to say, one thing for her to know. "If I'm to stop, tell me so and make me hear it. Don't—don't push me away."

"Never." Her foot slid higher, until her leg was all but wrapped around him. "I'm not an innocent, not afraid or delicate."

"No, it—" He bit his tongue. She'd had hounds before—he had to acknowledge it even as it made his skin heat with primal jealousy. "It isn't about that. You know why you mustn't run from me."

"I know." Tenderness filled her gaze as she met his eyes. The sunburn on her cheeks had faded, but this close he could see the freckles dusting her pale skin. She dug her teeth into her full lower lip, just for a moment, then smiled at him. "I don't wish to. I only meant that you shouldn't worry that I'll want to run from you. The things I would have you do to me...there is nothing proper or respectable about them."

"I will *take* you." Their encounters up to this point had been passionate, raw...but controlled. "Do you know? *Do* you?"

She didn't lie. "No. But I trust you. And I want you."

Perhaps a better man could have stayed in control. Wilder growled, the last of his sanity slipping away in the blackness of the night.

He wanted her sweetness, her pleasure. Her cries.

He would have them.

Satira expected him to fall on her like a beast. Instead he stared down at her, wildness in his eyes, but the hand grasping hers still gentle. Firm—she imagined she could struggle with everything in her and not break free—but careful.

The hound shaking above her would not hurt her. That truth might as well be carved in her soul.

He put his tongue on her first, licking the delicate ridge of her collarbone. Tasting her skin. She didn't fight her shiver or her quiet moan. Let him have no doubts about her willingness or the way her body sang when he touched her.

He parted her legs with his knee and nestled his hips tighter to hers. "What is it you want?" he rasped.

She couldn't deny him anything, even if it meant she might be forced to deal with the consequences later. "You. Inside me."

The fingers around her wrists tightened, and he thrust against her, hard through his clothes. "Now? Already?"

Satira didn't know how to guide him, didn't know if it was madness to try at all. "I want to hear your desires. To know the ways you'll take me."

He drew back to his knees, tugging at his belt as he loomed above her. "I'll taste you first. Tease your cunt with my tongue and fingers."

The bedroll scraped under her fingernails as she closed her fingers on it in a desperate attempt not to reach for him. "Do you mean to make me come? Or only tease me?"

"To make you come." The corner of his mouth ticked up in a wicked smile. "Eventually."

Time would have no meaning to him. Not tonight, or for the two nights to come. In a brothel, he might have had several women to see to his needs. Here, there would be only her. Not enough to give him relief, if he fought to hold himself back. If he feared hurting her...*terrifying* her.

She could show him he had nothing to fear. She started by reaching for him, sliding her fingers over his. “May I help?”

Wilder grasped her hands, twining his fingers with hers, and pressed them back to the bed. “You said you trusted me,” he reminded her. “Trust me now, Satira.”

“With everything.” That was simple. Harder was admitting the truth. “I don’t trust myself to be enough.”

Something softened in his implacable gaze, and he bent his mouth to her ear. “You are, believe me. But if you push... I could hurt you, darling.”

A more challenging task had never been set for her. To feel instead of think, to let go instead of clutching at control. She turned her head and brushed a kiss to his stubbled cheek. “You may have to remind me. I’ve always been a bit pushy.”

His laughter blew warm on her ear. “I like that about you. Usually.”

She squeezed his hands where they pressed hers to the mattress. “Do you want me to keep my hands like this?”

He squeezed back. “Right there. Just like that.”

Such a simple little request. She should be able to obey, even if growing arousal made it hard to lie still when she wanted to arch up against him.

When he released her, he trailed his fingers down her arms to her breasts. “Is this what you want?” He caught her nipples between his fingers and pinched lightly.

The sensation shot straight through her, like she’d shocked herself on one of her own inventions. Only this time pleasure rode that edge, and a moan caught in her throat, coming out sounding small and needy.

She tried to speak and only managed a whisper. “Yes.”

He pinched harder.

She couldn’t tell if it was pleasure or pain that arched her back. Both, perhaps, in an alchemical reaction more impressive than her finest explosive round. Too late she noticed she was reaching for him and scrambled to clutch at the bedroll again.

“Good girl.” He gave her his mouth then, his tongue teasing around her nipple.

Her body came alive for him. He’d learned it already, even in the short time they’d been together, and now he seemed willing to use that knowledge to relieve her of what remained of her sanity. It felt so good that she had the strands of his hair tangled around her fingers, this time, before she realized she’d moved.

He murmured to her, though his voice had dropped to a low growl. “Almost ready for me, aren’t you?” His hand eased between her thighs. “So fucking ready.”

“All of me.” She eased her hand above her head again, afraid she’d push too far if she didn’t. “I’m always wet for you, as soon as you touch me.”

His hands wrapped around her thighs and jerked them wider. “All of you?”

He'd taken her in so many ways, and never the most basic, fundamental one. Plenty of working women swore that a bloodhound couldn't get a woman pregnant during the new moon.

It might even be true—it seemed improbable she'd never heard of it happening if it could—but Satira had always been too logical to let herself hide behind such an excuse. She didn't believe herself safe. She simply thought it worth the risk.

He was worth the risk, and if the worst happened...

Satira pushed the thought away and gave herself over to the moment. To him. He held her spread wide, bare to his gaze, and the erotic power of it stole her breath. So did the words that tumbled forth, crude and illicit. "What do you want, Wilder? My cunt, tight around your cock?"

His gaze burned as his hands tightened on her legs. "You want that?"

So much. Her hand trembled as she edged it down—her own body, this time, instead of his. She bit back a whimper as two fingers slid through her slick folds, narrowly avoiding the temptation to let her fingers linger where she might give herself relief from twisting tension.

Instead she spread her fingers wide. "Can you see how much?"

Several quick breaths souged in and out of Wilder, but he didn't answer. Instead, he slid down, putting his mouth close to her hand. Then he licked her fingers, licked *her*, probing with his tongue.

Even feral, half out of his mind, he was clever. Attentive. Satira squeezed her eyes shut and moaned with every rasping lick, every wicked thrust. Her heels scraped helplessly against the blankets as she curled her toes and trembled at the precipice of something vast and beautiful.

Two of his thick fingers thrust into her as his tongue played over her clitoris.

"Oh—" Both of her hands tangled in the blanket and she couldn't recall how they'd gotten there, only knew that she would fly away if she let go. He stroked and worked into her, and heat became a fire, an inferno focused on each wicked lick. Every one drove her higher, until she was writhing, pushing up against his hand with sharp little jerks of her hips, each one accompanying a sobbing plea. "Please, please—"

Wilder lifted his head, though he continued to fuck her with his fingers, adding a third before curling them, rubbing inside her. "Like this. So much pleasure, darling. Constant, until you can't take any more."

It was his voice that did it, the low endearment, hoarse and hungry. He wanted her—*needed* her—and the empty, lonely place inside her vanished. Tension snapped, and every muscle in her body tensed at the same time before pure, clean relief flooded her, riding a wave of tempestuous pleasure.

"Yes." He kept murmuring as he moved above her. His hands closed around her wrists again, pushing them above her head. One thrust, and he slid home, all the way inside her.

Climax faded into a tense pressure, her body struggling to adjust to the size of him. Satira gasped in a breath, then another, still trembling as her oversensitive nerves registered even the faint stretching pain as something pleasurable.

Or maybe *he* was pleasurable. So close, she could feel his heat, his breath stirring her hair. “Wilder...I’ve wanted this so much.”

“I know.” The words were a low growl, and he took her mouth, kissing her deep and hard.

The unyielding thrust of his tongue made her hungry for another kind of claiming. Her hands were trapped, but she was free to ease her legs up, bending her knees until his cock edged deeper, driving a moan from her.

“Satira.” He urged her legs higher, tighter around him. “Pull me in, sweetheart. That’s it.”

She dug one heel into his back, urging him to move. She felt more tightly wound than a crossbow string, but he was implacable. The only recourse she had was words. “Please, it’s better than anything else. I—I need more. Please, give me more.”

Finally, he did. He eased away and drove against her with a groan. “Fuck, yes.”

No pain now, just beautiful friction. She pressed her open mouth to his cheek and his jaw, kissing anywhere she could reach as she fell into him. “More of you. I need all of you.”

It freed something in him, unleashed a flood of desire that he rained down on her with long thrusts and his lips on her skin. Fierce. Untamed.

But still careful. With her pulse pounding in her ears and his claiming trembling through her, she was painfully aware of how easily he could have hurt her. That his grip could have shattered bone, that the need inside him was so vast he could leave her broken.

She wasn’t frightened. He surrounded her, filled her, took her higher with every moment—and when pleasure crested with an intensity close to pain, she felt safe coming apart. Felt safe crying out, letting his name leave her lips again and again as she dug her fingernails into his shoulder and held on to the only solid thing in her world.

He whispered, the words too low and scattered for her to hear. His hips pumped faster, and he kissed her once, then held her gaze. “Again.”

Dark. He was so dark, his eyes swallowed by the beast. Maybe another woman would have feared it, but Satira closed her fingers around his rigid biceps and felt her own power. He was desperate for her pleasure, fixated on it.

As much as she needed him, he needed her so much more.

Satira lifted her chin, offering her throat to him. “Help me.”

He bit her hard, with an almost savage growl. His rhythm faltered and resumed, faster. Frenzied. “Satira—”

“I—I need—” *There*. A tiny shift of her hips and everything tilted sideways. “You,” she gasped, as climax consumed her.

He howled with triumph, but he didn't stop. Instead, he coaxed her through the orgasm with slow, firm thrusts and grinned when she whimpered her disbelief at feeling him still hard and ready inside her. "That's a start, sweetheart."

A start.

For one moment, fear tightened its fist around her heart, and she closed her eyes to prevent him from seeing it. She'd been a fool to think she understood, to imagine a bloodhound in the grip of the new moon was nothing more than a particularly lusty man. This was magic, pure and simple, the sort her analytical mind had always shied away from.

I won't be enough—The traitorous thought struggled to rise, and she rejected it. Magic or not, hound or not, it was Wilder above her, a man she craved with everything she was.

She didn't need to be *enough*, and opening her eyes confirmed it. Hunger was there, and need, but something deeper stared out from his wild gaze. Something that made her heart leap. In this moment, she wasn't just enough.

She was everything.

Moving slowly, she lifted her hands to his shoulders, smoothing her fingers along bunching muscles as she returned his smile. "Take me higher."

He did.

The hours were a blur of skin and sex.

Wilder traced his hand over the curve of Satira's hip and drew her closer, until he had her ass nestled against him. "Like this?"

She trembled, her breath coming in tiny, hitching gasps. "Oh—oh yes. It's—it's..."

He gritted his teeth and eased deeper, until the slick head of his cock breached the impossibly tight ring of muscle. He had to go slowly, carefully introduce her to this new sensation.

"Wilder—" So tight, but she was eager too, damn near vibrating with indecision as her hips moved in small jerks—first away, like it was too much, then back, taking him deeper as if she couldn't get enough.

He pressed harder, pulling her to meet his slow, careful thrust. "See, sweetheart?" The only way he could manage would be to get her off fast, so he slid his fingers around to her clit.

The moan started deep inside her and twisted into hoarse cry as he stroked her. She was so close it didn't take much, a few firm circles in just the right spot and she went wild for him.

Holding back was impossible then, control a distant dream, but Wilder knew deep inside that he wouldn't hurt her. He would sooner take one of her fancy weapons and turn it on himself.

No, he wouldn't give her pain. He'd give her pleasure, ecstasy.

"Satira."

Her tongue dragged over his cock in slow, teasing swipes, but through the lust he could see mischief in her eyes. When she lifted her head, her hands came to her breasts. Pressed them together. She arched her back and smiled, nothing shy or retiring left in her demeanor. “You enjoy looking at them. Would you enjoy fucking them?”

A thrill of lust shot through him as he looked down at her, at the soft, pale flesh she held on display. “And give up your mouth?”

“It seems like you might be able to enjoy both, though it’s only a theory.” Her dark eyes held only excitement and anticipation. “Proving a theory requires rigorous experimentation.”

“Yes, it does.” He thrust against her, hissing in a breath when her soft flesh hugged his shaft. “Fuck.”

She circled her tongue around the head of his erection with a satisfied little noise. “See?”

Wilder groaned. “Do it again.”

Her breath caught, as if his reaction was enough to make her tremble. She licked him slowly this time, lingering as she stared up at him with big, hungry eyes. He could picture that tongue gliding out to catch an errant drop as her delicate fingers massaged his seed into her skin.

His hips jerked of their own volition, and he reached for her, stroking his thumbs roughly over her nipples. “More.”

So quick to obey, so eager. Every way he touched her seemed to delight her. Her trust was open and endless, even now as she squirmed and gasped under his attentions but focused on pleasing him.

“Yes,” he rasped. “Make me come, and you know I’ll return the favor.”

She hummed her agreement. “Tell me how?”

Oh, he’d tell her, all right. “I can do that.”

And he did.

He cupped water in his hands and let it cascade down Satira’s shoulder, over her breasts. “Why haven’t you gone east to study, like Juliet’s son?”

“Because he’s a son.” She drew her knees toward her chest, and it looked like she was curling in on herself. “They don’t allow women to join the official Guild or serve as inventors in any of the others, like the Bloodhound Guild. They won’t even let me attend any of the schools.”

He snorted. “So they’re stupid.”

Satira shrugged and looked away. “Many people are. It isn’t important. We all do what we can with the lives we have.”

The words belied her obvious pain. Wilder wanted to drag her out of the tub and into his lap, but he settled for pressing a kiss to the side of her neck. "Perhaps the Guild will have a different opinion of you when you bring Nathaniel back."

"Perhaps." She tried to force a smile. "They won't risk Nathaniel refusing to work, in any case. Perhaps the new bloodhound he's assigned to will be tolerant of me as his apprentice."

"You don't think so?"

Satira didn't respond at first. Her fingers dragged a washcloth up and down her arm as if she wasn't paying much attention to what she was doing. Finally she sighed. "I think I'm clean enough. If you're feeling peaceful, maybe we should turn in so you can rest while the need isn't riding you so hard."

"Hey." He tilted her face up with his fingers under her chin. "Talk to me, sweetheart."

"I don't want to ruin this," she whispered. "I don't want to think past now. Let me be safe in your arms tonight. Let me be your woman."

She said it as though there would come a time when she *wouldn't* be—and of course there would. When this was all over, and she and Nathaniel were safe, and the Bloodhound Guild took on the task of deciding where Wilder was most needed next.

For a moment, the shock of the realization robbed him of his breath. Then he reached for her. "Come here."

Water slid from her body as she rose, wet and bare, and all but tumbled into him. Fingers grasped, her lips found his neck—but she didn't do anything but tremble and cling to his shoulders.

Wilder wrapped his arms around her, heedless of the water. "They never send me too far," he whispered. A promise, or maybe an excuse—even he wasn't sure.

She made a quiet noise and curled closer. Tension left her in bits and pieces, and her shaking eased. "I'm yours, for now."

"Mine." He refused to qualify it, to give it an inevitable ending.

He felt her smile.

Satira panted his name with every slow thrust, a familiar refrain in a voice gone hoarse from three nights of determined loving.

He'd learned enough to coax her legs higher up his sides, around his back, so that his next thrust made her cunt tighten around him, body primed for pleasure. She showed her appreciation with a broken moan, digging her head back into the pillows to reveal her pale throat.

She bore bruises from his teeth already, so he nipped at her jaw with a groan. "Come on, sweetheart."

One trembling hand stroked his cheek. "Only one—" A gasp. "One more. I can't... Come with me, Wilder. This time, come with me."

Tense pleasure coiled at the base of his spine, ready to strike. “Just one, no more?”

“Just—just...” Her nails scored his cheek as she scrambled to clutch at his shoulder. “Wilder—”

Her body gripped his, her inner muscles rippling, and he lost it. He drove deep and came, shudders wracking him as he joined her in bliss.

When he could breathe again, he dropped his face to her neck. “Christ.”

“Mmm.” The tips of her fingers stroked along his shoulders. “You seem...more at ease. Does that mean the new moon’s power is almost gone?”

“Either that, or you’ve managed to wear me the fuck out.”

Satira’s laugh sounded delighted. “On the first day I met you, I told you I could handle a hard ride.”

He hadn’t believed her, but he should have. “I’ll concede the point. I’m a judgmental jackass.”

“But a personable one. And I’ll confess, I’m feeling a bit worn out myself.” Underneath him, her body felt liquid. Boneless. “I could do well by a little gentle handling.”

Wilder rolled away and gathered her close. “Meaning to keep my pants on for the foreseeable future?”

Satira wrinkled her nose and settled her cheek on his shoulder. “Maybe a few days. Not that I haven’t enjoyed every moment of it...but I’m glad it only happens once a month.”

No matter how close the Guild kept him, Wilder doubted he would make it back to her every month. The thought chilled him. “You need to rest.”

“I *am* resting.” The words came out sleepy and contented. “I feel...exhausted. And wonderful. And alive.”

Alive. So many plans to make, things to discuss, and now they’d lost the last few days. “We need to talk about what we’ll face when we raid the compound.”

Her fingers curled into a fist against his chest. “As long as you understand that it’s *we* and not you.”

Even if he’d thought she might stay behind, he couldn’t leave her alone. “I know.”

After a moment, she relaxed again. “I don’t have the time and tools needed to do anything particularly fancy, but I can put a hole in any wall, or bring a building down, if I need to.”

“I won’t know what we need to plan for until I see where Nathaniel is being kept.”

“I’ll follow your lead, Wilder. I won’t be left behind...but I’ll follow your lead. I promise.”

“That’s all I’ve ever asked, sweetheart.”

“Mmm.” She turned her head and kissed his shoulder. “What do you think we’ll face when we reach the vampire’s home?”

They could meet slight resistance or an army of ghouls and vampires—but Wilder had his suspicions. “If this vampire needed to have Archer lay a trap for us, chances are he’s not holed up in a fortress. There are weak spots in his defenses.”

“Do you think Archer will be there?”

He tried—and failed—not to tense. “Probably. If I were that bloodsucker, I’d want him around to deal with me in case we pulled out of the trap.”

“I’ve never heard of a bloodhound turning against the Guild.” She began to stroke his chest, tracing endless, soothing circles. “I always rather thought they had ways to ensure it didn’t happen.”

“They don’t have Guild representatives out this far. When they find out, they’ll deal with him. Until then...”

She finished the sentence in a whisper. “You’ll deal with him?”

At one point, Archer had been a colleague. A friend. Now, he was a liability and a danger to Satira. “I’ll deal with him.”

“I’m sorry, Wilder.” She curled closer, as if she wanted to protect *him*. “This hasn’t been a simple job for you, has it?”

“Not meant to be,” he admitted. “It’s no life for anyone, really, but it’s got to be done.”

Her fingers made a lazy circle over his shoulder. Another. She drew in a breath, then hesitated, uncertainty screaming through her silence. Finally she sighed. “Why did you choose it?”

There was only one honest answer. “Someone has to, and I knew I’d be good at it.”

“That simple?” She touched his lips this time, then traced along his cheekbone. “You gave up any chance at a life just knowing you’d be making life safe for others?”

She made it sound like he could walk on water. Wilder shifted uncomfortably. “I didn’t have much of a life to give up.”

“Neither do I,” she pointed out. “Doesn’t mean what I’ve got isn’t dear to me.”

He hadn’t had *anything* left after the war, and he found himself telling her so. “By the time I came home all busted up, everything was gone. My home, my brothers. Everything.”

“Came home?” Satira propped herself up on one arm, her eyebrows coming together as she studied his face. “From where?”

“From fighting. From the War of the Rebellion, Satira. The Civil War.” He cleared his throat and waited for her to absorb his words.

It didn’t take long. “Nineteen years ago. How old were you?”

“I was twenty-three when I joined up. I’m forty-six now.”

“You don’t look forty-six.” She tilted her head and frowned. “How old was Levi?”

“Christ only knows. He had to have been at least sixty when I met him.”

“Oh.” The furrow between her brow eased as she dropped her chin to his chest. “I admit, I’d never considered it. You said you were...broken. Did the change from human to bloodhound heal your injuries?”

The change had ripped him apart, broken him down and remade him into something that wasn’t human. “That’s what it does, what it’s for. It makes us stronger.” Slower to age, quicker to heal.

“Levi would never talk of it. He’d only say some things aren’t for impressionable minds and delicate ears.”

For a moment, Wilder missed the old man so much he had to laugh or he’d cry. “I’m surprised he didn’t just tell you to mind your own business.”

She smiled a little. “After my mother died, I think he had a hard time shaking me loose. I was so needy, and he never had it in him to kick me hard enough to stop me from asking questions.”

He drew her closer. “That sounds like him too.”

“He’s the one who told Nathaniel to start teaching me. Told me if I was going to keep asking questions, I might as well fill my head with useful answers.”

And he’d spoken to Juliet, made provisions for her to have work and a home if something happened to him. “You were his daughter, sweetheart, whether you realized it or not.”

She let out a shaky sigh. “I miss him.”

“So do I.”

The silence lingered, and her breathing slowed. Evened. “I believe I need a few hours of sleep. You know how to make a girl wobbly in the knees.”

There was no avoiding the inevitable. “Tomorrow, we ride.”

Chapter Nine

Clear Springs was the most uncomfortable town Satira had ever seen.

They rode in just before dawn, when the rising sun would stir lethargy in vampires. The town, on the other hand, should have been bustling with early-morning activity. Instead the streets lay quiet and empty, without even a twitch from a curtained window to prove life stirred.

It felt dead, and Satira shivered. “There’s no one left alive?”

Wilder reined in his horse and drew up short behind some brush. “Likely not, unless more ghouls are about.”

“A whole town...” The Guild was supposed to prevent atrocities like this—but they could only do so much, she supposed, and Clear Springs would have been considered lost to the Deadlands. The border seemed to creep east a little more every year. If she returned to Iron Creek, there was no guarantee that a new bloodhound would be assigned to Levi’s old position. How long before the vampires edged close enough for the important men in Washington to decide Iron Creek wasn’t worth the cost to protect?

“Satira.” Wilder’s voice was steely. Hard.

She swallowed hard. “You can sense the dead, can’t you? Are the houses empty?”

“I sense the dead,” he confirmed, “and they’re here. Plenty of them. But don’t forget *they* can sense your fear. It’ll call to them, honey.”

So hiding her worry from Wilder wouldn’t be enough. She’d have to wall it off from her own heart. Concentrating on Nathaniel helped. Her mentor would need her courage now. “They won’t be able to enter the sunlight, though. So the ones in these houses can’t join the fight, unless they’ve created tunnels.”

“Ghouls,” he reminded her, though his expression remained mild. “Don’t know if we can fight all of them. Might have to, but avoidance would be better.”

There was no telling how many there would be. The vampire could have turned the residents of Clear Springs, or enslaved them, or simply killed them. “A hotel should have plenty of ways in and out. The ghoul said there was a lab underneath now. That’s where Nathaniel will be.”

“Since we know roughly where we’re headed, sneaking’s our best bet.”

“When? Will they be weaker when the sun’s higher?”

“Maybe a little. Not enough to make waiting worth it, though.” His horse danced beneath him. “The longer we sit around, the better the chance someone’ll spot us.”

Satira smoothed a hand down her mount's neck as the mare shifted uneasily. "I suppose I need to arm myself, in that case."

His grin was feral, edged with a little violence. "Time to bust open that handy pack of yours, sweetheart."

Time for the weapons they'd dragged with them across the plains, all in anticipation of this. Emotions tangled inside her—fear, anticipation, perhaps even excitement.

She met Wilder's eyes and wondered if her smile had that same madness. "If it goes badly, I can always cause an explosion or two."

"We'll keep that in reserve. Sort of a plan of last resort, yeah?"

"I'll struggle to restrain myself." She nodded ahead. "On foot, then?"

He inclined his head. "Don't suppose you'd be willing to hang back while I do a quick scout around the hotel?"

"Of course." It would give her time to check the weapons and be sure they hadn't suffered for their callous handling.

He dismounted and slipped away silently. She barely caught a glimpse of him as he darted across the clear spaces between buildings on his way to the hotel.

Long minutes ticked by as Satira slid from her own horse. Most of the weapons were in her packs—in deference to Wilder's mount, she imagined, which had to haul the impressive bulk of his muscles around.

The guns she checked briefly and put aside. She'd only been able to fit three of the modified grenades into her pack, and none of them had been armed yet. They were Nathaniel's invention, ingenious explosives that could be customized in the field with the addition of certain chemicals.

A dusty patch of road behind a bush was hardly an ideal workstation, but Satira felt plenty motivated. By the time Wilder returned she'd loaded the gunpowder and laced all three explosives with silver shavings that would shred through vampire flesh like acid.

"Got good news and bad news," he murmured as he knelt beside her.

Satira concentrated on the grenade's pin. "What's the bad news?"

"Archer is down there. He must have waited out the new moon here instead of going back to one of the brothels in town."

"If no one's alive, how did he...?" At Wilder's look, she swallowed hard and decided not to pursue the matter. Whether Archer had passed the new moon with vampires or ghouls, it didn't change the truth—he would be every bit as dangerous as Wilder, and would have the advantage of knowing the battleground. "And the good news?"

"I'm pretty damn sure I figured out where they're holding Nate." He touched one of the grenades. "What're these?"

"Explosives. Laced with silver. Expensive, but the damage is impressive."

"That would come in handy for clearing out a room." Wilder surveyed the rest of the array she'd laid out. "If it comes down to it, we can fight."

Confident, she reminded herself. She needed to be confident. "If I know Nathaniel, he'll have been planning for rescue."

"Is it possible to plan for a rescue like this?"

Perhaps not, but he'd be ready, and that was all that mattered.

Almost. After setting the grenade carefully on the ground, she rocked to her knees and framed Wilder's face with her hands. "No one could plan for us, Wilder. Not even Archer."

"They could plan for me easily enough." He kissed her and rested his forehead against hers. "You're the wild card, sweetheart. The ace in the hole, and you're going to win it for all of us."

"Just get me to Nathaniel," she whispered. "There's nothing the two of us can't think our way out of. Especially if we have a bloodhound around to help with the heavy lifting."

Wilder kissed her again, this time parting her lips with his tongue. So easy to melt at the taste of him, especially with the recent memory of pleasure fresh in her mind. He'd done things with and to her that still made her blush to think of, but none she had enjoyed as much as the simple heat of his kiss.

When he pulled away, his voice had gone low, hoarse. "Once this is over—"

Satira pressed her fingertips to his lips. "Levi would have told you not to waste time making plans before over gets here."

"Yeah, I guess he would have." He slipped the bag over her head and helped her secure it against her hip. Then he took her hand and hefted his gun. "This way."

For a large man, Wilder moved quietly. Satira watched his boots and tried to step where he did as he led her behind several roughly constructed buildings that looked to be in poor repair. More than one showed the evidence of violence—bullets lodged in wood and snapped timber. Black scorch marks climbed the back of one wall, as if a fire had been narrowly averted. The vampire who'd taken over the town clearly cared little for any home but his own.

And the hotel was immaculate. Fresh paint all but shined in the early-morning light. Tools lay in a neat row on the north side, where a new addition to the building was underway.

It was there that Satira saw the first stirrings of life. A ghoul, from the vacant expression, one who wandered in a jerky, uneven arc back and forth in front of the main roadway, his hands hanging limply at his sides. Avoiding him was laughably easy. Wilder hustled them both around the south side of the building, past a stable where horses whinnied restlessly.

Satira made note of the location of the stable door. Nathaniel would need a mount, if he was well enough to ride on his own. *Please let him be well enough to ride on his own.*

Wilder stopped near the edge of the building, next to a door that blended in so well with the wall that Satira might not have noticed it. Pulling it open revealed steep stairs carved into stone that twisted down into darkness.

“Stick close,” Wilder whispered as he began to descend the stairs. His boots fell on the stone with soft thuds, and he winced and stepped more lightly. “Echoes down here. Be careful.”

The stairs went down and down, until the darkness was all but absolute. Wilder had no trouble seeing—or perhaps whatever heightened senses bloodhounds enjoyed helped him pick out a path. Satira put one hand against the wall and braced the other on his shoulder, feeling her way slowly behind him as her heart hammered in her ears.

It seemed like forever before she saw a flicker of light ahead of them. Wilder stepped away instead of down, and her foot hit solid dirt. She stumbled a little, then caught her balance with a curse she only gave voice in her head. “We must be a hundred feet underground.”

The tunnel was still dark, and another, brighter flare of light followed the scrape of a match. Wilder looked around and shook his head. “It’s an honest-to-God dungeon.”

Satira reached into the bag at her hip and fumbled until she came up with a slender tube made from a clear resin. One of the first projects she’d worked on with Nathaniel, inspired by their modified rounds. Twisting a knob on the side combined the chemicals within, and she gave it a good shake to mix them together before clipping it to the strap of her bag.

The glow grew in intensity with each passing second, until Satira could clearly make out the long row of metal bars. Cages, carved into stone, large enough to accommodate one prisoner with no more room than they might need to stretch out.

Wilder stepped closer to the nearest one, and the flame of his match illuminated a desiccated corpse within. “Jesus.” He snuffed the match and cursed again.

Her handlight wasn’t bright enough to pierce the darkness at the backs of the cells. “That wasn’t—” She couldn’t force herself to form his name.

“No, not Nate.” Wilder reached for her hand again and continued around the curving tunnel, toward a heavy door at the end.

Movement in the last cell on the right stopped her. “Wilder, I think—”

A body shot toward the cage bars so hard they rattled, and Satira stumbled back out of instinct.

Wilder stepped in front of her, his nostrils flaring. “I don’t fucking believe it.”

“What don’t you—”

The low growl that rumbled through the hallway sent fear skittering up her spine. Satira unhooked the handlight and lifted it high enough to illuminate the figure gripping the cage bars.

A man—mostly. Dark hair hung in shaggy locks over blue eyes that held not a glint of humanity. His chest was bare, revealing scratches and scars and a spattering of ugly yellow bruises. He sucked in a breath and fixed his gaze on Satira, and she recognized something in the feral madness staring out at her.

Bloodhound.

“Go away,” the man rasped. “Go.”

“He’s not part of the Guild.” Wilder clenched his jaw, his hands tightening into fists. “Did they *turn* you here?”

The man—the hound—didn’t answer, but he hardly needed to. The process by which the Guild made their warriors was a well-protected secret. Surely *that* couldn’t have been Nathaniel’s secret project... Experimentation had been outlawed for decades, ever since the Guild’s inception.

Satira reached for Wilder’s shoulder. “Should we free him?”

“No.” A hand swiped between the bars, a menacing gesture undercut by the wild fear in the man’s eyes. “Leave. Go. Not safe here.”

His terror made Satira’s chest ache. Made her wonder what horrors Nathaniel might have suffered. “I could undo the lock if he let me.”

Wilder faced the other bloodhound, and they stared at each other for long minutes. “We’ll come back once we find Nathaniel. It’ll be safer then.”

“Nate.”

A scratchy sound, seemingly torn from the man’s throat. Satira ducked under Wilder’s arm before he could stop her. “Do you know him?”

“They put him in his lab. Always do, at dawn, now.”

Wilder breathed a sigh. “Do you know where it is?”

She barely heard the instructions—*in his lab. In his lab.*

Nathaniel was alive.

“We’ll be back,” Wilder promised the man—the *hound*—inside the cell.

Another person to rescue, but they could do it. Together, she and Wilder could do anything.

Ten feet from the door, Wilder knew something was off.

The scent of death hung heavy in the dank air, heavier than he would have expected if Nate was alive, like the feral hound had said. But who knew what lay behind the solid pine door? Nate could be alive but surrounded by corpses, stark reminders of what could happen to him—or those he loved—if he refused to work.

Wilder rattled the sturdy padlock and turned to Satira. “Don’t think Nate would object, do you?”

She studied the padlock for a moment, then ran her fingers up to the heavy loop and along the metal plate bolted to the wall. Her hand dipped into her bag again and came out holding a flat sheet of paper.

Unfolded, it revealed several long strips of a pale, tacky looking substance. She peeled one from the paper and smoothed it over the metal plate. Then she dipped into her bag again and retrieved what looked like a perfume vial.

"You might wish to cover your nose," she murmured as she replaced the folded paper. "This will smell unpleasant enough for me."

Wilder pressed a gloved hand under his nose as Satira misted the liquid onto the substance she'd spread over the plate. It began to bubble, and then to eat through the metal plate that secured the lock to the door.

She stepped back and tucked the bottle back into her bag. "There. A firm tug should break the metal."

He tried it, and the door snapped open with a cracking noise. "Nate?"

The room beyond was all but dark, even with the light cast by Satira's lightstick. The scent of death was worse now, but mixed with an oddly familiar note—something that could have been another bloodhound if it hadn't been just a little off.

Next to him, Satira shivered. "Nathaniel?"

Something stirred in the room. A boot against the floor, a quiet *clink*. Then— "Satira?"

Satira made a choked noise and launched herself forward, but Wilder drew her up short with a steely grip around her arm. "Not yet. Not—something's not right."

She all but shook with nervous energy, but she didn't try to pull away from him. "Nathaniel, we're here to take you home."

A click. Light flared so fast Satira reeled back, lifting an arm to cover her eyes. The illumination came from dozens of intricate glass bulbs lining the walls of a vast room, all hung above long shelves overflowing with tools and equipment.

Several worktables were arranged in a neat row across the center of the room, on which projects of various complexity rested. Nathaniel stood next to the closest bench, sallow and wild-looking, his usual neat vest askew and his spectacles gone completely. He squinted at them, gaze flickering over Wilder before fixing on Satira.

Regret filled his eyes before he closed them. "Take her away. Keep her safe."

He smelled like death, and even with his sickly pale expression, his face looked...different. Younger. "What the hell did they do to you?"

"Nathaniel?" Satira sounded uncertain. "Is that you?"

"Perhaps not anymore." He took a step forward, moving as if he barely had the energy to get his boots off the ground. "Satira, wait in the hallway."

"But—"

"Now."

The man might not look so much like Nate anymore, but he had Nate's voice, and Satira seemed to obey it out of instinct. She tried to tug her arm free of his grip, and Wilder let her go.

The man looked like death, but he smelled like a bloodhound. "Nate, what *happened*?"

Nate lowered his voice until the whisper was too low for Satira to hear in the hallway. "The vampire. Lowe. He's building his own army. Needed a weapon, and I wouldn't build it. So he found a way to make me."

He found a way to make me.

Wilder shivered, torn between fascination and revulsion. Lowe had abducted Nathaniel from his home, brought him here and turned him into a vampire—except that wasn't all. It couldn't be. "You smell like a hound."

"I wasn't strong enough to survive the change." The words were blank. Numb. "So instead of giving me human blood, they gave me Hunter's."

Wilder's skin prickled, and a cold knot formed in the pit of his stomach. "You can't do that. It doesn't—it doesn't work."

"It never has before," Nate agreed. "But Hunter wasn't created by the Guild."

The knot grew until Wilder thought he might vomit. "Archer did it."

Nathaniel didn't answer. Instead he reached out a shaking hand. "You can't let me finish this weapon, and you can't bring me with you. I've been starving myself. Getting as weak as I can, but Lowe will work it out soon enough and order me to eat. He's already ordered me not to kill myself. *You* need to do it for me."

Fuck that. "Back up and tell me why we can't take you with us."

"Lowe's powerful, Wilder. The border isn't far enough. He made me. I'll do whatever he commands, no matter how much I don't want to." Nate's gaze slid past him, toward the hallway where Satira waited.

Rage roared up. "Not if I send him to hell where he belongs."

Satira's voice came from the hallway, steady but more than a little tense. "Wilder? I think you should come out here."

He kept his gaze riveted to Nathaniel's face as he backed toward the door. When he turned to face the tunnel, he stopped short, a growl rising before he could stop it. "Archer."

His former colleague stood just beyond Satira, both hands upraised. She had one of her pistols pointed at his chest. A tiny frown tugged at her lips, and she looked more perplexed than afraid. "Ashamed as I am to admit it, he could have grabbed me. He didn't."

"Because I didn't join up for this," Archer muttered. "Untrained hounds and half-vampires?"

Wilder pulled one of his own revolvers. "You joined up for kidnapping Nate."

"No, I didn't." He held his hands a little higher. "I had nothing to do with that. The deal I struck with Lowe was only for Clear Springs. He'd already run everyone out, and he told me he wouldn't kill anyone else if I let him have it."

Satira's hand dipped toward the floor, then snapped back up, this time a little lower. "If you hurt Nathaniel, I'll blow your balls off. I might do it anyway for sending Wilder into a trap."

Even at gunpoint, he was contrary enough to argue. "I tried to warn you two *away* from it."

"Enough." Wilder was in no mood to discuss it. "You really want to help? Start now, here. Help me take down Lowe."

Nathaniel's voice came from behind him. "The weapon he's had me working on—it kills vampires. I can't turn it against him...but Satira could."

Wilder's first—and second and third—instinct was to get Satira as far away from the fight as possible. "And you could show me how, right?"

"If he could, he would be doing it already." Satira holstered her gun and turned to Wilder. "Nathaniel wouldn't put me in harm's way if he had any other choice."

He made a concerted effort to relax his clenched fists. "Maybe. How long will it take?"

"Nathaniel?"

"Twenty minutes, with both of us working together."

Wilder stalked up to Archer, not bothering to hide the challenge in his glare. "Want to go see if this new hound you turned is ready to kill some fucking vampires?"

Archer's jaw tightened. "Ready."

"Just so you know, if he wants to take a few shots at you, I'm not stopping him."

"Wouldn't expect you to."

Satira brushed her fingers over Wilder's shoulder. "Don't let anyone bite you. I'm possessive."

"That goes double for you, sweetheart."

Wilder and Archer navigated the darkened tunnel without any extra light, and it didn't take them long to reach the young bloodhound's cell. "You ready to get out of there yet?"

The man stared at Archer, teeth bared, eyes wild. "Are you here to kill me?"

"No." The other hound returned the stare without flinching. "We're here to free you."

"Can't trust myself, being free. Can't control it. Can't control *me*."

Wilder closed one gloved hand around the padlock, testing it with a hard tug. "What's your name?" he asked, though he already knew.

"Nate said I needed a new one. That all bloodhounds get new names." He stepped away from the bars. "He named me Hunter."

"Hello, Hunter." With Archer's help, Wilder twisted the lock until the metal gave way with a snap. "I'm Wilder, and I came here to kill Lowe. Want to help?"

Hunter's gaze fixed on the broken padlock. He sucked in a heaving breath, then nodded once, jerkily. "I can kill vampires. I think I'm good at it."

"We all are, even him." Wilder jerked a thumb at Archer. "Think you can wait 'til this is all over before you kill *him*?"

Archer watched Hunter. Hunter watched Archer. A quiet understanding seemed to pass between them before Hunter nodded. "He made me. But they made him do it."

A surprising concession that belied his feral appearance. "Then we'll fight together, and the two of you can settle your scores later."

"Later," Hunter agreed. When Wilder pulled the cage door open, the younger man stepped into the hallway and flexed his fingers. "The ballroom."

"That's where Lowe'll be," Archer elaborated. "Used to be the common room. He sealed off the windows and tore down the floor above, damn near turned it into a crypt. They spend the days there, with ghouls guarding the doors."

Thaddeus Lowe would have enough ghouls to guard against one bloodhound, perhaps even two, but he wouldn't be prepared for three. "Let's go."

Chapter Ten

Nathaniel was a vampire.

She wasn't supposed to know, but Satira had never been stupid. She'd also never been as obedient as Nathaniel might have liked, not when obedience fought curiosity—or concern.

So she'd eavesdropped, and she wasn't ashamed. Oh, perhaps she was a bit ashamed that her focus on the conversation inside the lab had allowed Archer to all but ambush her, but it didn't alter her conviction that she'd done the right thing. Now she knew how desperate Nathaniel was. How ready to die.

Now she knew how hard she'd have to fight to save him.

The bloodhounds had disappeared back the way they'd come, and Satira walled off her heart and her worry about Wilder and turned her attention to the oddities on the workbench in front of her.

A large glass sphere dominated the center of the table. A second sphere was suspended inside by thin metal rods, and filled with a hopeless tangle of copper wires that obscured whatever mechanism must lie inside. Sloppy, crowded work that looked nothing like Nathaniel's usual neat and orderly inventions. A sign of his fracturing mental state or a subtle attempt at self-sabotage—it could be either. It could be both.

She touched the surface, sliding her fingers up to the top, where a metal plate had been fixed. It held an indent where one could affix a crank handle to wind...something, and two small openings just large enough for the end of a funnel. Something that required a chemical addition, perhaps.

"A weapon?" she asked, not looking at Nathaniel. It was easier not to. His voice was the same, but he appeared younger. Closer to thirty than fifty, and the effect was unnerving at a time when she needed every bit of nerve she had.

"A weapon, yes." He sounded distracted. Tired.

A glass sphere. A chemical reaction. Satira froze, then lifted her head, so startled she forgot to keep her gaze averted. "You solved the sustainability problem. You *solved* it, didn't you?"

For a moment, his eyes sparked like they always did, and he leaned forward. "It's the charge created by the copper coil. Do you see?"

She rocked up on her toes to get a better angle. Beneath the wires and coil sat a delicate, miniature version of the same mechanism that provided power for the reading lights Nathaniel had built several years ago. "You must have altered the chemical ratio, though. A charge run through the composition we have in our rounds would cause an explosion."

"Mmm, not through these." It was odd to see his strangely youthful hands trace over schematics and formulas. "I've added a stabilizer."

It was elegant, for all the awkwardness of its construction. Whatever they'd done to Nathaniel, they hadn't taken his mind.

They had taken something else, though. Satira let her fingers fall away from the sphere and met his gaze squarely. "I heard everything, you know."

He nodded. "You didn't go far enough not to have."

"Oh, I did at first. Until I thought of all the things you'd only tell Wilder if I wasn't around." She gathered her courage about her. "Do you have fangs?"

"Yes." Nathaniel hesitated. "I've never bitten anyone, though."

It might explain why he looked so exhausted in spite of his sudden, explicable youth. "But they gave you blood. They must have, to transform you."

"They did." Nathaniel turned away. "There's a hound here, a new one. I named him Hunter."

The man in the cage. A hound's blood should have been toxic to a vampire—it was one of the founding principles of the Guild, and why Archer's defection was so unbelievable. *Never create a weapon the vampires can turn against you.* If drinking from a hound provided youth and vigor, they'd be handing their enemies too much power.

But the Bloodhound Guild hadn't created Hunter. Archer must have, presumably as a side effect from an attack during the full moon. The Guild claimed that the bloodhound's curse couldn't be passed along through infection, but it was true only because the infection tended to kill a human quicker than a mortal wound.

Hunter had survived—and his blood had never been tampered with by the Guild. Something in it had given Nathaniel a different sort of life.

Life. Could a vampire be alive? Her gut said no. Screamed it, even. Her mother had instilled principles in her from the time she was old enough to walk. Prejudices. Vampires were evil, whether they stole across the border or not. They preyed on the innocent, killed without feeling and had no soul.

They'd never been Nathaniel before.

Satira eased around the table and laid a hand on his arm. "Look at me. Please."

"No, because I know what you're thinking." His shoulders hunched, stiffened. Shook.

Telepathy. Satira closed her eyes and leaned her forehead against his arm, a meaningless, impersonal touch when she wanted to throw her arms around him. "I'm thinking all the things a girl raised by Ada and Levi is supposed to think. And I'm thinking they wouldn't care a damn about how I'm thinking they might have been wrong, because it's *you*. I don't care what you are, Nathaniel, as long as you're you."

His shaking intensified, and his arm slid around her, steely hard instead of comforting. "I'm sorry, Satira."

At first she thought he was apologizing for not believing she'd believe in him. Then his arm tightened, jerking her back against his chest with enough force she'd have bruises across her midsection. "Nathaniel?"

"I can't fight him," he grated out harshly. "Not when he commands me to obey."

Him. Thaddeus Lowe.

Damn it all, Wilder was going to throttle her for getting herself killed.

The residents of Clear Springs hadn't been run out.

They'd been enslaved.

Another ghoul leapt at Wilder and locked grasping, uncoordinated hands around his neck as the one he'd been fighting scrambled to drag himself away with one arm broken.

Fending them off was easy. It always was, provided the ghouls didn't outnumber you too drastically, which was why most vampires needed an army of them. His instincts had been right—alone, he would have been hard-pressed not to exhaust himself. He might even have fallen. But with Archer and Hunter fighting alongside him, the ghouls stood no chance.

Especially with the way Hunter fought, as if the violence had only been waiting for a chance to spill free. It wasn't training or intent, just feral, brutal instinct, and all the more vicious for it.

Archer slammed two of his opponents together and took a moment to glance around. "We're getting close to the ballroom. Damn ghouls are thick as flies up here."

Hunter let out a roar and dove past them, slamming into a fresh wave of bodies. Three hit the ground in a tangle of limbs, but two more scrambled over him and jumped at Wilder. One had a knife gripped in one hand, and he swung it toward Wilder's throat.

Wilder shoved the one wielding the knife into the other, the blade sinking deep into sallow flesh as the ghoul howled. He could see the door they struggled to protect, a heavy wooden thing that hung there like a shield, barring him from his goal.

He fought harder.

It became more difficult to maneuver, with bodies crowding the narrow passage. Hunter caught one ghoul by the back of the shirt and sent him skidding down the rough wooden floor until he crashed into the bottom of a staircase. Fewer were appearing at their backs now, and the ghouls left protecting the door turned and began scrambling for the knob.

One of them found it. The door flew open and the remaining ghouls fled inside, whether through some lingering instinct to survive or at their master's command, it was impossible to tell.

Hunter panted for breath and braced his hands on his knees. "I can hold the hall."

"You sure?" Archer asked.

One of the forms on the floor dragged itself to its knees. Hunter slapped his hands on either side of the ghoul's head and twisted sharply, cracking its neck. "Yes."

The hound's recent change of heart aside, Wilder wasn't fully comfortable only having Archer at his back. He'd proven inconstant, and facing Lowe with someone he couldn't trust beside him was worse than going it alone.

Still, he wasn't ready to challenge Archer, fight him, so he had no choice. "Break it down, Arch."

The ghouls had slammed the door shut again, but whatever attempts they'd made to block it wasn't enough to stop a hound. Archer lifted his foot and drove one heel just below the knob. Wood shattered, sending splinters flying as a cry of pain rose from the opposite side.

Archer grinned and pulled his gun. "Just plain old silver, but it'll hurt 'em, at least."

Wilder strode into the ballroom, two of his own guns drawn. He barely paid attention to the ghouls that rushed forward, the brunt of his focus on locating Lowe. If he could kill the vampire, the ghouls would scatter. They wouldn't recover, but at least the thrall, the command, would dissipate.

The cavernous room echoed with screams, snarls and gunshots. Wilder felt the anger rising, blood pounding in his ears until it almost eclipsed all those inhuman sounds.

And then the ghouls froze.

Archer put a bullet between a ghoul's eyes, and he toppled backwards without a whimper. The others didn't stir, all of their unnaturally focused attention fixed on a door at the back of the room.

"Never seen them do this before," Archer murmured. "Figured we'd have to fight through them to get to Lowe."

Repulsion washed over Wilder in a sickening wave. "They're obeying his will. He's—"

"Here." The rich, melodious voice seemed to come from nowhere and everywhere as the door swung open, revealing darkness beyond. "Have you brought me a gift, Archer?"

Archer shifted his weight and tossed a tense look at Wilder. "Wouldn't say *brought* is ever the right word when it comes to Harding. He tramples just about anywhere he wants."

"Levity does not become you." A man stepped out of the shadows, tall and thin, with dark hair and piercing eyes. He was impeccably dressed in a coat and tails, and he smoothed the pinstriped fabric of his sleeve. "Wilder Harding."

If he made his move now, without knowing where Archer stood or what tricks the vampire might have up that tailored sleeve... "Thaddeus Lowe. You have me at a disadvantage."

"I'd hoped to not have you at all." The vampire graced Archer with a chillingly disapproving look. "Your colleague has underestimated you more than once. Fortunately, I am not prone to repeating the mistakes of the hired help."

Damn straight. "Maybe my colleague wanted to get rid of you as badly as I do."

Lowe didn't seem perturbed. In fact, he seemed almost eager. "Not as surprising a revelation as you might have hoped. He has been showing a remarkable lack of dedication of late. Or a sudden onset of complete incompetence."

Archer spat on the floor. "Fuck you very much too."

"As refined as ever." Lowe strode to a throne-like chair set in the middle of the room and settled into it without any indication that the sun beating down outside had slowed his reflexes. "Almost all of us have arrived. Do you have any more pithy remarks before we begin?"

As if they were there for a tea party. Wilder raised his gun, but hesitated as the full import of Lowe's words hit him. "All of us?"

"I see what my children see, Mr. Harding. And they bend to my will, even when they don't wish to. That's a child's duty. And a woman's. Perhaps you should have left yours at home."

They came in the door to Wilder's right. He watched in dumb horror as Nathaniel dragged Satira toward the vampire's chair with halting, jerky steps. Satira's feet scraped the floor as she slumped lifelessly over the arm that held her.

"Nathaniel has been a far more dedicated servant than Archer has," Lowe remarked, his voice dripping with smug satisfaction. "I think I'll make her one of us, to reward him for his accomplishments."

Archer said something, *shouted* something. Wilder moved without thinking, his peculiarly focused anger exploding in a painful rending of flesh. *Changing*, he thought absently, and then that too was swept away in the dull roar of rage that consumed him.

One moment, her perfect plan was falling into place.

In the next, the world went mad.

Draped over Nathaniel's arm, she didn't have a good view of the room. Straightening would reveal her bag, and the incriminating bulge the sun-sphere made. Instead she twisted her head and caught her first glimpse of Wilder in his other form.

It *was* Wilder, but if she hadn't caught a peek at the man standing there a few moments before, she might not have recognized her lover in the monster he'd become.

He was large. Tall, towering a foot or two above the height he should have been. None of his clothing had survived the change. What hadn't been torn, he ripped from his body with massive claws. Fur covered him from head to foot, and that head—

They called them hounds, but it looked more like the muzzle of a wolf. A growling snarl revealed teeth almost as long as her fingers. A terrifying wolfman out of legend, eyes filled with a rage that eclipsed any anger she'd ever imagined before in her short life.

This was the beast. The unfortunate side effect of a mad scientist's wild marriage of science to magic. For the nights around the full moon, every month, this is what all bloodhounds became.

The full moon wasn't for two more weeks.

He charged, bounding two large steps only to be knocked off his feet by Archer, who wielded a heavy length of board like a club. "You came this far to rescue Nate," he snapped. "I'm not going to let you kill him now."

Wilder scrambled to his feet, jaws snapping as he lunged for Archer. The blond hound feinted left and then right, avoiding claws and teeth in a quick, violent dance.

She'd started this by feigning helplessness too well. Perhaps later, when they were all safe, she'd beat Wilder black and blue for underestimating her. For now she had to keep them all alive.

Slipping her hand back into her bag, she slumped forward a little more to cover her movement as she began winding the crank again. Loading the chemicals while Nathaniel struggled to drag her up the stairs as slowly as possible had been a far greater challenge to her dexterity, but the rough sounds of the fight made it difficult to concentrate on the task at hand.

Instead of giving in to the temptation to peek at Wilder, she chanced a glance at Lowe instead. The vampire had leaned forward slightly in his chair, a look of abject delight on his features as he watched the bloodhounds battle against one another. He'd underestimated her as well—and Nathaniel too.

"He's summoning me. I'm to bring you to him. Take the gun and shoot me now, Satira, or I'll have to take you there. I won't be able to stop myself."

"I'm not shooting you, Nathaniel. I didn't ride up and down the Deadlands with Wilder fucking Harding so I could shoot you."

She closed her eyes and blocked out the sounds of the battle, concentrating on the winding mechanism on the sun-sphere. The vampire was strong, so the weapon had to be primed for its highest setting.

Strong, but not smart.

"Damn it, Satira, this isn't a game."

"Of course it is. It's the game I've always played best. You watched me do it to Levi for years. Find the loophole, Nathaniel."

Her fingers trembled. A roar sounded from behind her, Wilder's roar, with pain and rage mixed into a single, heartrending sound. She should have given him a sign, some indication that she wasn't hurt. That she had a plan.

"There's no loophole. I have to bring you upstairs. To him."

"Did he tell you I couldn't bring anything with me?"

She tried to twist the crank. It resisted, just enough that she knew much more could damage the coil. She slid her fingers to the top, where a tiny ring sat between the funnel holes. Pulling it up would collapse the barriers between the chemicals and start the electric current. Sunlight, in the palm of her hand.

If she did it now, Nathaniel would die along with Lowe.

"Once we're close enough, pull the pin, Satira. Don't wait."

"I'll do it."

She'd lied.

Easing her hand away from the sphere, she groped for the modified rounds that she'd slipped from her gun and tucked in her bag. They wouldn't kill Nathaniel, but they'd burn him—and shock his system just long enough to shake his compulsion. *I'm sorry, Nathaniel.*

She curled her hand around two small glass capsules and pulled them from the bag, then took a deep breath. Before she could second-guess herself, she whipped her body around and slammed the glass against his temple, shattering them both in a flash of artificial light.

He didn't cry out as he stumbled away, and his silence bought her a single extra second before Lowe's head swiveled around. Before the frozen and slumbering ghouls surrounding her sprang to life.

"Archer!" It took that precious second to draw her gun. "Get Nathaniel into the hallway. *Now.*"

He ducked under another wild swing from Wilder and dove for Nathaniel. "Hope you know what you're doing, girl."

So did she. As soon as Archer had wrestled Nathaniel out of the way, she shot one of the ghouls and unleashed the only weapon that might buy her the time she needed to end this. "Wilder, *help!*"

He faltered and threw a ghoul into the air as he rushed toward her, half loping on all fours across the dusty, littered floor. She caught sight of his eyes, then—yellow. Inhuman.

It took everything in her to hold her ground in the face of his charge. She remembered the words from the new moon— *Don't push me away*. A different sort of madness gripped him at the moment, but underneath it he was the same. His basest instincts had been brought to light, and she had to trust that she was at the center of them.

He faced down two more ghouls who were reaching for her, one with a wicked-looking scythe in his hand. Wilder ignored the blade and bit down on the creature's shoulder, eliciting a howl of pain.

The ghouls were no danger to her. Not with Wilder there. Satira gambled everything on it as she pivoted to face Lowe and dropped the gun. She pulled the sun-sphere out of her bag, one finger already curled through the pin's copper ring. Archer had dragged Nathaniel halfway across the room, but they weren't clear. Not yet.

So she stalled. She smiled at the vampire and inched the pin up, just a little. Enough so it would jerk free if anyone jostled her before Nathaniel was safe. "You should be more precise with your orders."

The vampire's eyes narrowed. "And you, my dear, should watch your pretty little mouth. Someone might—"

Wilder roared again and dove for him, teeth bared.

Adrenaline surged. Time slowed. Some tiny, scientific part of her brain babbled at her in Nathaniel's driest voice, explaining the physiological reaction that made Wilder's leap take weeks.

At the far side of the room, Archer all but threw Nathaniel through a doorway and dove after him. Satira tightened her finger and whispered a prayer to a God her mother hadn't raised her to believe in.

Lowe flicked his fingers and Wilder stumbled back, clawing at his muzzle as long lines of blood appeared on his fur. The vampire turned—slowly, oh so slowly—toward Satira.

The pin slid free as smooth as one of Ophelia's silk dresses.

For one moment—a terrifying moment—nothing happened. A gear clicked and something inside the sphere sparked.

Then—light. So much light Satira flinched back instinctively, sure it would sear the flesh from her hands. It took another few seconds for her to realize there was no accompanying heat. Just endless, pure sunlight, growing brighter by the second as Nathaniel's simple, brilliant plan sprang to glorious life.

Squinting, Satira lifted her precious weapon higher as the ghouls began to scream.

Lowe's upraised hands started to smoke. His mouth opened impossibly wide, and he let out a scream that sounded like a hundred voices crying out in unison. Sparks jumped from his pale skin, sparks that grew into tiny licking flames and flared up into an inferno that engulfed his entire body.

He was gone in the time it took to lower her hands, the ball of flames imploding in a way that pained her rational mind and stretched the boundaries of physics.

Magic, and a fitting end for a creature borne of dark powers beyond the understanding of men and science. Lowe disappeared as if he'd never been there at all, leaving not even ashes to mark his passing, only angry scorch marks on the floor.

And the lives he'd destroyed.

And Wilder. The violence in him hadn't subsided. If anything, it seemed to intensify without a focus. He whirled in a wide circle, seeking foes to vanquish, to feed his frenzy.

The sphere in her hands wouldn't darken until the energy from the gear mechanism ran low, but tucking it into her bag dimmed it enough to let her blink away tears. "Wilder, it's all right."

He stopped with a growl and turned.

Crazed yellow eyes fixed on her. She couldn't help but stare at the sharp teeth filling a mouth large enough to crush her. "Wilder." Perhaps if she said his name enough times, he'd remember who she was. Who *he* was. "I'm safe. The danger's past. We can go home now."

He didn't charge, at least. He approached her slowly, almost warily, his claws clicking on the floor.

She'd seen Levi in his other form. Only once, when she'd been barely fourteen, and only for a few moments. When her mother had been alive, Ada had insisted on being the one who dealt with Levi during the full moon. After her mother's death, he'd forgone the cage in the basement and spent the full moons in the wilderness.

A glimpse of a beast in a cage was far from facing the real thing with nothing to protect her. But Ada had tended to Levi, month after month. Her presence had soothed him...because she'd been his mate.

Satira lifted her hand, proud that it barely trembled. "Thank you for protecting me. Now let me help you."

After an endless silence, he growled, a sound she probably imagined sounded like her name, and dropped to the floor at her feet, his sides heaving. His gaze darted back and forth, everywhere, still searching for threats.

He was low to the floor, but the tallest part of his shoulder came nearly level with her waist. Satira brushed her fingertips along the coarse fur at the back of his neck. When he didn't snarl, she stroked his shoulder, awed by the promise of strength in the bunched muscles beneath her hand.

He was the perfect weapon, and he was hers. No matter what the Bloodhound Guild did to them in the days to come, they couldn't take this from her. They couldn't steal the perfect peace of knowing where she belonged. With Wilder, always, even if it broke both of their hearts in the end.

Archer crept in, his eyes wide. "What the holy fuck was—"

Wilder stiffened and rose to a crouch, a growl vibrating through him at the intrusion.

Hell. Satira kept her hand where it was, pressed against Wilder's shoulder. He seemed tense, though he didn't lunge at Archer. Yet. "Archer? I didn't know it was possible for a bloodhound to change outside the full moon. How—how do we bring him back?"

The other hound dropped to his knees, putting his body lower than Wilder's. "Hard to tell. Time, probably, though it's bound to help if we get him away from here. From the fight."

Which meant moving Nathaniel. During the day. "I saw horses. Did Lowe have any carriages? Anything to keep Nathaniel safe from the sun?"

"Most likely." Archer didn't take his eyes off of Wilder. "We'll handle that part. You'd best be thinking about how to get your man there into one of them without a tussle."

"We left our horses and packs tied up at the edge of town. Fetch those and get a carriage ready. I'll take care of Wilder."

"Yes, ma'am." He ducked out of the shattered door.

Satira turned to Wilder and managed a shaky smile. "I know you're in there somewhere, Wilder Harding. You need to come back to me. I think I earned one hell of a kiss, and I mean to collect."

The growling subsided, but he didn't move. He stared at her instead, yellow eyes tracking every move.

A swift victory and a triumphant ride back to Iron Creek would have been too easy. Sighing, Satira settled in for a long afternoon.

Chapter Eleven

The jarring woke Wilder. He opened his eyes to the opulent interior of a large carriage, one he'd never seen before, and the warmth and scent of Satira's body draped across his.

He stirred, and she murmured his name, voice sleepy. One small hand curled around his bare shoulder, and her chin dug into his chest.

He was naked under a rough blanket. Wilder sat straight, cradling her in his arms, and cursed. Vague memories of a showdown with Lowe teased at him, and he shook Satira awake, "Sweetheart? What happened?"

"You ripped your clothes." She wiggled a little, getting her knees on either side of his hips, then sat back against his thighs. "Convincing you that you wanted to ride in a carriage wasn't easy."

"Did I get knocked on the head?"

"No." Her lips tugged down into a disapproving little frown. "Hunter was ready to try, but it wasn't necessary. Once they backed off, you followed me inside."

It didn't explain why he couldn't remember anything. "Why did I have to follow you anywhere?"

"Because you changed." She touched his cheek. "When you thought Nathaniel had hurt me. You changed into your other form."

"I—" The memory rushed back. Fur and fangs, rending anyone and everything in his path. Wilder sucked in a sharp breath and asked the question he wanted to bite back. "Did I hurt him?"

"No. No, we're all in one piece, more or less." She gestured to a narrow doorway behind her. "This is one of Lowe's carriages. Nathaniel's in the other room. It's sealed against sunlight."

"Lowe." He clenched his hands to still their shaking. "He's dead?"

That made her smile, though her expression held more than a little vindictive pleasure. "He was ash, last time I saw him."

There was only one reason for her to look so pleased instead of merely relieved. "You did it, didn't you? I remember...light."

"Sunlight," she confirmed. Her fingers brushed his cheek again, stroking as if reassuring herself he was all right. "Nathaniel did it, really. He'd already built the weapon. And even when Lowe ordered him to bring me upstairs, Nathaniel fought him long enough for me to prepare it."

Questions remained, a hundred questions that would take time to answer. Right now, only one thing was important. "I changed, and you were able to calm me."

“Yes.” She stroked his jaw as she leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to his temple. “You needed to protect me.”

He needed to *kiss* her, so he did, tilting his head to better fit his lips to hers. Her taste filled him until the world was nothing but her, every sense focused on the way she felt in his arms.

“I want to be with you,” he whispered finally. “I have to. Do you understand?”

“You need me.” Her lips tickled his lips with every word, and he felt her smile. “It’s a good thing, since I don’t think you’re devious enough to be rid of me. I’d follow you to the ends of the earth, if that was what it took.”

“It won’t.” One thing, all he needed to hear. “I love you.”

Her mouth crashed against his. She kissed him so hard her teeth dug into his lower lip. “Love you.” She kissed his cheek. His jaw. When she found his ear, her breathless whisper shivered pleasure down his spine. “I love you, Wilder Harding. Full moon, new moon and everything in-between.”

“Good, because this means you’re saddled with me, whether you want to be or not.”

“I want to be.” She leaned back, curled her fingers into a dainty little fist and drove it into his shoulder. “And next time someone drags me into a room, you’d best do me the courtesy of at least *considering* that I’m right where I intend to be. Because if you think you’re locking me up somewhere safe, maybe you did hit your head.”

He smiled. “Don’t think I can help it. I’m never going to be rational when you’re threatened.”

Her eyes rolled toward the ceiling as she heaved an entirely melodramatic sigh. “Fine. We can spend the next twenty or so years bickering over it. It’ll add spice to our life between bouts of mortal danger.”

“Reminding me about the mortal danger isn’t going to help your cause, you know.”

“Yes, all the things I could do to help my cause seem somehow less appealing with my guardian in the next room. Especially now that he probably has preternatural hearing.”

Wilder swallowed hard. “Are you straight with that? We’ll probably have to help him hide from the Guild. Lord knows what they’d want to do.”

Her humor faded. “He’s Nathaniel. I don’t—” An uncertain pause. “Levi gave me...prejudices. They’re not comfortable, now. But he’s still Nathaniel, and that’s all I care about.”

Most people had similar beliefs and prejudices, if only because they’d never actually seen a vampire. Never spoken to one. “I think, if it were as simple as that, he might not *be* the Nathaniel you knew. But he’s part hound too.”

“Then we’ll hide him.” She curled her arms around her body. “What about you? Us? I thought the Guild didn’t encourage hounds to take mates. And they’re not likely to consider me a qualified weapons inventor. If they tell you that you have to leave me—”

“They won’t,” he assured her. “And if they try, they can go to hell. They need me more than I need them.”

"And I need you most of all." One arm uncurled and looped around his neck, and she leaned into him, pressing her forehead to his cheek. "I need you."

He might have to fight for her, leave his life behind and forge a new one. Instead of terrifying him, the thought made him feel light. Free. "I need you too."

"The Guild representative has kept Wilder in Levi's old study all day today." Satira rubbed the heels of her hands against her eyes and sighed. "Nathaniel's been hiding in his lab for three days. Wilder thinks he should pose as his own nephew. He looks so much younger that it might work."

Ophelia lifted her tea cup and took a sip before answering. "It might avert questions later, especially from those who have known Nathaniel for some time. Secrecy about one's family is commonplace, but an unrelated man who could double for a dead Guild inventor? Not as likely."

Which was what Wilder had said, in fewer, blunter words. After the past weeks, Ophelia's gentle refinement was almost soothing. Satira dropped her hands to her lap and gave her friend a helpless look. "So much has changed."

The blonde woman's cup rattled against her saucer, belying her outward calm, but she met Satira's look evenly. "What happens is beyond your control, remember that. All that is within your grasp is how you handle those changes."

A truth anyone who wanted to live along the border must keep close in their hearts. "Are you all right, Ophelia? Did something happen while we were away?"

Her serious look broke with a smile. "You worry too much about others. You were the one who went marching into a vampire lord's lair."

It wasn't quite an answer, which only served to increase her unease. Ophelia had achieved independence and success enough to command a steep price for her favors, but it didn't make life as a whore any less dangerous. If Wilder got his way, maybe they could offer Ophelia a different choice. At least her friend knew something of managing households... The estate had fallen into an embarrassing state of disrepair under Satira's guidance.

Until the Bloodhound Guild handed down their verdict, Satira couldn't give her friend promises. Instead she offered a smile and reached out to catch Ophelia's hand. "I missed you."

"Oh, I missed you too." Ophelia's smile softened. "Things simply aren't the same around here when you're off having adventures."

"I *liked* the adventure." It felt like a confession. "Not at first. At first I hardly knew what to do with myself. I felt helpless. And then..." The new moon had changed everything. He'd needed her, and she'd been enough. Such a tiny thing to give her confidence, but it had been the first time in her life she hadn't been the one in need.

"I'm so glad it worked out for you." Her friend squeezed her hand. "He's a character, to be sure, but you *glow* when you look at him, Satira."

"I know." And she proved it a few moments later when Wilder walked in, his hat in his hand.

He halted near the door, an apology on his lips. "Sorry, sweetheart. Didn't know you had company."

Satira came to her feet in a rustle of skirts that still felt awkward after so many days of trousers. "Wilder, you remember Ophelia?"

"I do. Ma'am." He nodded and bowed slightly.

She rose. "I should be going, Satira. Mr. Harding, it was lovely to see you." Without waiting for their goodbyes, she smiled again and left the room.

Her unease returned, stronger this time as Wilder closed the door. "I'm so worried that something happened to her while I was away."

"Don't." He gathered her into his arms. "I'm sure she's fine."

Fine, perhaps...but alone. It made Satira feel more than a little guilty about her own happiness.

Assuming she was about to *have* happiness. "Tell me what the Guild representative said."

His jaw tightened. "Basically? They want nothing to do with Archer *or* Hunter, so they're my responsibility now. Archer's to train Hunter, as is proper, but I supervise them both."

It was a reprieve for Archer, who could have been handed a death sentence for his part in assisting Lowe. For Hunter, it was a slight. Cut off from the support of the Guild, from any comfort they might have been able to offer him in a life he hadn't chosen. "That's a great deal of responsibility for you."

"I have no choice but to accept it." His arms squeezed tight. "This whole area is mine. Ours. The manor, all of it."

Relief hit her so hard her knees wobbled. She tightened her grip on Wilder's shoulders as a laugh bubbled up. "Ours."

"Ours," he said again. "They wanted to send some student inventor from back east, but I told them you'd studied under Nate for years, and it was you or nothing. No me, no nothing."

He'd blackmailed the Bloodhound Guild. For her. "And?"

He smiled. "And they kindly extended you an invitation to join the Guild as an associate inventor."

Validation. A stipend. She'd be paid for the work she'd been doing all along and could use that money to build a better life. Perhaps not just for herself. "Then we'll need someone to manage the household. I was never very good at it."

"Does it matter? We'll muddle through."

"It matters if it means I can offer Ophelia a way to earn a living and be safe doing it. She could be protected here."

Wilder pulled back and looked down at her, his expression thoughtful. "You think she wants to?"

"I think she'd consider it." Satira rocked up on her toes and kissed his cheek. "And I think I'd feel better about the work we have ahead of us knowing the people I care about are well."

He spoke slowly, as if choosing his words carefully. "You know her situation is different than your mother's, right? The fact that she has sex with men for money doesn't mean she's unwell or miserable."

"It doesn't mean she's happy, either." Satira settled onto her heels again and tilted her head back. "I've known whores who loved their work and far too many who barely survived it. If she prefers her current work...I'll still feel better. Because she'll have a choice."

He nodded, satisfied. "Then ask her. It's certainly a burden you won't have time to shoulder."

No, she wouldn't. She had a thousand tasks ahead of her. Perfecting the weapon Nathaniel had designed, not to mention researching a way to synthesize blood for him. Training, because she had every intention of following Wilder into battle, like a Guild inventor should.

She had Wilder. Perhaps not a peaceful life with him, but she'd give up the quiet when it came with such a reward. "No time at all. I'm determined to change our little bit of the world, so you'd best be prepared to keep up."

"Only fitting," he agreed. "And since I'm the senior hound around these parts now, I need the very best. Tools, supplies..."

"Sunlight in the palm of your hand, day or night?"

"I was going to say...you."

Warmth flooded her cheeks. Her body. Her heart. She lifted her hands to the buttons on his vest and eased the top one free. "You've been keeping your hands to yourself, Mr. Harding. I've been waiting for you to take me to bed in our new home, and then I remembered I told you I needed a few days to recover from the new moon."

His fingers skated over the backs of her hands. "Indeed, that you did."

There was a strange confidence in familiar surroundings. It was so easy to urge him toward a chair and press him down with firm hands at his shoulders.

Hiking her skirts, she slid into his lap and wrapped her arms around his neck. "In the future I'll remember to issue my invitations more explicitly. Is this clear enough?"

Wilder stared up at her solemnly. "Actually..." His hand crept up her thigh. "I'm still a little hazy on the details. Why don't you explain it to me...at length?"

She could do that. Maybe for the rest of her days.

About the Author

How do you make a Moira Rogers? Take a former forensic science and nursing student obsessed with paranormal romance and add a computer programmer with a passion for gritty urban fantasy. To learn more about this romance-writing, crime-fighting duo, visit their webpage at www.moirarogers.com, or drop them an email at moira@moirarogers.com. (Disclaimer: crime-fighting abilities may appear only in the aforementioned fevered imaginations.)

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

Undertow

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Building Sanctuary, Book 2

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

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

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

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

Enjoy the following excerpt for Undertow:

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

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

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

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

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

He had a harder battle to fight. The moon hung heavy overhead and dug claws deep into his soul. The

wolf struggled, demanding another chance to run and revel, to be free and wild.

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

“You didn’t have to come back in,” she murmured. “You could stay out. I’ll be fine.”

“So will I.” *Eventually*. “I wanted to come with you.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She sat up, kneeling over his thigh. “You won’t hurt me.”

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

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

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

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

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

Again, that gentle smile. “I wouldn’t if I didn’t want to, but I do. I want to taste you.”

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

She laughed and nibbled at his stomach. “Absolutely.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Love lifted her heart to the skies. The rest of her needed a little more help.

Flavia's Flying Corset

© 2010 Sahara Kelly

A Silk, Steel and Steam Story

When Flavia Winters enters the aerial carriage that will convey her across churning waters to the magnificent, isolated castle of Dr. Harland Gennaro, it's not a polite social call. Nor does she hope to re-ignite their former passion. Oh, no. She's convinced the renowned scientist stole something of value from her lab, and she plans to get it back by *whatever* means necessary.

Once Harland blinks away the temporary blindness caused by Flavia's clever magnesium beads, he finds himself tied to a chair as she insists he return a vital ingredient for some impossibility called "Icarus". Then she demonstrates with the last of her compound, and all he can think about is convincing her he's not the guilty party—and getting into the lab with her to recreate her gravity-defying wonder.

Side by side, they burn the midnight oil making new discoveries, and re-learning old ones about each other. As an ocean storm rises with their desire, though, skullduggery is afoot. A thief watches and waits for the moment they make a discovery that could be their last.

Warning: Reading this book may stimulate an interest in the principles of physics, aerodynamics and the science of sexual arousal. The author is not responsible for any injury incurred while investigating all three topics simultaneously.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Flavia's Flying Corset:

Harland prided himself on the efficiency of his unique home, in fact he'd put several years worth of thought into the additional design elements. Thus he was able to provide a suitable meal to start the day. At least he thought it was suitable. Tea, of course. Toast, not too badly burned. Some marmalade Mountjoy had recommended and he'd approved. Of course, he had a suspicion that Mountjoy was walking out with the marmalade maker, but that was his business, not Harland's.

The butter was cool, as was the milk for tea. Harland's icebox system was one of his many accomplishments. The use of the largest local resource—the ocean and its salty water—combined with an ingenious extraction and circulation pump, well it worked quite well. He was proud of it.

Setting the dishes on the table in front of the windows, he wondered what Flavia would think about it. Then she walked in and he forgot everything he'd planned on asking her.

Glowing skin, hair soft and falling down a little here and there—she was a vision from his dreams. Her smile lit a fire in his breeches, an occurrence that seemed to be part of his every waking minute since she'd stepped onto Roman Rock and back into his life. Even in the more casual attire she'd chosen, she was the answer to his every sensual dream.

He had a very difficult time not going to her, stripping her free of those clothes and taking her all over again on the Axminster rug. Perhaps from behind again, her buttocks white and round, begging for the touch of his hand, his mouth, his teeth—

“Oh, lovely. Tea. Just what I need.”

Well, it wasn’t exactly a rousing endorsement for sex on the carpet. He gave himself a mental smack and just smiled. “I’m glad. We need to discuss some matters.”

“Yes. The plan.” She seated herself and glanced out of the window. “It’s very thick, isn’t it? The fog?”

He didn’t even bother looking, just set the toast rack near enough for her to reach and popped a small spoon into the marmalade jar. “Not unusual for this time of year. It may clear later, if the wind picks up a bit.”

Such mundane conversation, he mused. As if they hadn’t been naked and intimate such a short time ago.

“So tell me.” She bit down on a slice of toast. “You want to recreate Icarus.”

He nodded. “I do. That’s the first part of the plan. Simultaneously, I want to spread the word of what we’re doing.”

She tilted her head and watched him as he poured the tea. “How? Why?”

“The how is easy.” He gestured to the communications machine. “I’ll simply send a message to a few friends that you’ve honored me with your presence and that we’re working together on an exciting project you’ve developed.”

“And rumors will spread.”

“I hope so.” He nodded again. “The only person whose attention will be thoroughly intrigued should be the person who knows what *you’ve* been creating. Anybody else will simply think it’s just another scientific collaboration and not devote much interest to it.”

“It’s bait, isn’t it? Designed to lure the thief here perhaps?”

Approvingly, Harland smiled. “Yes. You’re quick to grasp the implications. Whoever stole your Icarus sample will wonder if we’re making more.”

She held up a hand. “There’s more to it than that. Whoever stole it has a piece roughly an ounce or so in size. He’ll try and duplicate it, of course. And that will be a futile endeavor.”

“Why?”

“Because I can’t remember the *exact* measurements. My discovery of Icarus was—how can I put this—serendipitous?”

“You mean it was an accident?”

She sighed deeply. “Yes. Completely by accident. I wasn’t paying much attention since my attempts to create a wax additive weren’t paying off. I recall stirring in a little cedarwood essence to add a fragrance.

Then I wiped off my worktable and probably got a little more dust and scrapings into it than I'd originally planned. I did sneeze too."

"Oh good God. Don't tell me that nasal effluvia is essential."

She grinned. "No. But my sneeze lifted some vaporous dust, drifted it around and into the mixing dish I was using at the time. All these circumstances combined together and when I looked back at my compound, it was congealing into the form you saw." She rubbed a hand over her nose in frustration at the memories. "Even then, it wasn't until I had it in my hand...I was staring at it and wondering what on earth had gone wrong. I sighed and—"

"It elevated."

"It did." She shrugged. "I can't begin to describe my surprise."

"The exhalations. The contents of your breath. Gases caused a reaction."

"That was my assumption, yes."

"Good. I probably have the ingredients we'll need." He nearly rubbed his hands together in enthusiasm, but managed to restrain the impulse.

"Don't get too excited. I've tried for so long to duplicate it. I've had no success whatsoever." Her mouth turned down.

"Never underestimate the power of two heads, which is, as they like to say, sometimes better than one."

She flicked him a mildly irritated glance over the rim of her teacup. "I made the damn stuff. If I can't do it again, I'm not sure how having you hovering over me is going to help matters."

"Testy." He grinned.

"Sorry, didn't mean to be. But you've arrived at the point where my frustration knows no bounds."

"We'll take it step by step. I'll sneeze if I have to."

"Gracious. Why didn't I think of that?" She raised an eyebrow dryly.

"Trust me, Flavia. Between the two of us, we should be able to succeed."

"And if we do, then what?"

"Then...*then* we hope the lure of more Icarus, or perhaps the idea of a written formula, will be sufficient to entice your thief."

Their love rides on a spring and a prayer...

Wild Cards and Iron Horses

© 2010 Sheryl Nantus

During the recent Civil War, a soldier risked his life to save Jonathan Handleston—and lost. With the help of an advanced metal brace on his crippled hand, Jon now travels from one poker tournament to the next, determined to earn enough money to repay the man's debt.

Prosperity Ridge is supposed to be the last stop on his quest, but his brace is broken and he needs an engineer to repair the delicate mechanisms. The only one available is Samantha Weatherly, a beautiful anomaly in a world ruled by men.

Sam is no fool. Jon is no different from any other gambler—except for his amazing prosthetic. Despite a demanding project to win a critical contract to develop an iron horse, she succumbs to the lure of working on the delicate mechanisms. And working with the handsome Englishman.

Like a spring being coiled, Samantha and Jon are inexorably drawn together. Sam begins to realize honor wears many faces, and she becomes the light at the end of Jon's journey to redemption. The only monkey wrench is Victor, a rival gambler who will stop at nothing to make sure Jon misses the tournament. Even destroy Jon's and Sam's lives.

Warning: Contains crazed card games, gears and springs galore and a wild ride that'll have you panting at the end of the book.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Wild Cards and Iron Horses:

Sam looked down at the brown paper parcel, shaking her head as if waking from a dream. "Oh, yes. Your brace is repaired." She went to the half-wrapped bundle and began pulling the paper off. "I intended to come over to Mrs. McGuire's and meet you there." The words rushed out like an oil leak. "Of course, then we would have had to come back here and do the fitting. I don't think Mrs. McGuire would let me go up to your room and allow us to complete our dealings there." She felt the tingling down her spine, settling in her stomach with a butterfly's flutter.

Jon got up from the stool, now steady on his feet. Taking his jacket off, he draped it over the stool and began the now-familiar routine of disrobing in front of Samantha, who diverted her eyes, as was proper. A few minutes later, he walked over to the table. Jon leaned over it, his upper body totally bare.

She pulled the last piece of parchment off the metal brace with fumbling fingers. "Do you need my help to adjust...?" The words trailed off as she studied his bare chest, the light furring of dark hair a stark contrast to his fair skin. The trail led down to his bellybutton then lower, dipping into the darkness below his belt buckle. "The brace is very comfortable," Sam murmured.

Jon leaned into the brace, flipping the clamps that attached it to his upper and lower arm muscles. The strap went across his chest, the well-worn leather pulled tight with the buckle pressing against the red indentation on his skin.

She watched, fully transfixed as he slipped the belt tail through a holder, laying it flush with his chest. The leather edge flapped against his skin, eventually snuggling safe into place.

He turned to look at her, grinning. “‘Comfortable’? Did you try it on?”

She let out a light hiccup, intently studying a knothole in the tabletop to avoid his gaze. “I felt it was important to see if the device worked as required, specifically the fingers. So I needed to wear it to be sure.” Sam looked up, just slightly, staring at his muscles twitching and shifting in the metal brace.

“Ah.” Jon flexed his fingers, watching the little finger curl and uncurl on command. “As good as new.” He tilted his head to one side, still smiling. “How did you like wearing it?”

“An amazing invention.” The words tumbled out, her internal voice shouting for her to calm down and stop babbling like a young girl on her first social outing. “I would have loved to have seen its construction. I would recommend, however, that you contact the manufacturer and ask if they could provide you with some emergency replacement pieces for the future. Improvisation can only go so far, and while I enjoyed working on you...on it and would do so again in a minute, I think...” She was breathless, her last words coming out in a whisper. Her eyes dropped down to study the knothole again. Surely she had made enough of a fool of herself that he would have nothing else to do with her now.

Jon put his shirt on, shrugging the fabric over his broad shoulders and the brace. “An excellent repair job. And I’ll follow up on your recommendations. They’re preparing to make it available to more people.” He flinched, fumbling with a button. “A sad reality of armed conflicts is that innovation tends to follow in order to deal with the results of such.” Jon glanced over at her father and Gil, the two eagerly finishing off the last of the tarts. His voice dropped, almost to an intimate whisper. “Have you considered getting an artificial arm for your father?”

Sam took a step back, folding her arms in front of her. This was an old argument with a new opponent. “Father’s too proud for that, at least right now. Besides, it would be too much money.” She shrugged, meeting his gaze head-on. There was no use in mincing her words. “As you may have noticed, out here things are much more expensive than they are on the coast. While we can produce our own food and items to a degree, we still need to import much more than we can make ourselves. Including such luxuries as artificial limbs and the means to fit and maintain them. And everyone wants to make a profit.”

“I have noticed that.” Jon nodded. “I do think you should think about it. The science, the people I have seen in England, they would make his life much more comfortable.” He curled his fingers into a fist, the metal bands pulling the slender digits inward. “But I would understand if he chose not to, for his own reasons and not financial ones. I often wonder about my own decision.”

“Well, I, for one, am glad you decided to keep your hand.” Sam took the crippled right hand and pressed it between her own two warm palms.

Looking up, she saw a matching smile. The deep blue eyes locked with her own for what could have been a minute, an hour...

“This pastry is delicious,” her father roared from the other table. “I’d forgotten how good. We need to order from them more often.”

The shock startled Sam out of her reverie and she moved back a few inches, releasing Jon’s hand. He let out a low sigh at her withdrawal, sending her pulse racing.

“Yes, the bill. The bill.” She went to the other desk and picked up a piece of paper. “We have an itemized bill here for you, Mr. Handleston.” Sam cleared her throat, making one last attempt to be as professional as possible. “I think you’ll find our rates are quite reasonable...” She paused, seeing his wide smile, the softness in his face bringing unbidden tears to her eyes.

“What you’ve done for me is priceless, Miss Weatherly. And I thought I told you to call me ‘Jon’.” He took the page from her, scanning down the columns. “Everything seems reasonable, more than.” His good hand pushed into one of the waistcoat pockets. “Unfortunately, I don’t have enough on me at the present to pay.” Jon put up a hand. “But I do have an account at the bank, my dear lady. I don’t carry around large wads of cash, no matter my profession.”

“Good idea.” Her father glanced over, a trace of raspberry jam on the edge of his mouth. “Why don’t you accompany him to the bank, my dear, and simply deposit it to our own account? That’ll save an extra trip for everyone.” He nodded to Jon. “I trust you to escort my daughter, sir. At least to the bank,” her father added with a hint of laughter in his eyes.

“And I shall.” Jon bowed slightly, returning the wide smile with interest.

Sam rolled her eyes. When it came to affairs of the heart, her father was about as subtle as a runaway steam engine. After walking into the back room, she emerged with a delicately made shawl, a cream-colored piece of whimsy that somehow fit with her work shirt and her dark blue jeans. The shocked looks when she re-emerged banished all doubt she had about buying the shawl only a few weeks earlier in an impulsive moment.

“Shall I pick up something for later on?” She let out a laugh, seeing the mess the two men/boys had made on the worktable.

One raspberry tart had been cleanly dissected, the fruit scooped out with fingers and spread across most of the daily newspaper, while the chocolate creampuffs had exploded over both faces.

“Uh...maybe not for me.” Her father wiped the edge of his mouth with a finger and licked it clean. Gil let out a moan, clutching his stomach. “And I think Gil here needs a bit of a lay down.”

Sam nodded. "There's some baking soda in the cupboard if you need to mix something up." Turning to Jon, she gestured towards the door. "The bank should be open for another hour or two, but we should hurry."

"Take your time coming home," her father called after them. "Maybe stop for a cup of tea or something. No rush."

Sam scowled at him as she closed the door behind them. She was surprised Jon hadn't already headed for the hills, with this sort of suggesting going on.



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