



Santana's Heat

Kitty DuCane



www.loose-id.com

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eISBN 978-1-60737-974-4

Editor: Ann M. Curtis

Cover Artist: Marci Gass

Printed in the United States of America

Loose Id.

Published by

Loose Id LLC

PO Box 425960

San Francisco CA 94142-5960

www.loose-id.com

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Chapter One

The river was icelike, too cold to drink and certainly too cold for a swim. Her lungs burned, not from heat but from the cold. She fought to expand her seizing lungs, to pull in lifesaving air, gulp by gulp. The raging current tossed her around as if she were a twig, and the inkiness of the night made it near impossible to see critical items, like that boulder the river just slammed her head into.

She was going to die tonight. Perhaps from the cold. Perhaps from the rocks. Perhaps from drowning. Probably...from fear.

What the hell was that thing that attacked her?

* * *

A firm leather whip slashed the sub's back, leaving small welts on her perfect skin. Luc watched as she moaned from each slash. This one might be different. This one might sustain his interest for more than a few nights. She was beautiful and very obedient, which he demanded from his subs. He'd sensed she was new to this lifestyle, and he admitted it had been a mistake not to check her references, but she was here now, and he would soon know. He unlocked the handcuffs and led her to the bed. Her blindfold would ensure she didn't see his fangs if things got out of control.

"On your hands and knees," he ordered.

His sub complied just like he knew she would. That's what he liked about subs; they were uncomplicated. He'd advertised for a sub for hire, mostly because his sexual urges were getting more frequent and he'd wanted an outlet he could use at any time. Of course, the real reason was Gabriella. Maybe hiring a full-time sub would send the message to Gabriella that he didn't want her as a mate. Hell, he didn't want a mate at all. His life was too complicated and, lately, too dangerous to have a mate.

Luc rolled on a condom, added plenty of lube, and then positioned his cock at the entrance to the sub's ass. This was the test. Could she take him, or was she too small? He eased the head of his cock into her tight hole and heard her hiss.

He slapped her ass. "All you have to say is stop." He wanted someone who wanted to be here, not someone who had to be here because of the large sum of money he'd offered.

"No, don't stop," she said through clenched teeth.

He eased in another inch and smelled her physical pain, pain that didn't spark an arousal. Hell, if she couldn't take his cock and enjoy it, she would never enjoy the other tricks he had planned. He dropped his head. *Well, that was a mood killer.*

His head came up. He detected footsteps at the end of the hall and knew there had to be a good reason for his men to intrude on his playtime. Somebody had better be dying.

Pulling from her, he placed a kiss on her hip. "You did well, pet." He hated to lie, but really, it wasn't her fault. Some people liked pain, and some, like her, didn't. Who knew finding a suitable sub could be so difficult?

There was a knock on his door. "But I have some pressing business I must attend to. Get dressed, and I'll have someone take you to your hotel."

Her eyes found his as she fought back tears. Maybe he should change tactics and instead of offering money, find a sub who enjoyed being dominated. Of course, finding those types of women in the mountains of North Carolina was difficult, and it was hard to find werewolf subs, period. Whoever his sub was, there always loomed the high probability that she'd have to move here, which meant leaving her job. Which was why he offered so much money in the first place.

"It's okay," he said to her. "You did fine. I'll be in touch."

Luc disposed of the condom and then pulled on his smoky blue silk robe as he went to his door. He opened it and stepped out into the hallway, giving the lady some privacy. The head of security, Adolf, and several of the security team members stood in the hall.

"Trouble?" asked Luc.

Adolf nodded. "Intruder in sector three. The subject scaled the wall and managed to stagger to the stable."

"Storm?" asked Luc, concerned about his thoroughbred. Storm was his prized possession.

"The guard was at the end of sector three and couldn't get to the stable before the intruder slipped in," said Adolf. "Do you want us to eliminate?"

"No, Adolf. I want to know what this person wants first."

"But sir. He is trespassing."

Adolf was the best security person in the world, but he was a shoot-first-and-ask-questions-later type of person. Unfortunately his instincts were correct most of the time, but Luc knew sooner or later his head of security would be wrong. Luc was trying to coach Adolf to find the answers first, if possible.

"Not every person who trespasses is a trained assassin trying to kill me."

"I can't take that chance, sir."

No, it was against Adolf's nature to take a chance, especially now. Someone had taken a potshot at Luc two months ago when he was in town. It was a warning, but he'd be damned if he'd change his mind concerning the upcoming council vote.

"Let me get dressed, and I'll meet you at the stable. Just make sure the intruder doesn't harm Storm. You have permission to kill him if he does. And have someone take...the lady home."

Damn, he couldn't even recall her name.

He dressed quickly, praising himself that his playroom was separate from the bedroom. No one was allowed in his bedroom. It was his only sanctuary, and he intended to keep it that way for a very long time. Gabriella had almost slipped in two days ago. He'd hate to have to send her back to her family bound and gagged, but he would—in a heartbeat. His friendship with the Earlander family was strained, but he'd be damned if he'd unstrain it with a mate he didn't want. No, Luc had come to the conclusion that he would never have a true-mate, and until he found out who wanted him dead, he would not be mating and creating pups.

Placing his Stetson on his head, he stuck his Glock in the back of his jeans and slipped on his duster. Luc moved quietly through the house, knowing that all of his pack was on high alert. He stepped into the cool night air, and two guards armed with guns immediately flanked him. Someday he might welcome a bullet to the brain, but not tonight. As he approached the barn, his excellent night vision noted the swarm of guards stationed outside the stable. He couldn't wait to find out what would drive a person to invade his estate.

Luc stopped in front of Adolf. "Report."

"The intruder and Storm are lying down."

Luc frowned. "Impossible." Storm didn't like anybody but him, and he had never taken to a stranger. He was a one-man horse.

"No, sir. And Storm appears calm."

"Drugged?" Luc asked, his gut tightening at the thought of drugging an animal unless its life was in danger.

Adolf shook his head. "Not that we can tell. The monitors show Storm is calm."

Storm was a beast of a horse, champion bloodlines and beautiful, and he tolerated the werewolves only because Luc had had him injected with some of Luc's own wolf blood. After several injections, Storm didn't know the difference between himself and the werewolves.

Luc pulled his duster off and handed it to Adolf. "I'll go in and see this intruder myself."

"Sir," stuttered Adolf. "I can't let you do that."

Luc placed his hand on Adolf's shoulder and grinned. "Adolf, there's not a damn thing you can do about it."

Pulling his Glock from his back, he slipped into the stable, stopped, and listened. Ragged breathing came from Storm's stall. He sniffed the air. Nothing. He moved to the stall and peered over the edge. Storm acknowledged him by lifting his head and snorting softly. Damn horse was as crazy as everybody else on this estate.

Luc moved into the stall at the same time his security team moved into the barn. Well, Adolf had lasted longer than Luc thought he would. Luc nudged the horse blanket with the toe of his boot. The intruder grunted. He nudged harder.

“Go...away. I...I need to sleep,” the intruder mumbled, barely audible to human ears, but not for wolf hearing.

“Sleep? You’re in my barn, cuddling with my million-dollar thoroughbred.”

“Don’t care. Please...leave me alone.”

Luc’s nose told him the man was in great physical pain, but there was no fear. The man apparently wasn’t afraid to die. The intruder’s breathing was labored and hoarse. “How about I call the sheriff’s office, and you can sleep there.”

He waited, but the intruder didn’t move. He sensed his team move in behind him, and the firepower aimed at the man was really over the top—as usual.

Luc squatted, gripped the edge of the blanket, and eased it off as his team lifted their weapons in preparation. They’d only sacrifice Storm if left with no choice, but the intruder would pay dearly.

The man was clad in a tattered jacket and knit cap and was nestled up against Storm, stroking him with a shaky hand. Luc’s nostrils flared as a shiver racked the intruder.

Luc nudged the body again. “The sheriff’s on the way.”

“It...doesn’t matter. I’ll be...be dead...by morning.” The intruder coughed, gasping for air. “Blanket. Until the sheriff...gets here?” His teeth were chattering so hard, Luc could barely understand what was being said.

Luc sniffed again. The man smelled different, and he detected blood. His clothes were wet, and his hiking boots were caked in good old North Carolina red clay. Luc leaned closer and rolled the man onto his side, but the man buried his head into Storm.

“Listen. Just let me...sleep. In the morning...you can dump my...my dead body in a ditch.”

No ditch for trespassers. Six feet under was more like it.

“Why are you wet?” Luc asked.

“Jumped.”

“In the river?” That was stupid, since it was early spring and the river temps were still near freezing. People only jumped in the river if they had a death wish.

The man fell into a coughing fit, and Luc waited until the coughing subsided before he pulled the sopping wet toboggan off the man. The intruder rolled his head and lifted his hand to fend off the harsh light from Adolf’s flashlight. Luc peered closer.

Damn. A woman.

Luc’s world pivoted, launching his beast into a frenzy. Lights exploded behind his eyes, and his beast roared.

Mine!

His beast felt joy.

But Luc the man felt dread.

His mate was human? He had nothing against humans, but he assumed his mate would be a she-wolf, someone to keep the bloodlines pure. It wasn't against pack law to mate a human, but none of the ruling families had ever done so. If a true-mate wasn't found among the ruling families, then an arranged mating happened between pure bloodlines.

The woman's good eye fluttered against the light. Her right eye was badly bruised and puffed to the point that it was closed. Several cuts marred her face, and she had a big gash and contusion on her forehead. Her skin was pale, almost translucent, her lips blue.

Luc pushed hard to contain his beast and struggled to think rationally. Hadn't he declared twenty minutes ago that he wasn't looking for a mate? "Why did you jump in the river?"

"To get away."

"From whom?"

Another big shudder rolled through her delicate body. "Not who."

Luc's eyes narrowed as fear eased along his body. "Okay. From what?"

"Wolf. No...a man-wolf." His men behind him shuffled and murmured.

"You must be mistaken," answered Luc. She must have a fever. That was it. It was the fever talking and the wild tales told here in the mountains that she was spitting out.

Her forced smile twisted his heart. "I...can prove it," she mumbled. "If you'll give me my...blanket back and...let me die in peace."

His hearing picked up on her mumbled sentence. *Die*. His beast roared, pushing to get out and save her.

"Prove it, and you can have your blanket back."

He noticed her triumphant smile, although it was weak. She was a fighter, and she liked to win. Luc smiled. And this was her victory. She took a deep breath and pushed herself to an unsteady sitting position. Storm snorted, his warm breath creating a puff of steam in the cold night air.

"Easy boy," she said to Storm. Her good blue eye blinked as she pushed her thick, wet, honey blonde hair out of her pale face. She used both hands to pull her wet jacket open, and then she dropped her head as she fumbled with the few remaining buttons of her red flannel shirt. Luc suppressed his wolf's growl. His wolf urged him to cover her and keep his men's eyes from seeing what was his. But if she was his mate, he had to keep it a secret for now. People wanted him dead, and a mate would only make his enemies try harder.

She lifted her head, her eyes glassy with pain. His breath caught in his throat as she gripped the sides of her shirt and slowly pulled it open. Luc knew her

movements were slow because of her weakness and not because she was a seductress sent to turn his life into a living hell.

"Damn," someone behind him said.

Yeah. Damn.

Santana Jones couldn't see a damn thing, but she was going to get that damn blanket back and hopefully die in peace beside a huge warm body. *Million-dollar horse, my ass.* But she was sure he was a beauty. The cold air brushed her breasts. Why wasn't she wearing a bra?

She slowly covered herself back up and smiled. "Blanket now."

The blur in front of her spoke. "Take the best trackers and find out where she came out and where she went into the river. I want to fucking know *everything*."

The voice was harsh, almost angry, and it confused her. Hell, all she wanted was a blanket. Was that too much for a dying woman to ask?

Strong hands pulled her to a standing position, and she jerked against those hands. "Blanket. You promised a...blanket."

She felt the blanket wrap around her before someone scooped her up. Her nose twitched. This warm body smelled better than the horse. She snuggled closer. She knew they were moving, but she couldn't keep her eyes open. Cold. So Cold.

"Get Dr. Vernon out here ASAP. Tell him we have someone suffering from hypothermia and to bring some antibiotics."

Hypothermia? That was an awfully big word for freezing to death. Her teeth rattled in her head, and she was sure her feet and hands were encased in blocks of ice. No, that wasn't right, but that's what it felt like.

Cold air brushed her face. "I don't...want to leave...the warm barn. You promised...I could...die in peace."

"You are *not* going to die."

She fought the violent shiver that threatened to roll through her. "I'm already three-quarters...dead."

"You're still not going to die. I have plans for you. You will live. Do you understand?"

A little thrill raced through her at his husky voice and the way he'd said it, which was crazy, because she was using the door knocker on death's door and shouldn't be enthralled with a male voice.

"I don't...take orders...from you."

A laugh rumbled deep in his chest. "You will take orders from me before it's all over."

Did he just laugh at her? "Don't count...on it...Mister." She was not good at taking orders, but right now she concentrated on sucking all the heat out of the man holding her.

She must have nodded off, because the next thing she knew, she was plunged under a hot shower.

"I know it burns your cuts, but they need washing anyway," he said.

"Oh I'm not...complaining," she managed to say. Her legs dangled as a big, strong arm supported her, and the other hand worked to free her of her jacket.

"You're undressing me?"

"Uh-huh."

Her shirt slipped from her shoulders along with her bra. Where had her bra been hiding? The warm water pounded her back, and she sighed. This was heaven; she was actually in heaven. Who knew that heaven was a sauna?

"I'm going to sit you on the ledge and undo your boots, okay?"

"Sure. Just don't turn off the heat."

She missed the warmth of the water as he swapped places with her. His hands fumbled with the button of her jeans, and she slapped at him. His laugh glided along her insides as he slid her zipper down, and her jeans followed. Two strong hands gripped her arms and eased her down onto a cold seat. She rested her head on the cold tile as he worked off her boots and then yanked off her socks and jeans. She waited for him to put her back under the water. She cracked her good eye. *Damn. Mr. Heat was stripping.*

But what the hell, she was dying. Might as well go out gloriously.

He ripped the buttons on his shirt before he slipped it from his shoulders and let it drop. His jeans followed. She tried to follow what little she could see with her good eye. Too bad she couldn't see him clearly. It might be the last time she'd ever see male flesh. She had a hunch that it was *perfect* male flesh too.

She flinched when he dropped to his knees in front of her. "I'm going to wash you," he said. "And it's going to hurt like hell." She cracked her swollen eye and tried to bring his face into focus, but couldn't manage to get the two of him aligned.

She nodded as he grabbed a washcloth and squirted soap on it. She gritted her teeth as he swept the soap over her breasts.

"Sorry, baby, but I've got to scrub your open wounds."

The soap burned like fire, and she looked down, remembering the slash of claws. Claws that had been attached to a man. She blinked to erase the memory; she didn't want to dwell on it. With any luck, this would all be a bad dream, and she'd wake up somewhere nice and toasty, with two good eyes to view Mr. Heat.

The man scrubbed her arms and legs, but fortunately, there was only one stinging gash on her left thigh. He cupped her chin and gave her what she thought was a lopsided smile.

"Close your eyes."

She did, and he swept the soap over her face, her forehead burning like the devil.

"Okay. Can you stand under the water while I wash your hair?"

She kept her eyes closed because of the soap. He was going to wash her hair. "You're kidding, right?"

"Nope. Got to get that river water out of your hair."

Mr. Heat pulled her to her feet and placed her under the water, and man, did it feel wonderful. She relaxed and let the warm water rinse the soap from her face.

"Place your hands on the wall to steady yourself, lean your head back, and keep your eyes closed."

Luc didn't own shampoo, so he squirted the body soap into his palm and worked it into her thick hair. He found a large bump, and she winced. What kind of hell had she been through? With a lump that big, he'd have to have the doc check her head for a concussion. She swayed, and Luc swept his arm around her before her knees buckled. He turned her around, so that her back was against the water, and pressed her sweet flesh to his. His cock swelled at the contact, and he cursed himself. His beast was responding to its mate, and hell, Luc the man didn't like it. *She must think I'm a total jerk.*

His beast pushed against him, and he leaned into her and sniffed, pulling her essence deep. And he instantly regretted doing that. Her scent seeped into his wolf, entwining, weaving, imprinting her on his soul. His beast wanted to roar. Roar with joy and roar with hate. Hatred for the wolf who'd dare assault his mate. He inhaled again and picked up a hint of something different, but he didn't have the time to process it.

Too many emotions bombarded him. Joy. Hate. Lust. Fear. Especially the fear. The fear of losing a mate before getting one.

Luc pushed his feelings away as he used his other hand to ease her head back so he could rinse her hair. Her head lolled to the side, and a fist squeezed his heart. He hated to do it, but he had to get her out of the warm water, dry her off, and get her into bed before the doc got there.

Turning off the water, he stepped from the shower, taking her with him. The fact that she was out cold bothered him. Her breathing was still shallow, and he heard a wheeze deep in her chest. He managed to dry her off and get her into bed right before his bedroom door opened.

Luc noticed Dr. Vernon's raised brow, but the good doc proceeded to the bed.

"Tell me what you know."

"She was wet and shivering, said she jumped in the river. I gave her a hot bath and scrubbed her wounds. She's got a good-size lump on the back of her head."

Dr. Vernon pulled his stethoscope from his bag and eased back the covers. When the doc placed his hands on her to listen to her heart, Luc growled. Dr. Vernon's hands stilled.

Apparently having a mate made you do things without thinking. Luc dragged his hands through his hair. "Sorry, Doc."

"Go put some clothes on and let me do my job without the hairs on the back of my neck standing up."

Luc knew he should do that, but his wolf wouldn't let him leave. Something inside Luc demanded he be there.

"How long was she in the river?"

Luc shook his head. "Don't know." Hopefully Adolf would have something to report in an hour or two.

The doc pulled the scope from his ears. "She's got fluid in her lungs, and lots of it." He leaned forward and found the contusion on her head. "And she may have a slight concussion."

Dr. Vernon took her temperature and shook his head. "One hundred and three."

Luc didn't know much about human temperature because werewolves regulated their temperature and were hardly ever cold or hot, but he assumed one hundred and three was bad.

"Now, you want to tell me what did this?" asked Dr. Vernon as he pointed to the claw marks on her chest.

Dr. Vernon knew about Luc's pack because Luc happened to be in town the day that Dr. Vernon's daughter was kidnapped by a piece of shit strung out on meth. The idiot had wanted to trade Kylie for drugs. The man had been unstable, and Luc did the only thing he could. He'd shifted in midair and torn the man's throat out. Luckily Kylie had passed out, and the only living person who'd seen him in his wolf form was Dr. Vernon.

Luc looked at Dr. Vernon. He trusted the doc because he had patched up many a pack member when they couldn't transform to heal. Luc extended his hand. Claws grew from his nails, and hair covered his hands. Luc made a sweeping motion down her chest.

"You think a werewolf did this?"

"Part man, part wolf, somebody in the middle of a change. A wolf would kill by ripping the throat out. A desperate man would do whatever he had to do." Just saying what was obvious caused Luc's gut to tighten. His mate had been attacked by one of his kind.

"She's going to have deep scars."

Luc nodded absently. A permanent reminder of her night of horror. Of course, he could convert her tonight, and her body would heal itself, *if* she could change into a wolf. And she'd be damned the rest of her life. Being the mate of the most powerful werewolf in North America didn't have many perks but had tons of pains in the ass.

"She needs to be in a hospital," Dr. Vernon said as he shoved his stethoscope into his bag.

Luc snarled. "Why?"

"She needs constant monitoring."

"Tell me what to do and what to look for."

Dr. Vernon lifted his brows in surprise. "I'll write out the instructions and leave them on the nightstand. And you need to dry her hair. All that wet hair will cause her to get pneumonia. I'll start an IV with a potent antibiotic and fever reducer."

Luc snatched his phone off the nearby chair and punched in a number. "Find me a hair dryer," he barked.

The doc started a line in her arm and hung the IV bag on a pole he'd unfolded from his black bag and wedged under the mattress.

"Leave her wounds open. Let them breathe. These antibiotics should do the trick on her cuts. It's her lungs that bother me."

The doc filled a syringe and pushed it into the IV line, and Luc prayed it was a miracle drug.

"I'll be back in the morning to check on her. Keep an eye on her temperature. If it goes up to one hundred and four, give her an ice bath."

Luc grinned. "I'm sure she'll try to kick my ass if I do that, Doc." Yeah, his mate was a fighter. Anyone who survived a jump in the icy river was a fighter. Now she just had to survive. Period.

Dr. Vernon looked at Luc over his glasses. "I doubt anyone can kick your ass, but if she can, please call me so I can watch."

The doc rose, but Luc placed a hand on the doc's arm. "What are her chances?"

Dr. Vernon shoved his glasses back up his nose and shook his head. "I'm sorry. I doubt she'll make it through the night."

* * *

"Is it done?"

"Not exactly," answered Joe.

"What happened?"

"She got away, jumped in the river. It's only a matter of time before her body shows up, stuck on a log or washed up somewhere."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "How hard is it to kill one woman, a *human* woman?" he asked.

"She was a fighter and knew a lot of evasive moves."

Imbecile. Why was everything that was so simple fucked up by imbeciles? All Joe had to do was rip her throat out. Nothing else. "Did you do any damage to her at all?"

"I think I got her with my claws."

Well, that might be enough, *if* there was any luck in this world. "I want confirmation of a dead body. Find that damn body."

He snapped his phone shut and slammed down the last swallow of the Irish whiskey. It was a sad fucking day when the best thing was the whiskey. He needed an alternate plan. And of course, he'd have to eliminate Joe as soon as that body surfaced.

Chapter Two

Luc stood at the end of the bed for a long time, staring at her. She was too weak to change. The best he could hope for would be for her to get better, and then he could change her. Damn. What was he saying? He couldn't change her unless she wanted to change. Pack law.

A knock on his door pulled him from his thoughts. Naked, he opened the door. Adolf held a red hair dryer out to him.

"Request permission to speak freely, sir?" said Adolph.

Luc took the dryer and gave his permission but knew he wasn't going to like whatever Adolph said.

"Sir, please consider the possibility that she might have been sent here to kill you."

"You mean that she knocked herself in the head, slashed her body, and then threw herself in the river?"

"I'm just pointing out all the possibilities."

"Thanks, Adolf. But I'm sure I can protect myself from a half-dead woman. Did you find anything?"

"Yes, sir. Her name is Santana Jones. She got out of the river about a hundred meters upstream and walked here. And she went into the river about two miles from the bridge. We found her campsite. There was evidence of a struggle...and a wolf."

"Anyone we know?" *Because if we do know that rat bastard, his death is next.*

Adolf shook his head, pulled a bag from his jacket, opened it, and handed it to Luc. Luc sniffed the contents, and rage burned through him. It was the scent of the werewolf who'd threatened an innocent woman...his mate. The scent was unfamiliar. He inhaled again, imprinting the scent in his brain, because if he ever found the bastard, Luc was going to kill him slowly.

"Pass this around to everyone. I want to know if anyone recognizes this scent. If any pack member encounters this scent, I want to know. Do not engage." Hell, he was saving that pleasure for himself.

"I also want to know everything about her. Where she lives, who her friends are, what kind of shampoo she uses. And bring some of her clothes here."

Adolf slightly bowed before turning and leaving.

Luc closed his door, a little relieved. At least he didn't have a rogue wolf in his own pack. It was true that wolves loved to fuck, but it was also true that good and evil existed in all packs. Hell, maybe the wolf and the woman were dating, and the wolf had taken over and scared the shit out of her. The wolf was its own entity that was hard to control sometimes during sex. Shit! That thought burned a hole in his gut.

Luc went to the bed, plugged in the hair dryer, and dried her hair. If his pack saw him now, they would declare him insane. Why hadn't he asked for a brush? She didn't even move when he replaced her wet pillow with a dry one. Finally her hair was dried to a mass of curls that rivaled the texture of fine silk. Luc picked up a strand and rubbed it between his fingers, imagining it sliding across his thighs as she went down on him.

Sighing, Luc dropped the silky strand and went to the other side of the bed. He slid under the covers and grinned. His mate had already taken over his side of the bed. A mate he didn't want. A mate he *did* want on some primitive level.

He propped himself up with the pillows and stopped to listen to her faint heartbeat and ragged breathing. For the first time in his life, he was helpless. He had the power to save her, but only if she had the energy to shift. She didn't.

Luc knew being around his mate was affecting him when the door to his bedroom opened. He hadn't even heard the footsteps in the hallway.

"I don't believe it," said Gabriella. "You actually have her in your bed?"

"You know, Gabriella, I usually do exactly what I want to do. It's a bad habit of mine."

Gabriella took a step forward.

"Don't," he said. "I didn't invite you in."

"But you invited her?" Gabriella sniffed. "Hell, she's not even one of us. She's *human*."

"So what do you want me to do, throw her back in the river?" Knowing Gabriella, that's exactly what she'd want him to do.

"You could have put her in another damn room. It's not proper."

If he'd planned on taking Gabriella as his mate, it wouldn't be proper, even though some non-true-mated pairs had arrangements that allowed them to play the field.

"I could have, but I didn't." *Because I don't give a shit.* Gabriella was beautiful with her long dark hair and long legs, but he hated being manipulated by her and her father.

"What will the council members think about you having a human in your bed?"

That was one thing about Gabriella. She didn't get the fact that he didn't give a shit what the council thought. Luc shoved the covers down and slipped from the bed. In two strides, he was toe-to-toe with Gabriella in all his naked glory. Werewolves were extremely comfortable in the nude, since they almost always

shucked their clothes before shifting. "Two days from now, your father will be here for the council meeting. When he leaves, you will go with him."

He saw the horror and then the hurt on her face, but he didn't care. She was a spoiled child used to getting her way, and he was happy to say he'd made a point to irritate the hell out of her.

"You can't mean that," she said.

"If I say it, I mean it."

She turned and headed for the door. "You'll regret this, Luc."

"I doubt that. One more thing," he said. She stopped in midstride and turned. "Don't ever come into this room unless you're invited."

"Sure, Luc. We've all got to have somewhere to run and hide." The slamming of the door shook the pictures on the wall.

Chapter Three

She was on her side, her leg thrown over something warm and hard. A strong heartbeat drummed in her ear as she smoothed her hand over rock-hard abs covered with soft hair. She buried her nose deeper into the flesh and inhaled a man's warm and wild scent. Her nose twitched, and something coiled in her womb.

Pressing her pussy against his leg, her hand traveled lower over corded muscle. She smiled at the sharp intake of breath as she toyed with the hairs on his belly. She stopped when her hand bumped into his heavy member. She walked her fingers down its length, amazed at the smooth velvet over steel. He shifted his hip, and she lifted her leg, rocking her clit against him. She grasped his member and slowly slid her hand up and down, mimicking her rock against his hip. Her body was on fire, and he hadn't even touched her yet. She stopped and rubbed her thumb over the slick moisture and heard him hiss. Yeah, he wanted her too.

Gripping his cock, she gave it a squeeze, and slowly pumped. She repeated the process, picking up the pace with every pass. His legs corded under hers as she rocked against his hip.

"Oh yes," she said when a big hand palmed her ass and pulled her against his hard body. Another big hand covered hers on his cock. He increased the pace, and she let him take over as her body coiled and spiraled. Warm heat raced through her as pleasure consumed her. Her orgasm erupted with a wildness that was foreign to her, her womb convulsing again and again.

Her body trembled with little aftershocks, and the pressure against her hand increased, along with the speed against his cock. Muscles corded under her leg as his big cock jerked. She felt his slick wetness against her palm as jets spurted, soaking her hand. He released his grip, and she eased back down his member, coating him with his own release. Sliding her hand back up, he jerked when she thumbed his sensitive head.

She tucked her hand between them as she snuggled back down to sleep.

"That feels good. Don't stop," someone said.

Her eyes flew open, and she eyed the man beside her. That voice. The voice from last night. She looked at her hip positioned against him and his cum spread on his belly. Mortification flooded her.

"I'm so sorry. I was dreaming. I have...I mean, I've never... I wouldn't do that."

"Dreaming about me so soon, and we haven't been properly introduced? I'm Luc Delemere. And you are?"

She rolled away from him and pulled the sheet up to cover her breasts. "Santana. Santana Jones."

"No, don't cover up. I like the view." A grin split his beautiful face. His dark hair curled around his face and neck, unruly like the soft hair on his chest, a chest that she'd been stroking only a few minutes ago.

"What are we...you...I mean me, doing in bed?" she asked.

"You were recovering from a swim in the river."

She frowned. The river. Then she blanched. It all came flooding back to her. Yeah, she'd jumped in the river to get away from a madman turned wolf. And she'd been so cold that she thought she was going to die.

"How do you feel?"

"I feel good. A little tight in the chest, but I'm good."

"You're supposed to be dead."

Gee, he was just a well full of joy. "Well, sorry to disappoint you."

"Darlin', I'm happy as hell you didn't die in my bed. But seriously, you were deathly ill last night."

"I'm a very healthy person. I never get sick." She eyed the IV in her arm. "But it looks like I had some help."

The man only nodded.

Santana went into a coughing fit, losing her breath a couple of times.

"You're still sick," he said.

She cleared her throat. "Chest is a little tight, but I'll be fine." She knew he didn't believe her, but she didn't care.

"Santana," said Luc. "That sounds like a man's name."

Santana smiled. "There's a male singer with that as a last name, so that's probably why you think it sounds like a man's name. Apparently it's a very special name to my mom."

"Why?"

She shrugged. "She always said it was the name of a princess, but Mom was always a little off her rocker."

"Does she live around here?"

"No. She died when I was ten." Which had been the event that started the downward spiral of her life.

"I'm sorry. So you were raised by your dad?"

She shook her head. "No. I never knew my dad. At first Mom told me that he had left us, but near the end...she said she left him because she had to. So I really don't know the truth. And it really doesn't matter."

"So who raised you?" he asked.

"No one."

"No one?"

"No. I grew up on the streets of Charlotte."

She saw concern in his eyes, but it was misplaced. The streets had made her strong.

"What do you do for a living?"

She grinned. "I'm a stripper."

He scratched his chin, and she knew he was contemplating what to say, like all the other people she'd ever told. She loved telling people her occupation just to see how they reacted. Most were appalled; some were intrigued.

"You'll have to strip for me sometime."

And most men reacted exactly like he did. "I'm sure you can't afford me." But as good as he looked, she might offer him a discount. Her eyes strayed to his cock, resting on his belly.

"So you're a high-rent stripper."

"Yes, and I'm real good."

He opened his mouth to answer, but he never got the chance. The door to his bedroom flew open, and a beautiful woman stormed into the room. She stopped at the end of the bed, threw her hands on her hips, and sniffed the air.

"You fucked her?" screamed the woman.

Well, that was blunt and to the point. Santana pulled the sheet up higher as her face burned with embarrassment. She glanced at Luc and wondered why he wasn't covering himself up.

"Actually, she fucked me," said Luc. Santana glared at him, and he shrugged. He'd spoken the truth, but it did sound awful.

"I don't believe this," the woman said.

That's exactly what I was thinking.

The lady glared at the man beside her, the same man with whom Santana had had sex with a few minutes ago.

"Your wife?" whispered Santana.

"Fuck no."

Santana glanced sideways at Luc. "Fiancée?"

"Nope."

"Girlfriend then?"

He crossed his arms over his delicious chest and shook his head.

"Sister?"

He smiled right before a deep laugh rumbled from him. "No," he said. "She's the daughter of a friend and a guest here. That's all."

The woman glared even more. "Obviously what you think and what she thinks are two different things," whispered Santana.

"It usually is," he replied.

"She's made a miraculous recovery since last night," interjected the woman.

The man glanced at her. "It appears so. Now get out, Gabriella, and make damn sure you're ready to leave with your father when he leaves."

Gabriella glared at Santana before she turned on her heel and left. The slamming of the door echoed in the room.

"Listen," said Santana. "I think that was my cue to leave, so if you'll tell me where my clothes are and give me a ride back to my campsite, I'll be out of your hair."

"Ignore Gabriella. She's spoiled rotten, and she knows no woman has ever been in my bed before."

What exactly did that mean? Unless he never brought his women home. She was surprised that thought pleased her. "Am I supposed to be impressed? Because I'm not."

His laugh startled her. It was a pleasant laugh, deep and rich, and moved over her like decadent chocolate. A genuine laugh. "I didn't think you would be," he said.

"I'm ready to leave."

"The doctor's coming back this morning to check on you."

"I don't need a doctor. I need to leave."

"I can't let you leave," said Luc. *Can't and won't*. Even though that was the very thing that he should let her do.

Santana cut her eyes at him. "I beg your pardon."

"You heard me. You're not well. Besides, you've got to find another job."

She blinked her eyes in disbelief. "Why?"

Because the wolf said so. "It looks to me like your...assets are damaged."

She glanced down at her breasts and the ugly scrapes marring them, but she knew the wounds would be gone in a few weeks and the scars that would be left behind would turn on some of the hardcore men she knew. "They'll heal, and theatrical makeup can do wonders."

"Maybe. Why don't you go shower and wash those assets of yours, and I'll get us some breakfast."

"You like my assets, do you?"

Like was not the appropriate word. Her breasts were double Ds, and his hands were itching to test their weight, suck them into his mouth, and taste them. "Guilty."

She glanced at his growing cock, and he watched her tongue trace her upper lip. His cock jumped. Damn, she had the softest-looking lips. She pulled the tape from her IV and yanked the line out of her arm. "All men do," she said as she slid from the bed and walked to the bathroom.

His gaze followed her fine ass and long legs across the floor, and he laughed. His mate was a stripper, which meant she was a perfect match for him. And her being a stripper explained a lot of things, like her bare pussy. He could only hope she was up for the Dom/sub life. He'd come to love the lifestyle, to have a woman completely trust him to give her pleasure while she was entirely at his mercy.

Luc's wolf wanted her badly, and not just for some masturbation in bed. He needed to figure out why another werewolf wanted her dead, and he had to protect her while keeping her from finding out that weres really did exist.

He also needed to fuck her.

Chapter Four

Santana put her achy body under the warm shower. Bits and pieces from last night floated back to her. She remembered being in this same shower with Luc, the most handsome man she'd ever seen, and he'd bathed her...tenderly, if her memory was correct. And then she'd accosted the man in his own bed, which was so unlike her.

Her clothes, along with his, were still piled on the floor in the huge shower. She picked up her blouse and inspected the rips across the front; then she found her bra, only to find it was slashed in two. So she wasn't crazy. She'd been attacked by that crazy man who grew claws and fangs, who'd told her that her death would be swift and painless. She shook her head. No one would ever believe her. She'd need to keep the information to herself because she preferred *not* to be locked up in the loony bin. Hell, she barely believed it'd happened herself. Her attacker must have drugged her with something to make her hallucinate. But that didn't explain her torn clothes. She let her blouse and bra fall back on the floor.

After she showered and dried off with an oversize towel, she opened the bathroom door, fully expecting to see him reclining on the bed, but he was gone. She glanced around the room, looking for some clothes. Of course, he'd leave and not provide her anything to wear.

Damn him. She had to get back to Savage.

Well, if he thought she couldn't improvise, he was in for a big surprise.

She went to a set of double doors and pulled them open. It was his closet, which was bigger than her whole house. She snatched one of his shirts off the rack and sniffed it, disappointed because it smelled of laundry detergent. She caught sight of another shirt dropped carelessly on the floor. She picked it up, sniffed, and smiled at the wild, woodsy scent that reminded her of him. She might be running away, but she didn't want to forget him. There was something about him—Besides, it was still early spring, and this shirt was thicker. She put on the shirt and tucked her long hair inside. She found his sock drawer and pulled on some wool socks. Shoes would be a problem. Her feet were so dainty; she always had issues with finding something that would fit. She fumbled around, looking through all his shoes, and determined that cowboy boots would be easier to tramp around in while she was making her escape. She found a pair of sweatpants but had no way to keep them up, so she put them back where she found them. She pulled on an old oversize jacket and snatched a cap from the sock drawer.

Satisfied that she looked like she actually *belonged* in the insane asylum, she shuffled out of the closet and headed directly for the door.

She turned the knob. "Damn, the son of a bitch locked me in." She hated locked doors, especially when she was the one locked up.

But that wasn't a problem. Growing up on the streets had its advantages. She went to the bathroom and found what she needed. Prancing back into the bedroom, she took her time jimmying the door, smiling. He might think he had her, but she was mighty resourceful.

Tucking her two high-tech lock-picking tools, a.k.a. bobby pins, into a shirt pocket, she gave the room one more glance before she opened the door and stepped into the hallway, where she smacked into a big hard body. A strong hand reached out and caught her arm, keeping her from falling on her ass.

The man was tall and handsome like Luc. Well, not as handsome as Luc, but this man was in that same make-you-drool category. "Excuse me," she said as she pulled her arm away. She stepped to the side to go around him, but he blocked her path.

"You're in my way. Please move."

The man grinned. "No can do. I was told to keep you here."

"And who told you that?"

"Luc."

"Figures." Was it the fact that she was a stripper that had him thinking he owned her? "Step aside. Don't make me kick your ass."

He crossed his arms over his massive chest and smiled. "Sugar, I want you to try to 'kick my ass.' Getting physical with you sounds like fun. Luc didn't tell me you were a cute little thing."

"Right. I'm dressed like a hobo. Does everybody around here think with their dicks?"

"Pretty much."

She rolled her eyes and racked her brain to figure out what to do. She knew she couldn't actually take the guy, nor could she outrun him in these boots, but she still had her brains.

The man leaned in close and sniffed. "You smell like candy, and I love candy."

She rolled her eyes higher if that were possible. "Listen, dickhead. I'm ready to leave, and you have no right to keep me here."

"See, there's a problem with that, sugar. If I let you leave, Luc will kick my ass. So if I keep you here, maybe you can *try* to kick my ass, and I'll get to see if you really taste like candy."

"What has tasting got to do with me kicking your ass?"

"Because if you assault me, I plan on stealing a kiss, so why don't you attack me and let me see if you taste as sweet as I think you do."

Sometimes she actually hated men, and this was one of those times. She stepped back into the room and slammed the door. The laughter from the other side pissed her off. She took a deep breath and moved over to the window. Luc's bedroom was at the back of the house, and it overlooked the stables. She smiled. That million-dollar horse was her ticket out of here. Several guards patrolled the grounds, and getting around them would be fun. Too bad it wasn't dark. She spun around and searched for a weapon. She knew there was a pair of cosmetic scissors in the bathroom, but she wanted something more substantial.

She smiled again when she found her weapon. She unhooked the IV bag from the pole and then pulled the pole free from the bed. It wasn't as big or as heavy as she'd hoped, but she'd make it work. She didn't want to kill him, only disable him.

With the pole in her right hand, she opened the door. The guard turned to face her with his big grin, and that's when she brought the pole up between his legs. He doubled over with a grunt.

"Sorry," she said. "I know that had to hurt."

Then she brought the pole down on the back of his head. He toppled like a tree, out cold. She stooped and felt his pulse, then looked at the split on the back of his head. It was bleeding profusely, but head wounds did that. He'd survive, but his head was going to hurt like a bitch.

Too bad he didn't fall farther into the room so she could close the door. There was no way she could haul his heavy ass into the room.

"Sorry. I told you I would kick your ass, but I conveniently forgot to tell you that I don't play fair." She scooped up his radio and stepped over him.

She felt good. It had been years since she'd used her survival skills, and it was good to know she still had the touch. She made her way down the hallway, went down the stairs, and took a right. She found the kitchen and was surprised it was empty. She plucked two steak knives from the dish drainer and put them in her coat pockets. In her past, she'd carried a boot knife, but she didn't have a leather sheath to conceal one. However, she knew how to make one. She stopped by the butcher block and found a utility knife, slit the inside of her left boot, then slipped the knife inside. They weren't high quality tactical knives, but they'd do.

Santana glanced out the kitchen window and waited until two guards disappeared around the back of the barn before she opened the door and stepped onto the pathway. She didn't stop as she headed for the barn. She didn't run, nor did she trot, but she was in a careful hurry. The wind whipped cold air against her bare shins and up the shirt all the way to her bare ass as she held her breath and prayed her luck would hold.

But it didn't. The radio crackled. Damn, they'd found her first victim. She opened the barn door and slipped inside. The barn was bigger than she remembered from last night; five stalls ran down both sides of the huge walkway. She should stop to assess the situation, but she didn't have time. She walked toward the back, where she knew that mammoth horse was, and when she reached the stall, she peered through the slats. The horse came and poked his head over the rail.

"Hey, big boy. Remember me?" She stroked his head, and he snorted softly. He was a beautiful thing, very big and very black. His shiny coat reminded her of raven wings.

"Are you going to let me ride you out of here?" She found a bridle that was looped over the post and hoped the horse could tell her how to get it on him. She opened the stall.

"Wha-what are you d-d-doing?"

She stopped and turned, unsure of the weak voice that had spoken to her. A boy, who appeared to be six or so, stood a few feet from her.

"I was planning on going riding," she said. Damn, she'd been caught by a child.

"N-nobody r-r-r-rides S-t-t-torm but Master Luc," stuttered the boy.

"I'm sure he won't mind." *Well, Luc probably would mind, but he isn't here.*

The boy glanced down at the dirt and then back at her face. "Why you d-d-d-dressed so f-f-funny?"

Holding her hands out, she asked, "What? You don't like my outfit?"

The boy shrugged and glanced away, blushing.

"My clothes were wet, so I borrowed some of Luc's."

The boy pointed a small finger at her feet. "You're g-g-gonna be in t-t-trouble. That's Master Luc's f-f-f-favorite b-boots."

Her heart broke as he struggled to get his words out, but he was just precious. She wanted to scoop him up and take him home with her. She looked down. Yeah, they probably were his favorite pair. They were old and worn, and she was glad she'd snatched them.

She noticed the boy didn't stutter over "Master Luc." She dropped to her knee. "You know, Luc's not your master."

She hated that word. It brought back unpleasant memories, ones she couldn't deal with right now.

"Sure h-he is."

"Why do you call him master?"

"B-b-b-cause he-he is."

"What makes him your master?"

A big grin split the boy's face. "He t-t-t-takes c-c-care of m-m-me."

She'd heard that before. "Okay. How does he take care of you?"

"He f-f-feeds me and g-g-gives me a p-p-place to st-st-tay and h-h-helps me with my-my sk-sk-sk-schoolwork."

She brushed a lock of hair out of the boy's eyes. "That doesn't make him your master. That makes him your friend."

"He's m-more than a fr-fr-friend. S-s-s-sometimes he lets m-me sleep with him."

She clamped her hand over her mouth as her belly bottomed out. His words took her back, back to that time in her life that she could never escape. And the memory of Michael assaulted her. Michael wasn't much older than this boy standing before her, and Michael had been subjected to things that no child should ever experience. She was about to ask what else Luc did, but the boy threw her for a loop.

"D-d-do-do you have a m-m-m-master?" the little boy asked.

She gently placed her hands on the boy's shoulders and ran her hands down his arms. "I did a long time ago."

"You d-don't have one n-n-n-now?"

She shook her head.

"Wh-what ha-happened to him?"

I killed him. "Listen, I'm not so good of a rider, so why don't you come with me and make sure I do it right."

The boy opened his mouth to speak, but the radio squawked, saying her name.

He pointed to her. "They-they are t-t-t-talking about you."

She smiled. Yes, they were talking about her, and she'd run out of time. "Yeah, why don't you run along and tell them where I am?" The last thing she wanted was for the child to be around when they caught her. "And then go inside and get yourself a cookie. I saw some on the counter when I came through the kitchen."

"C-c-cookies?" He gave her a wide grin. "Miss R-Rachel s-s-said she w-was making c-c-cookies f-for us m-m-munch-kins."

"There are other children here to play with?"

He kicked the dirt. "Y-yes. Th-they come h-here in the m-morning and l-l-leave at n-night w-with their m-moms."

"Are you the only one that stays at night?"

His nod caused dread to fill her soul. She turned him around and gave him a little shove. "Go on now. Tell them where to find me." The boy looked over his shoulder as he shuffled to the door. "And don't forget that cookie," she called after him.

Chapter Five

The boy eased out the door, and she wondered if he was running or walking slow. The boy was obviously in need of some professional help, and the question running through her mind was whether Luc was the problem. Her mind raced on with all sorts of negative thoughts of Luc and the boy in bed. She might have to kill the *master*, like she'd had to do the last time.

She put the bridle back where she'd found it and turned to wait. She heard the men outside, and it didn't take them long to enter the front and back doors. She remained still, looked at all the firepower aimed at her, and wondered just who the hell Luc was that he needed so much protection.

Santana crossed her arms over her chest and looked every one of them in the eye. They all had the same features, were big and handsome, and her glaring at them didn't faze any of them. She watched as the sea of men parted to let Luc through. It was like a scene out of a movie. The only thing missing was the dramatic music. Hell, she wondered if she should bow to him. *Not!*

Luc stopped about ten feet from her, cocked his hip to the side, and tucked his hands into his jean pockets. She put her hands in her own pockets and gripped both steak knives.

"You must have the biggest dick in here," she said.

He shrugged. "Probably."

Typical male answer.

"Willie said you wanted to go for a ride," said Luc.

"No. I was stealing your horse to escape."

"Looks like you stole some clothes too."

"When left with no choice, I improvise."

Luc pushed his cowboy hat up on his head as he eyed her feet. "So there are my good boots."

She looked down at his tennis shoes and almost laughed, but instead she shrugged.

"I think that's stealing," he said.

"I've stolen before, Cowboy. You made a big mistake. You left me no clothes, and you locked me in. You'd better be glad that I didn't try to find *you*."

Luc looked at the waif standing in front of him. She was furious with him, and he was furious with her and furious with himself. She could have killed Jim and Willie both, and Luc couldn't have done a damn thing about it. He'd put his pack at risk by having her here.

"You almost killed Jim."

The man she'd assaulted stepped forward, holding an ice pack to the back of his head.

"He made a mistake. He chose to obey your orders instead of doing the right thing by letting me go. Besides, if I wanted him dead, I would have continued to beat him with the pole."

"He did what he's paid to do."

"Well then, I hope you pay him well." She glanced at Jim. "And you may want to throw in a bonus for hazardous duty pay."

Luc was sure that she didn't understand the implication of what she'd just said. A woman had bested a werewolf warrior. That would *not* sit well.

Luc took a sniff. She was calm, too calm, and she wasn't afraid of all these weapons pointed at her. And she could swing an IV pole exceptionally well. He made a mental note to never trust her. She was unpredictable and impulsive to the point of recklessness.

"You do know I should punish you."

"Right."

"So what am I going to do with you?"

"You're going to let me go because you don't want to break the law."

He shook his head. "I can't do that, and besides, I'm the law around here."

She rolled her eyes. "Well, if you're the law, why can't you let me leave?"

"I need to find out who assaulted you."

"Oh puh-leeze. What difference does it make to you? It's my life, and you are *not* the law. Besides, I don't want to be here. You can't hold me against my will."

"I can and I will." *And unfortunately you make all the difference in the world.*

He watched her gauge her options, that mind of hers no doubt working overtime. He wondered if she'd do something stupid, like take him and his men on right here in the barn. He wouldn't put it past her. Apparently she liked to win at all costs.

"I'll make a deal with you," she finally said.

"I don't deal."

"You're an asshole, but I can overlook that. You and I, hand-to-hand. If I win, I get to walk out of here. If you win—" She stopped and laughed. "Hell, I don't even know why I said that."

His men laughed at the absurdity of her statement. Even if he didn't have the speed of the wolf, the sight of the wolf, or the strength of the wolf, she was still no match for him as a human.

"I think I should get a crack at her," said Jim.

There was no way in hell he was letting Jim fight her. Jim was a good fighter, probably one of the best, but Luc didn't want anyone else laying a finger on her but him. Touching her was his pleasure, and his pleasure alone. Paddling her ass was going to be such a treat.

"You're in no condition to take a crack at me," she said to Jim.

Luc almost laughed. She had guts. She'd offended Jim twice in twenty minutes.

"I've never fought a woman before," said Luc.

"You need to change that statement. You should say you've never fought a woman before *and lost*."

The men standing around smiled, and some even chuckled.

"I'm ten times bigger than you are, and ten times faster than you. What makes you think you can win?"

"I...have nothing to lose." He sensed her confidence and knew she spoke the truth. But he had everything to lose.

"We all have something to lose." Some more than others. "If I win, what do I get?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I'll stay here until you figure out whatever it is you're so hell-bent on figuring out."

He shook his head. "No. How about, if I win, you'll be my sub."

Luc thought he saw fear fleet across her face before she caught herself, but he smelled it roll off her. Those who didn't understand the Dom/sub lifestyle were uneasy about it, but fear was not something associated with the lifestyle unless she'd been in an abusive relationship, one that got out of hand.

"You mean as a submissive," she asked.

He nodded.

Luc sniffed again. Her fear was even stronger than before. She was afraid of being a sub, but not of the twenty M4 carbines pointed at her head. Had she been abused? His beast prowled around inside him, irritated that someone would cause his mate harm, cause her fear. He'd take it as a challenge to introduce her to the Dom/sub life. He'd go slowly, get her over her fear. Show her what it meant to be cherished.

He was surprised when she finally said, "Deal."

She stepped to the side, and all his men lifted their weapons. She cocked her brow but removed her coat and hung it on the stall post. She barely wore anything, which his beast liked and didn't like. He liked it because she was sexy as hell, but he didn't like it because the other men could see her creamy skin.

Skin that was all his.

"You got a knife?"

What was she planning now? She stepped toward him and lifted the cuffs of his shirt. He pulled his pocket knife from his pocket and cut off both of her sleeves. She was smart. Overly long sleeves could be used to contain her, whereas her overly big shirt would allow her to slip out of it if she chose to do so. She braided her long hair and tied it off with one of the cuffs and then tucked her hair back inside her shirt.

"Rules?" he asked.

"None, other than just you and me." She nodded to his men. "They stay out of it."

"I'm pretty sure I don't need their help. And thanks, by the way."

She frowned. "For what?"

"For making Willie a hero."

"Cute kid. So you want to tell me why you're sleeping with Willie?"

Willie. She was worried about Willie? "Willie gets scared sometimes at night."

She circled to her right, and his men moved back to give them some room.

"Uh-huh," she said.

"After I kick your ass," he said, "I'll tell you all about Willie."

"You'd better tell me now, so I won't kill you." Her voiced changed to something hard and nasty.

"You think I'd hurt Willie?" He should be offended at her accusation, but she didn't really know him; she didn't know he'd kill anyone who harmed a child.

"I don't know. Why don't you convince me otherwise?"

He remained still and let her walk behind his back. He'd never do that in a real fight, but this was kid's play. He outweighed her by eighty pounds. There was no way in hell she could best him.

"Willie never had a dad. He and his mom lived in town. She worked as a waitress. She was a good woman."

She came to stand in front of him. "Go on," she said.

"Someone broke into their house while they were at home. His mother stuffed him under the kitchen sink. Then his mother went after the intruder with a frying pan. She didn't win. And Willie overheard it all."

Luc heard her heart skip a beat and then pound frantically as sorrow poured off her. His beast wanted to comfort her, take away her pain.

"He heard her scream," she whispered, her face pale, her eyes blank.

"Yes. How did you know?"

"And he still hears her scream, and he wonders if he could have made a difference."

He crossed his arms over his chest, smelled her pain, and it cut him deep. This was more than normal compassion, so much more. "I think so."

"That's why he stutters," she said.

Luc nodded.

"He needs psychological help."

Yeah, Luc knew that and had made up his mind to seek professional help if Willie didn't progress. But Willie was a fighter, he was smart, and he understood there was nothing he could have done that night. "Probably. Do you know of a good one?"

She frowned. "Anyone would be better than no one."

"I agree, but he's come a long way. He *can* talk now."

"How long ago?"

"Six months. And he can sleep with me anytime he wants to."

She rolled her lower lip between her teeth. "I apologize for thinking you were a sexual pervert."

"Apology accept—"

In a swift move, she drove her foot into the side of his right knee, the one that held most of his weight. He sank down onto his right knee. She shoved him up high on his chest, and he landed on his back. The next thing he knew, she held a knife over his heart. She was smart and cunning, he had to give her that.

His men moved toward her, but Luc held his hand up and waved them off. A deal was a deal. Her triumphant smile was beautiful.

"Did I mention that I don't fight fair?"

"I think Jim mentioned it."

She cocked her head to the side. "You should have jotted it down, Cowboy."

He smiled sarcastically. "I'll make a note of it and make sure not to forget it next time."

"Now," she said. "I need to borrow a car."

"I'll drive you home."

She glanced at his men. "You and how many? No, thanks. Any car will do."

"You can use my truck, and I'll provide an escort."

"No, thanks to the escort. I think I've proven I can handle myself."

She was sitting on his cock. Her eyes bored into his, and she purposely rocked back against it.

"You're playing with fire," he whispered, even though he was sure his men could hear him.

She leaned down beside his ear and whispered, "I like it hot."

She sat up and said, "Make your men back off and have someone bring your truck to the barn."

He waved his hand, and his men reluctantly backed out the doors. "Someone's trying to kill you," he said, wondering if he could talk some sense into her.

"I'm going to mark my incident down to a fluke," she said as she smoothed her hands over his chest and bit her lower lip. God, how he wanted to replace her teeth with his, suck that little pink flesh before he proceeded to suck every inch of her. He cleared his mind and forced it back to the matter at hand. Luc didn't believe for one second that it was a fluke; he just hadn't figured it out yet.

"Well, while we're waiting, why don't you remove your knife from my heart and tell me what made you go camping? You don't look like a camper."

"I won a contest, and I actually love the outdoors."

"A contest?"

"Yep, complete with full camping gear."

He glanced at the knife, and she moved it but didn't let go of it. She shivered.

"Go put my coat back on, and I promise to lie right here until you get back."

"You promise?"

"Yes."

Santana pushed off him, giving him a good look at her backside. And what a wonderful backside it was. He shook his head. "How did you pick your campsite?"

She shoved on his coat, came back, and straddled him again. "That was easy. The travel agency provided a map with several campsites. Oh, and I won a fishing rod. Do you know I've never been fishing? I've always wanted to fish."

He smiled at her childlike desire to go fishing, proving she wasn't complicated and that simple things could bring her pleasure. "I'll take you fishing one day, but back to your contest. How did you enter?"

She laid down on him, chest to chest, and snuggled against him. "That part's unclear. I don't remember entering any contest, but I'm not one to kick a gift horse in the mouth."

He was having a hard time concentrating, and it didn't help matters when he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her closer. She felt so right, lying on him, out there in his cold barn. "Who ran the contest?"

"WWX 99.9."

"What was the name of the travel agency?"

"Warhol, Warhole. Something like that."

Luc caught the sound of his SUV pulling up outside and cursed that his men were so damn efficient. He wanted more time to hold and talk with her. His mate. She had morphed from the warrior into a cuddly kitten. But he wouldn't make the same mistake twice. He knew that kitten was in truth a wildcat capable of more things than one woman should know. She was confusing. A minute ago, she had been angry enough to kill him, accusing him of molesting Willie. And now she was snuggling close to him.

She was in trouble and refused to acknowledge it. His land was posted, and no one camped on pack land. It bothered him that she didn't specifically remember entering a contest.

He'd let her go, but not without protection. He'd send a team to tail her, and she'd never know. In the meantime, he'd check out her story.

"You could spend the rest of the day with me," he said.

She went perfectly still, and he knew he had tempted her.

"We can finish what we started," he added.

She shook her head. "No, I need to go."

Santana pushed up off him, and his beast instantly protested. A wolf wouldn't let his mate go unless he was sure there was no danger to her, and damn it, Luc wasn't sure of anything.

"Can I get up now?"

She gave him a lopsided smile. "Sure."

He got up, brushed the dirt off his jeans, dusted off his hat, and then followed her out of the barn. She stopped in front of the SUV and popped the hood latch. Then she opened the fuse box and pulled out one of the fuses. She tossed it to him, and he caught it.

"What's this to?"

"OnStar."

He lifted a quizzical brow.

"I used to boost cars too," she said as she climbed into his vehicle. "Don't follow me, because I'm also good at evasive driving."

He didn't doubt that for a minute. He wondered how long her rap sheet was. He'd know that and much more in the next twenty-four hours.

She lowered the window and then put the vehicle in drive. "You can pick up your truck in Charlotte," she said and rattled off an address.

"Is that your home address?"

She shook her head as a smile played around her lips.

"Are you gonna be there?"

"No."

He didn't doubt that either.

"See you around, Cowboy."

Chapter Six

Santana threw her makeup brush on the counter and stared at her reflection in the mirror. She couldn't get Luc out of her mind, and she would have given a small fortune to see the look on his face when the pizza boy delivered his truck keys and a pizza to him. But she knew better than to hang around and see the action. She had to put distance between herself and Luc.

Luc was too male. Everything about him made her want him, especially made her want to trust him. But Luc had made a big mistake when he told her she couldn't leave. She'd heard that before and had been sucked down that horrible hole. A hole she'd never willingly allow herself to fall into, ever again. She'd made a promise to herself to never, ever let anyone control or own her again, no matter how handsome or how much she wanted to be with him. Of course, Luc's second mistake was thinking she was anyone's sub. No way in hell. She'd kill the next man who tried to dominate her.

She was proud of herself. She'd done what she'd always told herself she'd do: walk away and never look back.

Why couldn't she meet a good guy, someone who wanted 2.3 children and a cottage with a white picket fence? Hell, she didn't want to be a stripper forever. But really, it was the only good-paying legal job she could do without an education. Well, she did have a PhD in street smarts, but those corporate boys waiting for her out front probably didn't want anything less than a pedigree and a trust fund. Like Luc with his mansion and his bodyguards and the beautiful Gabriella. Gabriella wasn't any more beautiful than Santana, but Gabriella had something she didn't have—class.

No, she couldn't have Luc. Well, not the way she wanted to. She was sure she could be his mistress for a while, but she'd never settle for that. She deserved more.

Leaning on her elbows, she looked at herself in the mirror. "No, Santana, you'll never be good enough for a good man, and you won't settle for anything less."

She looked at her *assets* and smiled, remembering Luc's version of her boobs. The scars were barely visible under the pancake makeup, and she was the late show, when most men were well on their way to being drunk. She hoped they saved some of their hard-earned money for her. She was saving for her white picket fence without the husband and 2.3 kids. She wasn't supposed to be working tonight, but she needed to work to keep Luc off her mind.

After dressing in her turquoise lamé chaps, she squeezed into her skimpy top. Her breasts were sore because she hadn't worn a bra when she was traipsing around Luc's place. She plopped her matching sequined cowboy hat on her head. Ruby red lips and she was set. Tonight she would dance for the cowboy that she'd never have.

* * *

Luc stationed himself near the back of the strip club, surrounded by his men. This was an uptown strip club with mostly white-collar men. Luc laughed. Everybody but him and his pack. He looked down at his well-worn boots. She'd left them in his truck for him, and she'd left the knife in them as well, probably to show him how damn smart she was.

The house lights dimmed, and the stage turned pitch-black. Men rustled in their seats, and Luc wondered how many came here night after night to watch his mate shed her clothes. His beast didn't like it, and neither did he.

Luc had to smile when "Save a Horse, Ride a Cowboy" played. Then the spotlight came up, and Luc's breath seized in his throat. She was too beautiful, too sexy, and too naked. She moved to the beat of the music in a sexy cowgirl outfit, and the white-collar boys were whooping and hollering, totally losing their air of sophistication, but Luc understood. He wanted to whoop too...in private. She was the headliner, and Luc knew why. She danced for the audience, drew them in with her movements, and when the "ride a cowboy" part played, every damn one of them wanted her to ride them.

She stripped off her chaps and flung them into the crowd, where two guys fought over them. The winner sniffed the crotch. Luc instantly wanted to kill. That only left a G-string that covered nothing, since it was barely an inch wide and held in place by rhinestones that glittered in the bright lights. Luc went instantly hard as the rhinestones shimmered over her hips, and when she presented her fine ass to the crowd, the rhinestones continued down her ass and disappeared. Luc growled when she shimmered over to the edge of the stage and allowed the men to stuff money into her G-string. His beast pushed against him, wanting to get out and claim what was rightly his, maybe smash some heads, but Luc couldn't even let his men know she was his because of his enemies. He trusted his men, but one slip of the tongue would change the stakes of the game. He'd just ordered his men to protect her and dared them to ask any questions.

She finally finished, and Luc had never been so glad in his life. Two men who looked like linebackers helped her walk down the steps. Luc assumed they were the bouncers. A herd of men rushed her, and Luc was relieved that her bouncers kept them from getting too close.

Luc leaned over and whispered into Adolf's ear. "Get a man over there and make sure she's not harmed. No," said Luc, changing his mind. "Take two."

"I didn't bring enough men to protect you and her both," replied Adolf. Irritation poured off him, but Luc didn't give a damn.

"I think I am more than capable of taking care of myself."

"Like she took care of you?"

God, he'd never live that down. "She's not a threat to me; she just doesn't like to be told what to do. And until I find out who tried to kill her on our land, I want eyes on her. Now get someone over there."

Adolf growled, and Luc growled back, but Adolf turned and spoke to two team members. Luc could barely see Santana through the men surrounding her, but he studied every one of them, watching them with his wolf vision. Other men's lust had assaulted his nostrils ever since she'd stepped on the stage. His beast didn't like that either.

Luc had to figure out how to deal with her. His gut told him that something wasn't right about her incident; he just couldn't prove it yet. Maybe she'd show some sense when he told her what he'd found out today. And when she found out that he'd investigated her, she'd probably hold another knife on him, and this time, shove it in to the hilt.

He'd been so lost in thought, he was surprised when loud voices scraped down his spine.

"Let go of me, you brute."

Luc forcefully pushed away from the bar and moved toward the back, shoving men out of his way. He got there in time to see Santana ram the heel of her hand into a man's face. Her two bodyguards picked the man up and held him by the arms, blood pouring from his nose.

Luc stopped in front of her as she straightened her top, if you could call it a top. Her assets spilled over and under. He liked it, but he wanted her dancing for him and no one else. And the fucker putting his hands on her—hell, that was never gonna work.

Luc glared at the two bodyguards. "You two ever done this before?"

Santana's head snapped up at his voice. Surprise flashed in her eyes right before it was replaced by fire.

The guard on the left glared back and said, "We're professionals, and we were dealing with that one over there on the floor."

Luc glanced at the man sitting on the floor holding his shoulder and figured the muscle had used his arm as leverage. Not one but two, *two* dickheads groping his woman. Luc stepped in front of the man hanging by his arms, grabbed his hair, and yanked his head up. A small trickle of blood seeped from his nose, but that didn't ease the rage that coursed through Luc. "If you ever touch her again, you'll be a dead man. Do you understand?"

The man grunted.

Luc rolled the man's head into the light. "I don't think your nose is broken, but"—Luc head butted the man—"I could be wrong."

Nothing hurt worse than a head butt to a sore nose. Except maybe a bullet placed in the femoral artery and then lodged into the bone so that the bastard could watch himself bleed to death. The man passed out from the pain, which Luc thought was too good for the bastard. Luc smiled.

A fingernail poked him in the back, distracting him from his small victory. He turned slowly, ready for whatever she threw his way.

"Listen, Cowboy, I don't need you to come in here and act like you own me. I can take care of my damn self."

Luc pushed his hat up on his head and frowned. He knew she was angry, but he could also smell the faint hint of fear. Her anger he could deal with. But did she fear him? "I know you can."

She plopped her hands on her hips. "Then why are you butting into my business? In fact, why the hell are you here?"

God, he loved the way her eyes flashed when she was pissed, and she *was* pissed. His gaze roamed down to the thin patch covering what was his and his alone. His eyes traveled back up to her nipples that pushed against her skimpy top.

"Well?"

"I came to see you dance."

"You did, huh? Then go sit down and watch. I'm trying to work here."

"Why are you so pissed?"

* * *

Pissed? Pissed didn't even come close. Santana wasn't pissed at him; she was pissed at herself that Luc had found her so easily. But she couldn't tell him that.

"I'm pissed because you're threatening my customers." She knew it was lame, but hell.

"Looks to me like you already threatened him."

"He knows better than to touch, and I purposely didn't break his nose. It's late, which means he's had too much to drink. It happens all the time."

He smiled that smile that probably made all women melt. All but her if she fought it hard enough.

"Maybe you need more bodyguards," he said.

"Maybe they're not here to protect me." She arched her brows.

He glanced around. "Now that, I believe."

"Good," she said. She turned on her heel and headed to her dressing room. Bob stood in the hallway between her dressing room and the big dressing room where the other four girls changed. Santana was the headliner, so she got the big, private whoop-de-do dressing room. Of course, she'd come to work tonight and found that Gina had moved her ass in during her absence. Gina didn't get it. Santana was here for the money, not to have men drooling all over her. Santana didn't give a shit about a private room, but Don, the owner, insisted.

“Hey, Bob. Any of my hairbrushes try to escape?”

“No, darling, but you know that Savage would kill anybody who touched your stuff.”

“Yeah, he’s the best.”

Bob stiffened and pulled his gun from his back. Santana turned and followed his gaze. Luc filled up the entire hallway. He was big, impressive, and stood scowling with several other big and impressive men behind him. Mr. High-and-Mighty had brought his band of bad boys.

“It’s okay,” said Santana to Bob. “I know them, *unfortunately*.”

When Luc stopped in front of her, Santana pasted on a fake smile. “Can I help you?”

“We need to talk.”

“Then spit it out. I’ve got to change.”

Luc’s gaze slid to Bob and then back to her. “In private.”

She tucked her arm through Bob’s and leaned into him. “Bob is a good friend of mine. You can talk in front of him.”

“I’m not talking in front of him. And if you don’t cooperate, I’ll have to work *through* him.”

“Trust me, here is better. Savage doesn’t tolerate visitors too well,” she said. Bob nodded in agreement.

“Who the hell is Savage?”

Santana glanced at Bob and smiled. “He’s the love of my life.”

Luc clenched his teeth, and his eyes narrowed at her. Was that jealousy? Hell. She hadn’t expected that. And hell, she didn’t need it either. “It’s here or nowhere,” she said.

“It’s in your room, or I’ll throw you over my shoulder and cart your ass out of here.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Oh yes. I dare.”

In a move that she didn’t anticipate, Luc grabbed her arm, opened her dressing room door, and shoved her in while his men moved like lightning to surround Bob.

Santana knew the situation had rocketed past the danger zone. She wrenched from his grip and put herself between Luc and Savage.

“Stay,” she said firmly. The growl from Savage even raised the hairs on her neck.

“Are you talking to me or the dog?”

* * *

Luc remained rooted in his spot by the door, but the dog moved from the shadows and stationed himself beside Santana, his hair bristled, his teeth bared. Luc sniffed. Wolf.

"What kind of dog is that?"

"Part gray wolf, I think. At least that's what the vet said."

Luc knew there was no *part* about him; he was a full-blooded wolf. The wolf was beautiful, but the real question was why his mate owned a wolf. "Where did you get him?"

She bent and stroked the wolf, who never took his eyes off Luc. Then she threw that sinful smile on Luc. "You won't believe this, but I went camping in Wyoming."

"By yourself?"

"Yes. And I found him. He was all alone. I didn't know where his mom was, but he was starving to death, so I fed him."

Luc sniffed the air and knew she was telling the truth, but it was too coincidental that his human mate owned a wolf *and* someone had attempted to kill her on his land. He didn't believe in coincidences.

"And what if the mother had decided to come and get her pup? She would have ripped you apart."

"She could have had him back. I only wanted to feed him. He was hungry."

"Why didn't you turn him over to the authorities? They would have taken care of him and reintroduced him back into the wild."

She bit the inside of her lip. "I couldn't do that. He's the best thing that's ever happened to me."

She moved away from Savage and removed her top. Savage didn't seem to mind, and hell, neither did he. Seeing her smooth, creamy breasts shot a bolt of lust straight to his groin.

Luc forced all those thoughts about what he wanted to do to Santana to the back of his mind and focused on Savage. The problem with male wolves was there could only be one alpha male in the pack, and Savage thought he and Santana were a pack. Luc could force the issue on Savage, but that would only piss her off. He'd deal with Savage later. Right now she had to understand the danger she was in.

"I checked with the radio station. They never had a contest, and you never won."

She stopped putting on the black lace-up corset she was working with and stared at him. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. And there is no such travel agency as Warhole or Warhol. Hell, there's not even a travel agency in the state of North Carolina that begins with War or Wor."

Santana pulled her G-string off and pulled on another one, black this time, with pearls that held up the thin satin. Then she turned her back to him to pull on her black hose and attach them to the garters, and that's when he noticed that her

corset had a heart cutout in the back, right above her bare ass. He'd gone bone hard when she took off her top, but he was in pain now.

She turned and smiled at him. "What do you think?"

"I think you look good enough to eat, and I don't think you've heard a word I've said."

"I heard every word you said, and I must admit it all sounds...creepy, but I don't think I'm in that much danger. Besides, I've got Savage here."

He glanced at the wolf and knew all she had to do was give the word and he'd attack.

Luc crossed his arms, and Savage growled louder. "Where was Savage when you were camping?"

She sat at the table and brushed her face with powder, then applied some blush. "He was sick."

"Sick with what?"

"I don't know. The vet said it was something he ate. Anyway, I didn't want him to go if he wasn't feeling well, so I left him at home."

"You took him to the vet?"

"No," she said and smiled. "I took him inside the vet one time, but that just upset everybody—dog, cats, and their owners all went crazy. So the vet comes to my home."

"Santana. Look at me."

Her gaze found his in the mirror.

"You're not an idiot. Look at the facts. You won a contest that didn't exist from a travel agency that doesn't exist and Savage, who I'm sure has never been sick a day in his life, gets sick right before you go on your trip."

She whirled around in her seat. "How did you know he's never been sick?"

"Instinct," he replied. Wolves were hearty animals, and they never ate anything that would harm them unless someone intentionally poisoned them.

She had been set up.

Chapter Seven

Santana took a deep breath before she turned back to the mirror, grabbed her hot red lipstick, and applied it to her lips. *Damn, Santana, you are such an idiot.* Why hadn't she checked out the contest before she jumped all over it with two feet? What was the old saying? If it's too good to be true, it probably is. But it still made no sense. If someone wanted to kill her, they could do that in the street with a bullet. Even Savage couldn't stop a bullet.

"If you don't care about yourself, at least care about Savage."

She rose and crossed the room in two strides, and Savage moved with her. She stood nose to nose with Luc and said, "Don't you ever insult me like that again. I'd kill for Savage, and he'd kill for me."

He reached out and gently grabbed her arms. Somehow that little bit of contact sent shivers racing along her body. "I know you would, darlin'. So think about him. He can run wild at my home and..."

"I take him to the woods to run all the time."

"And you and he will be safe."

She pulled away from Luc and rubbed her temples. She wasn't convinced there was still a threat. Perhaps it was a fan of hers who wanted to meet her. That would explain all the effort to get her in the woods. Of course, the claw marks down her assets she couldn't explain, but she was on alert now. Besides, she had to work to pay for her white picket fence without the husband and 2.3 kids, and she couldn't very well do that if she wasn't onstage.

"Listen, Luc, I need to work. I have goals and dreams, and I don't run from trouble."

"How about if I pay you to dance for me?"

She pinned him with a stare. "Do not insult me. I won't be your whore."

"Did I say anything about you being my whore? All you have to do is dance, and I'll pay you whatever you make a night. And you and Savage will be safe."

Being a private dancer was not a good career move for her. Before long, he'd want a lap dance and then a blowjob, and she would not degrade herself that way. A knock on the door was followed by, "Five minutes."

She frowned. "We'll have to finish this discussion later. Now, can you leave me alone so I can get ready for my next show?"

"We're not done with this conversation," he said before he turned and left.

Well, la-di-da. This conversation would be finished if she chose it to be so. She stared at the door before she plopped down in her chair. Savage came and sat before her, cocking his head to the side. She rubbed her hands on his fur and scratched his ears. "This is not good, Savage. I can't go with Luc back to his place. I'm in danger—in danger of falling hard for a man who's way out of my reach."

And she hated herself for it. She'd never felt such a draw, and she knew if she went with him, she'd give in. She wanted to rub herself all over him, which was so unlike her. She wiped a lone tear and gave Savage a big hug. "Well, boy," she said. "Where would you like to run to? Back to Wyoming? No, I've already told Luc about Wyoming. How about North Dakota? Lots of wide-open spaces for you to run."

She got up and stuffed as many of her costumes into her backpack as possible. Maybe she'd get a waitress job before she took up the stripper lifestyle again. She wiped another tear as the knock on her door told her it was time to go. "Stay here, Savage, and when I get back, we'll leave for a new adventure. Thank God I have two cars, since Old Bessie's still in the woods."

Onstage, she danced like it was her last, because it would be for a while. She couldn't see Luc and his bad boys because of the bright lights, but she knew they were out there, stalking her like prey. When the spotlight went dim, she moved to the back of the stage and went directly to her dressing room. She paused long enough to throw a coat on, strap on a thigh holster, and get her backpack and Savage.

"See you around, Bob," she said over her shoulder as she walked down the hallway. She couldn't say *see you tomorrow* because that would be a lie. At the back door, she pulled the fire alarm and stepped into the cool morning air. Don would be pissed about the alarm, and she knew he'd be fined for a false alarm, but she'd drop him a check to make it up to him.

She walked down the back alley, not really understanding her feelings.

Remorse—perhaps.

Dread—maybe.

Loss—definitely.

She rounded the corner, and Savage's growl stopped her dead in her tracks. Her hand instantly went to her Sig.

"Trying to slip out?"

Luc leaned against her truck, arms and legs crossed, looking like sin even in the harsh lights of the parking lot.

"Just trying to get away from a stalker."

"You left without collecting your tips."

"I thought it was worth it." She moved to her truck and stopped in front of him. "How did you know?"

He shrugged and gave her a brilliant smile. "Just a hunch."

Which was another reason she had to run away from Luc. He knew her too well. She couldn't allow anyone to think she was predictable. That was a weakness she couldn't afford.

"What do I have to do to get you to leave me alone?" She punched the Unlock button on her remote control, hoping he'd take the hint and move his sinful self out of her way.

"I believe you were set up."

"Set up?" *Oh Lord, here we go again.*

"You were meant to be attacked on my land."

"For God's sake, why?"

"I don't know yet."

"Oh come on. You've got to have an inkling of something."

She waited, but he didn't answer, which was a good indication that he had an inkling. "You want me to work with you, but you're not going to work with me. This is bullshit."

"I'm a powerful man," he finally said. "There are bad people who'd love to take me down."

God, she was stuck in a bad movie.

He probably was a powerful man; Lord knew he had enough security and firepower to at least give the appearance of a powerful person, not to mention that mansion he lived in.

"Well, that makes so much sense. Killing a little nobody like me on your land is so fucking...diabolical."

"I'm serious, Santana. I don't have all the answers. I've only got my gut."

"Well, move your gut out of my way."

She was surprised when Luc stepped to the side, and even more surprised when he whipped her around and pinned her to her truck with his big, hard body. Savage growled, and for some unknown reason, she told him to stay when she should have told him to attack. Her breath caught when Luc's hand cruised down her belly and over her mound, where he pressed his fingers against her center. She should be fighting him, demand that he leave her body alone, because Luc's touch was her weakness.

"What do you think you're doing?" she managed to ask, her voice husky, betraying her calm facade.

In a sudden move, Luc pulled her Sig from her thigh holster and held it up beside him. "Removing this so you won't shoot me."

You're such a sucker, Santana. "Don't bet on it, Cowboy. I might not shoot you now, but I always get even."

"I'm counting on it," he answered as he moved away from her.

She opened her door and told Savage to get in. Savage wasn't too happy about it, so he growled at Luc before he jumped in.

"See," she said. "Even Savage thinks you're full of shit."

Santana turned to get in her truck and dropped her keys. "Damn it," she muttered as she bent to retrieve them. Then her door window shattered. Luc threw himself over her as he pulled his gun and hers too. The gravel bit into her knees as his heavy weight pressed down on her.

"Stay," he ordered.

She looked up to tell him that she wasn't a damn dog but noticed he was talking to Savage, and damn it, Savage was obeying. Another reason she had to run as far from Luc as possible. No one would come between her and Savage.

Booted feet and yelling men echoed in the night air, and she knew Luc's men and their firepower would be all over the alley.

"Fan out," Luc ordered. "Shot came from the building on the other side of the club."

The stench of the Dumpster had her wrinkling her nose, and she could only imagine the crap she was lying in. "Get off me and give me my gun back."

"No," he barked.

"I can protect myself *if* I have my piece back."

"I know you can, but I might need it."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh brother. How long do I have to stay here?"

"Until I tell you to get up."

"Asshole," she muttered. She'd noticed Luc had a tendency to take charge and bark orders, and she didn't take orders well.

"Until they secure the area. Is that better?"

"Yes, but you're still an asshole."

"Never doubted it for a minute." His pleasing chuckle slid along her insides, and she chided herself for even noticing it.

Her body protested at being folded like a pretzel. "Get off me. You weigh a ton."

"Yes, but all this body mass may stop a bullet from entering yours. And I want you all intact because I have plans for you," he whispered as his erection pressed into her rump.

Just like a man to think of one thing when pressed against a woman's body while being shot at. One would think sex would be the last thing on a person's mind when someone was trying to air out your head. "How can you think about sex at a time like this?"

"It's just what you do to me."

"Puh-leeze. And I hate to tell you, but even your big body won't stop a .308."

"Who said it was a .308?"

"Nobody, but if it came from a sniper rifle, it was probably a .308."

"You know about sniper rifles?"

"Yes. If I had more time, I'd take you out and give you a lesson or two."

Luc wondered how many women knew a .308 even existed, but hell, Santana Jones wasn't just any woman. She was a hell of a woman, and she was his. He eased off her, but only to give her some breathing room. And he needed breathing room too. She was hell on his libido. She frustrated him to no end. She confused the hell out of him. She pissed him off most of the time with her stubbornness. But damn if she didn't keep him on his toes.

The sound of several boots approached, followed by Adolph's "all clear." Luc rose to his feet and helped Santana up, and she immediately piled into the cab to check on Savage.

"Did you find anyone?" he asked Adolf.

"No, sir, they got away."

"Bring the vehicles around," Luc said before he turned back and examined the hole lodged in the outside of the truck. Head-high. *Fuck*.

Santana stroked Savage like he was the only thing in the world, and maybe Savage *was* her world. Well, all that was about to change.

"Now do you believe me when I say your life's in danger?" he asked when she finally turned to face him.

"No."

"No?" He let out the breath he was holding and fought to rein in his temper, resisting the urge to shake some sense into that pretty little head of hers. "Why do you say that?"

"First of all, head shots only happen in the movies. Secondly, shooting through glass will change the trajectory of the bullet, making it unpredictable. Thirdly, a real sniper would continue firing through the door of my truck until he was sure his target was hit. For all I know, the sniper was shooting at you, which really makes them a fucking bad shot."

He reached in and grabbed her by the arms, pulling her toward him and out the door, which was a mistake, because he wanted her sweet little body naked against his. "My God, Santana. You could have been killed. What does it take to make you see what's so damn obvious?"

"Luc, I could have been long gone by now if you hadn't interfered. So if someone had shot me, I would hold you personally responsible. And I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself." She pulled against his grip, but he held her firmly.

"Well, think about Savage. When you're alone, he'll be the first one they take down, so they can get to you."

She stilled in his grip, and he sensed her fear. She didn't care about herself, but Savage was another story. She was terrified of losing Savage. It was apparent

she loved him, and perhaps he really was her everything. "I can protect you and him, and after I find out what's going on, you and Savage can leave." *Hell, like he was ever gonna let that happen.*

Lying always left a bad taste in his mouth, but he had to get past this sticking point with her. If he had to lie, so be it.

"I'm sorry, Luc. I'd rather take my chances alone." In the instant she turned to get in the truck, Luc made his decision. He'd do anything to protect his mate, even if that meant her hating him for the rest of her life.

He spun her around and lifted her over his shoulder. Her shriek sent Savage to growling. Luc eyed the wolf, then elongated his own fangs and shifted his face. Savage stopped growling and bared his teeth, but heeded the warning from Luc. Sooner or later, Luc and Savage were going to have a confrontation, and it wasn't going to be pretty.

"Damn you, Luc. I'm going to fucking kill you."

He laughed. "I don't doubt that either." His men chuckled.

"All of you. I'm going to fucking kill all of you." She screamed as a punch landed to his left kidney, precisely placed to inflict as much pain as possible. "What I did to my first guard was mild compared to what I'm going to do to all of you fucking bastards."

Chapter Eight

Luc sat at his desk, rubbed his jaw, and chuckled. Santana packed one hell of a punch. She'd waited until they were back at the house and out of the truck before she'd hauled back and landed a solid one on his jaw. His men had quickly moved to subdue her, and she'd managed to land several punches and kicks on them as well. Hellcat. That's what she was. His little hellcat. Too bad she wasn't a she-wolf.

Even Savage managed to break the skin on his calf.

A knock came on the door. "Come in." Adolf and T.K. entered. Both stood before him like soldiers. He had to do something to change that. He wasn't a general, and they weren't his soldiers. They were all friends. It just happened that Luc was born into a position to be on the council, and someone was trying to swing the upcoming council vote. Which put them all into military-alert mode.

Luc leaned back in his oversize leather chair and eyed Adolf. "Adolf, please tell me why you almost killed my...guest. You were supposed to scare her, not kill her. That shot of yours was head-high and pretty damn close."

"That's just it, Luc. I didn't take the shot."

Luc's heart stilled in his chest before it beat frantically again, rattling against his rib cage. Sweat popped out on his brow as his mouth went dry. "Say that again."

"It's true," said T.K. "We were to your right. You were in the line of fire, and we couldn't shoot the roof of her truck because of that mutt inside. We were moving to get a better position when the shot rang out."

Luc rubbed his jaw and winced. He knew they told the truth, but it didn't make him feel any better. This puzzle had more missing pieces than it had found pieces. And Santana was right. If they were trying to kill her, they would have continued firing through her truck door. None of it made any sense.

"Did you find anything?"

"No, sir," said Adolf. "Only his scent. It was the same man from the woods."

So now they were just trying to scare her. Santana was right, of course; her assassin was a bad shot unless he was firing a warning shot.

Luc narrowed his gaze at Adolf. "What's on your mind, Adolf?"

"Can I speak freely, sir?"

"Of course you can. You are free to speak at any time. I value your judgment."

Adolf shifted his weight on his feet, but he still looked like a child about to be scolded. "You could have been shot while I was trying to scare Miss Jones. It was a stupid game that we played. You could have paid with your life."

"And?"

"And..." Adolf hesitated. "I don't understand why you worry with Miss Jones."

"That's a fair question," answered Luc. "And the answer is pretty simple. Someone went to a lot of trouble to set up this elaborate scheme to have Miss Jones killed on our land, and I want to know why. And if she's a pawn in some game, I believe the pack is obligated to protect her and her wolf."

"She should have never taken him from his home," said Adolf, who was a firm believer that wild animals didn't belong with humans, especially wolves.

"Santana claims that he wandered up starving, and she fed him. And then she couldn't turn him over to the wildlife officials, so she kept him. Now they are a pair. I don't intend to point out the error of her ways, and I expect you to understand that. She's not one of us. She doesn't understand, and I can't hold that against her. Neither should you. She probably saved his life, and I'm sure he's saved hers just by being around. After all, he did break the skin on my leg. You attack her, you'll have to go through Savage."

Luc saw the indecision on Adolf's face and hoped he understood that sometimes, people did things they shouldn't do even though they had good intentions.

"Okay," Adolf finally said. "We will protect her and Savage too, even though I don't know how to handle a real wild animal in the house." It took a lot for Adolf to agree, and Luc knew that and admired the man for it.

"He obeys her, but he's still wild underneath all the love she's bestowed upon him. Now," said Luc. "Are we ready for our guests to start arriving tomorrow?"

"Yes, sir, and I can't wait until they leave," said T.K.

Luc grinned. "Me neither. Remind me next time to hold the council meeting at a neutral site. That way, I can run away from everyone when I take the notion."

Adolf only nodded before he and T.K. left.

Luc spun his chair around and stared out the window. His bulletproof window. When had life gotten so muddled with attempts on his life, attempts on an innocent's life on pack land, and infighting within the council? Power and greed drove a few on the council, and it was only a matter of time before those who were overcome with greed got what they wanted. Luc shook his head. He couldn't solve the problem at this precise moment, so it was time to go and meet his hellcat.

* * *

Santana lounged on Luc's bed and eyed the door. She was ready. Let him show his stinking face, and he'd rue the day he'd slung her over his shoulder like a caveman. She already knew the door was locked, and that fact was pushing her

toward the edge of no return as far as her temper was concerned. She didn't do well with locked doors. It brought on a madness that she could hardly control.

The doorknob turned. She took a deep breath and laced her fingers together. It was hard to portray the appearance of calm when her entire body was vibrating with rage.

The door opened, and her gaze locked with his. Savage growled from his position on the bed.

He grinned. "Is it safe to come in?"

"About as safe as it's ever gonna be."

He stepped inside and closed the door. "You can't still be pissed at me."

He crossed his arms and leaned against the door. Damn. Why did he have to look so fine? Why couldn't her captor be a huge ogre or a terrible troll with a wart on his nose, not some hunk of the month? It sure would be easier to follow through with her plan if he were butt ugly. She had to remember that good looks didn't a good man make. Hell, she'd learned that the hard way many years ago.

"Understand this. I will not tolerate being locked up like a criminal."

"And why is that?"

"The why doesn't concern you."

"There are bets going on downstairs. I think the odds are twenty to one."

She arched her perfect eyebrow. "Odds that I can't escape. Odds that I won't kill you. Odds of what?"

"Odds for whatever you're planning."

"In who's favor?"

"Mine of course. I'm bigger and stronger than you are."

Bigger and stronger was better if you were in a straight up hand-to-hand, but she never went into a hand-to-hand situation unless she had an edge. She didn't fight fair, but she really didn't give a shit. "Uh-huh. I want in on that bet. What's the pool?"

"I don't know, a hundred maybe."

"Chump change. Tell you what, you and I'll wager. Can you bet twenty thousand?"

"Yeah, I can handle twenty, but we could make it interesting."

She knew exactly what he was suggesting. "I'll pass, but remember, I have nothing to lose. People with nothing to lose are unpredictable and dangerous."

"I want you safe. That's all."

"Are you sure that's all you want?"

"I won't lay a finger on you. I promise."

"Right." She'd heard that before, and then bam, she was held hostage for two years by a madman. She'd rather die than let that happen again.

"But if you want to take advantage of me, don't let me stop you." His smile was beautiful and caused her insides to quiver. Why did he affect her so?

She rolled her eyes. "I don't have any clothes...again."

"I had my men pick up some clothes from your house, but I will withhold them until you can prove to me that you can behave."

She held out her hand, licked her writing finger, and jotted down a note on her hand.

"You keeping score?" he asked.

"I find that writing everything down helps me to focus on the whole, and it's a pretty big whole."

"Well, while you're focusing on the whole, I'm going to take a bath. Then I'm crawling into my bed and taking a nap. Savage will have to sleep on the floor."

She jotted that down too on her imaginary notepad and grinned at his retreating back. Savage sleeping on the floor was never going to happen. She fondly remembered the night Savage had literally crawled into her sleeping bag and snuggled close. She'd never felt more needed before in her life. Well, except for Michael. Michael had needed her back then, and she'd failed him. She scratched Savage behind the ears. "I do love you," she told him.

Santana had already picked out the clothes from his closet that she was going to wear, but this time, she didn't want anything that reminded her of him because it awakened something deep inside her that she didn't like.

Ten minutes later, the door to the bathroom opened, and he strolled out in all his naked glory. One look at all that warm, tanned skin over well-defined abs sent her womb to quivering. His hair was still wet, and as he stopped beside the bed, her gaze traced the trail of a single drop of water down his hip. Her cheeks warmed as his wonderful cock jumped.

Damn, Santana. Get a fucking grip. He's a man who thinks he can keep you as a prisoner. Been there. Done that. Got that fucking T-shirt.

Savage's low growl sent shivers over her spine, and she wished she could growl at Luc too.

"This is my side. Do you mind sleeping on the other?"

"Of course not. It is, after all, your house, your bed. A man should be able to demand which side of the bed he sleeps on from his prisoner."

He grabbed the covers and whipped them off her. She was totally naked. His nostrils flared as his gaze raked down her body like he was actually reaching out and touching her. And for the life of her, she couldn't remember why she was so foolish, other than she liked to play with fire—couldn't resist it, actually.

When his eyes narrowed, she scrambled to the other side of the bed.

"I need to sleep a couple of hours, or I'm going to be in a foul mood."

"Worse than you are now? This I gotta see."

"Are you always such a smart-ass?"

"Only when I'm physically abducted and locked in a room. Otherwise I can be quite charming." She gave him her best smile. "Besides, aren't you afraid I'll bash you in the head while you sleep?"

"I'm a light sleeper."

"Sure you are."

"Please tell Savage to sleep on the floor. I don't allow animals to sleep on my bed."

"That's right," she said. "I remember now. You've never allowed a woman in your bed before either, but I've been in here twice now."

He glared at her, and she decided it only enhanced his looks, somewhere between beautiful and sinful. She slipped from the bed, grabbed her pillow, and called to Savage. Savage followed her to the corner, where she plopped down, leaned her back against the wall, and stretched her feet out in front of her. She encouraged Savage to lie down beside her. He did, but he never took his eyes off Luc. She knew she was being childish, but damn if it didn't feel good not to cooperate.

Luc watched that fine ass of hers walk away. Damn stubborn woman. He stifled a yawn as he ran his hands over his face. He was dog tired, and sparring with her didn't make it any better.

"Has Savage always slept with you?"

"Always."

She was rubbing Savage's ear, and Savage was still growling. It dawned on Luc that she might see his actions as trying to drive a wedge between her and Savage, which he didn't want to do. He'd left her no options, and she was hell-bent on hanging on to Savage.

"Okay. He can sleep on *your* side. Please come back to bed and let me get some rest."

"Are you sure?"

He saw the surprise on her face. Maybe meeting her halfway every once in a while would get her to trust him. After all, he was only doing this to protect her.

Protect her and keep her near him.

"I'm sure. Right now I don't care if a whole pack sleeps on the bed."

"Well, lucky for you, I don't own the whole pack." She rose and crawled back into bed. She patted the end. Savage jumped on the bed and continued to snarl. "Lay," she said. Savage circled twice and then flopped down, facing Luc, still growling. "Quiet," she said.

Luc turned out the bedside light. "Thanks," he said. "I really need to sleep."

"I'm sure you do."

* * *

Santana snuggled down to wait. She was sleepy too, but anticipation hummed through her veins. She'd sleep later. The knockout drops she'd put in Luc's toothpaste would only take a few minutes to work. Or maybe it was the few drops on his toothbrush. Either way, he was going to sleep for an extremely long time, and she was going to collect her winnings. Of course, he'd have to wire them to her, but twenty grand would go a long way toward buying a home. She was thankful that he'd let her keep her backpack, because she had lots of survival toys hidden in the secret compartments, like her other gun that she needed to put together and a couple of knives. His steady breathing indicated that the drops had worked.

She took her hand and gave him a hard shove. He didn't even grunt or flutter his eyes. She laughed and then leaned close to him. "I've won again, Luc," she whispered. She ripped the covers off and started to get out of bed, but stilled when the covers slipped down, showing his glorious body.

"Oh what the hell," she said. She tugged the cover down, exposing his narrow hips, strong powerful legs, and his cock. It was still impressive. Her fingers twitched, and before she could get a grip on herself, she trailed a finger down his belly. Little bumps of gooseflesh followed in the wake of her nails. She stopped at his dark hair and then gently took his limp member in her hand. It was amazing how it could grow into that enticing cock she'd witnessed a day ago.

Oh, what she would give to have met him on an even playing field. She'd jump his bones just because she couldn't help herself. Her eyes narrowed as his member grew in her hand, which should be impossible since he was under the influence. She searched his face for any sign that he was not fully asleep and realized she was playing with fire. Her goal was to run and collect her money, not ogle an incapacitated Luc.

She flipped the covers back over Luc and dressed quickly in some more of Luc's clothes that she'd pilfered. The outfits in her backpack were worthless as far as providing warmth. She still wasn't wearing any pants, but what the hell. And of course, she had to grab his favorite boots. Those boots would be her token of him, a reminder of what she wanted but couldn't have. She removed the pieces of her gun and quickly assembled it and then slid the magazine in and chambered a bullet. She didn't plan on shooting anybody, but one never knew when a bullet would be needed to enforce a point. She smiled as she slid a knife into the boot.

When she was ready, she stopped and looked at Luc. A little twinge fluttered around her heart. She was almost sad, which was stupid. She was leaving of her own free will. She called Savage, who rose to his feet and sniffed Luc before he growled and jumped off the bed. Strange. Savage was always wary of people, but he was really wary of Luc. Of course, Luc was intimidating, whether he meant to be or not.

She headed for the door, but on a whim, turned and retraced her steps. Leaning over his face, she inhaled deep, taking in that wild, woodsy scent that was Luc's own and tucking it away in her memory to remember later, when she started feeling sorry for herself. She planted a soft kiss on his lips and frowned when a

smile curved his lips. Then she smiled to herself. Maybe he would miss her too, just a little bit.

She walked to the door and eased it open, expecting to see a guard or two, but the hall was empty. Perhaps Luc didn't think guards were required if he was with her. Big mistake. She knew the way to the kitchen but decided she'd walk right out the front door like she owned the place. Besides, Luc wasn't going to call anyone and tell them she'd escaped. All the vehicles were parked in the back, which was fine because she didn't want to steal a car. She'd hike to the road and then bum a ride with someone who didn't mind having a wolf in the front seat.

All she had to do was get over the wall and then walk. Fortunately she and Savage had practiced getting him over a wall years before, and it was a beautiful thing. She just needed a flat area on both sides of the wall.

She peeked out the front door. No guards were patrolling, which was highly unusual, but she'd take what she could get. She and Savage swiftly moved to the left and headed straight for cover. They reached the trees, and she honestly wondered why she wasn't besieged with armed men capturing them like the Scots did in all those romance novels she'd read.

And this compound was like a keep. However, she was sure there were sensors everywhere, so they didn't have much time. She and Savage walked until she found a spot that was at least flat on this side. Dropping her pack, she put on her climbing gloves, toed off her boots and socks, and free-climbed the wall with ease. She peered over the side and was pleased to find the other side was flat too.

She pushed away from the wall and gracefully landed in the cold snow, which chilled her feet, but she could handle the cold if it meant her freedom. Stationing herself four feet from the wall, she turned and faced it. Bending slightly forward, she created a good launch pad for Savage.

"Up," she told Savage. She braced herself as she heard Savage's feet pound on the frozen ground as he took a running start. As they'd rehearsed, he landed in the middle of her back and then springboarded to the top of the wall. She didn't like high walls that were meant to keep her in, and she'd never leave Savage. She threw her boots over the wall, slung her backpack over her shoulder, and scaled the wall again.

She dropped softly to the other side, slipped on her boots and socks, and disappeared.

* * *

"Have you found her?"

"Yes. That guy, Luc, snatched her ass up and physically hauled her to his place."

"Damn. It's going to be impossible to get to her there." Why couldn't she have drowned? Or died in the streets, when she was a nobody living as a thug.

"Actually, sir, I have a plan, and it's brilliant."

He didn't think Joe was capable of anything brilliant, considering the fuckup he'd done on this job. In fact, he'd bet money on it. This had been a cluster fuck from the beginning and was only bound to get worse. He could hear the confidence in Joe's voice, but Joe was turning out to be a mistake. A mistake that was going to have to be rectified. "So what's this brilliant plan?"

"I'm not going to kill her on Luc's land. I'm going to fucking kill her in his house, right under his nose."

He rolled his eyes and resisted banging his head against his mahogany desk. "Are you sure you can pull that off?" *Because your track record says otherwise.*

"No problem," replied Joe. "I'll slip in as a guard to one of the council heads. You all got so many, one more won't matter."

"It's risky."

"It's perfect."

Nothing was perfect. "Just call me when it's done." He closed his phone and leaned back in his chair. This could be perfect if Joe could pull it off. If Joe did manage to kill her on Luc's property, he would try to persuade the council members that Luc's security was lax and that any one of them could have been the target. But he'd have to tread carefully there, plant the idea, and see what sprouted.

He could also come out smelling like a rose in this whole affair. He could meet Joe on Luc's land and kill Joe. That way, everyone would think he was the hero who'd killed the intruder. And no one would be the wiser. Yes, the plan had its merits. But only if Joe was successful. But he wasn't going to depend solely on Joe. He'd call in more men just in case they were needed.

Chapter Nine

Santana moved through the forest, guided only by the full moon reflecting off the light snow. Her and Savage's breaths formed little iridescent clouds in the cold night air as the wind whipped around her bare legs, but fortunately for her, neither the cold nor the heat bothered her that much—unless she was swimming in an icy river.

The woods were a little creepy, being that she had been assaulted in these very woods by...something. Hopefully whatever the hell it was wasn't out tonight. Really, what were the chances that she'd run into that...thing again. Besides, she was packing tonight, and she wouldn't miss.

The farther they walked, the more remorse weighed down on her, which was completely and utterly ridiculous. She was leaving by choice, one that would be the best for her in the long run.

Savage's growl halted her and sent chills along her skin. She dropped to her knees and looked at him. His ears were up, and his snarl was low. She readied her weapon as Savage moved forward and stopped, sniffing the air.

"What is it?" she whispered. "Friend or foe?"

Savage didn't acknowledge her but moved to his right, and she followed, wondering what in the hell had gotten into him. Savage loved to hunt. She'd kept him out of the local parks and only allowed him to hunt when they went to the forest. A squirrel didn't stand a chance if Savage turned into the hunter, and she didn't need any horrified children seeing Savage eat a squirrel.

"If you're hunting rabbits or squirrels," she whispered, "you can do that when we get to North Dakota."

Again, Savage didn't acknowledge her when she spoke, which had never happened before. Bad feeling. She had a bad feeling about...this.

Savage stopped, and she stopped too. She swept her gaze around the area but didn't see anything but trees and shadows. Savage hunched down and crept forward. And then she saw it, whatever *it* was. A lump on the ground. Was it a dead animal? Santana waited as Savage crept forward, letting him take the lead. She readied her Sig, because she'd shoot anything, animal or human, that tried to attack Savage. When Savage reached the lump, he nudged it with his nose. Then he lay down beside it and whimpered.

What the hell? Santana slowly approached. Obviously it wasn't a threat, but she'd never seen Savage act so strangely before.

She rolled the thing over, and fear whipped through her.

* * *

Bang! Bang! Bang!

A door was banging in Luc's head, and someone was calling his name. His eyes drifted open, and he fought the sweet sleep.

"Luc. Wake up! We've got trouble."

Luc managed to sit up and sling his legs over the side of the bed, all the while fighting a wave of dizziness. His brain wasn't functioning for some reason.

"Luc!"

He stood and stumbled to the door, unable to walk a straight line. Damn, had he pulled an all-nighter, drinking until he was no longer conscious? He opened the door and blinked hard to bring Adolf into focus.

"What's wrong?" Luc managed to ask even though his tongue was thick and dry.

Adolf moved in front of Luc and sniffed. "You've been drugged."

Luc blinked, trying to clear his head. Drugged? Who? What? His mind couldn't grasp the answers. "Maybe that's why I feel like shit."

"And Miss Jones is missing," said Adolf as he peered over Luc's shoulder.

Luc glanced back into the room, and it all came flooding back. Santana had been here, and now she wasn't.

"Well, I'll be damned," Luc said. "I guess I owe her twenty grand."

"And that's not all," said Adolf. "Willie is missing too."

Luc frowned. "Are they together?"

"Not that we can tell, but Miss Jones appears to be a woman of many talents."

That was an understatement. Luc didn't think she would hurt Willie, since she'd been hell-bent on kicking his ass when she thought he was a pervert, but if she thought she could use the boy as ransom or a free pass, she could fucking think again.

Adolf pushed the comm in his ear, and Luc waited. "They found where she and her wolf scaled the wall. Willie wasn't with her, but that doesn't mean anything."

"No, it doesn't," replied Luc. "Let's find Willie first. I'll get her myself, later."

"There's no way in hell we're letting you go after her by yourself. She could be part of some trap."

If Santana wanted him dead, he'd be dead. She could have done any number of things to him while he *slept*, anything from slicing his throat to bashing his head in. No, Santana only wanted to leave.

Luc rubbed his eyes in an attempt to wipe the drug away. "Willie's more important at this time. The sun's set, and if he's in the woods, he may not fair too well. The three wolf packs out there won't care that Willie is part wolf."

"And Miss Jones doesn't stand a chance," replied Adolf.

Luc didn't want to hear that. He went to his closet and pulled on some jeans, knowing he would probably have to shift at some point in this whole mess. He knew he was making a choice that could end his mate's life, but Willie didn't know any better than to run away, whereas Santana should know the dangers in the forest at night. Hell, she'd been attacked in the same forest only two nights ago. Did the woman think she was fucking invincible?

"We're going through the video, trying to see where Willie might be," said Adolf. "But so far, we've come up empty. We have no idea how long he's been gone, and we don't even know if he's in the compound."

"Have some of the men shift and go around the entire compound, see if they can pick up his scent. Have the women comb the entire house again. Willie likes to hide. Check all small hiding places—like under the sinks."

"Are you sure you feel okay to help with the search?" Adolf gave him a once-over.

"I'll be fine. I'm fueled by two things: fear for Willie, and anger at Santana."

"Well," said Adolf. "You should be fine then."

Luc paused. Was that humor coming from Adolf? Maybe there was hope for him after all.

Luc and his men fanned out and entered the woods. Too many acres and not enough men. If they didn't find Willie close by the estate, the chance of finding him decreased dramatically. He sniffed the air and couldn't pick up either Willie or Santana. Hell, why was he even worrying about Santana? She was a grown woman, fully capable of taking care of herself...except when it came to werewolves. Especially a male werewolf.

* * *

Savage's howl was long and mournful, causing chills to skate up her spine. Santana dropped to her knees. "Oh my God, Willie." Willie's eyes were closed, his lips blue, and Santana's heart thudded against her ribs. She leaned over Willie and was instantly relieved when a gentle breath brushed her cheek.

"Willie, can you hear me?" She cradled his face. He was cold, so cold. She searched for any injuries, relieved that she didn't find any. She shrugged off her coat and laid it on the ground. Then she gently picked up Willie and placed him on it. Just picking him up brought back the same image of her and Michael. Michael had been limp like Willie, but it was a filthy, tattered blanket instead of a coat that she'd wrapped him in. And Michael didn't survive.

Willie had to.

She shook her head as she put his little arms inside the sleeves and then buttoned up the coat. She stole a glance at Savage. Savage had his head tilted, looking at the boy. Somehow Savage knew Willie was in trouble, and Santana believed Savage actually cared about what happened to Willie.

Santana rubbed Savage's head. "He'll be all right, but we've got to get him back to the estate." She picked Willie up in both arms and headed back the way they'd come. It was hard to carry a child and a gun at the same time. It wasn't hard to follow their footprints, though, because she'd made no effort to conceal them from Luc, knowing he'd be asleep for a long time yet.

The boy only weighed forty-five or so pounds, but her arms were tiring. Trying to walk far in these cowboy boots and lugging extra weight was proving to be tough.

In the distance, a howl echoed in the cold night air, and the hairs on her arms stood up. "Come on, now," she said to herself. "We don't need any four-legged company."

Savage perked up and sniffed the air. The rustling in the undergrowth ahead drew her attention. A minute passed before four shadows appeared in front of her, and it wasn't hard to tell what they were. Wolves. The four wolves fanned out, the hair raised on their backs and baring teeth that were as white as the snow. Savage growled and bared his teeth too. She dropped to her knee and positioned Willie on her left to free her Sig hand. Savage stepped in front of her, but that was the last thing she wanted.

"Here, Savage," she said as she pointed to the side that Willie was resting on. Savage reluctantly obeyed, still growling at the four wolves. She hated to do it, but Willie's and Savage's lives depended on it.

* * *

A shot echoed in the night, but Luc couldn't discern where it came from. He glanced at Adolf, who shrugged. But it didn't matter; his wolf had picked up his mate's faint scent. At least Santana was armed, but who knew how many wolves would perish tonight. And they still had to find Willie.

With no choice, Luc and his men ran, hoping to get there to curtail the damage. Another shot echoed, and Luc was sure another wolf was dead. His mate was killing the real wolves in his sanctuary, and that was hard for Luc to stomach. Damn woman should have stayed put.

A third shot almost sent him to his knees. At this rate, she'd take down the whole pack. Tree branches lashed his face as he wove through the thick trees. A fourth shot told him they were close. Luc and his men burst into the clearing, firing tranquilizers at the remaining wolves.

Luc looked at Santana as she crouched surrounded by four wolves, his shirt hanging off her shoulder. Her eyes were bright, her skin flushed.

"Here," she managed to say. "Get Willie somewhere warm."

Luc rushed to her and grabbed the boy. Willie's head rolled back, and Savage growled. Luc pulled up one of the child's eyelids. The boy was out cold.

"Adolf." Luc rose. "Take him back and get him warm." He passed Willie to Adolf. "Call Dr. Vernon."

Adolf and two more men melted into the woods, taking Willie back to the house. Several men hung back to protect him. He wanted to send them away but knew Adolf would have a hissy fit—or something close to it—if he did.

Luc glanced around and frowned. "Where are the wolves you shot?"

She lifted her gaze to his. "I didn't *shoot* any of them, only fired warning shots. But if they had charged, I would have."

Luc pulled her to her feet. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Just a little unsteady on my feet." Santana glanced at the wolves. "You tranq'd them?"

"Yes. This is a wolf sanctuary. We only shoot them when we have too. The darts work well."

A shiver rolled through Santana, and Luc knew it was from the adrenaline.

"Here, take my coat."

"No, I'm fine, just an adrenaline crash. Besides, you need it."

"I can handle cold weather better than you can. I *am* a man."

She raked her gaze over him. "Yeah, I keep forgetting that."

Luc removed his duster and wrapped it around her shoulders. Damn woman. He should have known she'd refuse his help. "Can't you just take what people offer?"

She smiled. "No. Why would I want to do that?"

With his men around, he resisted pulling her against his body. "We all need to rely on someone. It gives us security."

"So who do you rely on?"

"I rely on my men to keep the pa—my people safe. I rely on my people to make me laugh, smile, hurt, and cry. I rely on Willie to remind me that life isn't always fair. Who do you rely on besides Savage?"

He imagined pulling her close, molding her sweet little body to his. His cock instantly stirred, and he cursed himself. He inhaled deep, searching for any hint that she'd been hurt by the wolves.

"There's only Savage. It's less complicated that way."

"You've been hurt?" Luc said.

She slowly lifted her gaze to his. "Yes, and I don't intend to ever let it happen again."

"What's the old saying about never having loved?"

"What? Trust me, Cowboy, it was never about love."

"Then it was about trust."

She looked at him with those big blue eyes. "Yes, it was about trust, and then it was about hate."

She'd gone on the defensive again, and she reeked of hate that was still fresh and ran deep. Hate didn't really fit with his picture of Santana, so whatever her reasons were, they had to be life changing.

Luc removed the tranq darts and adjusted the bodies of the wolves that were twisted at odd angles. That way, when they awakened and flopped around, there would be minimal chance of them harming themselves. This was the Roma pack. Lucien was the leader. Also in the pack were his mate, Corina, along with Dominic and Sasha. They were each beautiful in their own way, and Luc was grateful they weren't harmed. In fact, he had a lot to be thankful for tonight. Santana could have found Willie and kept walking, but instead she'd taken her coat off, wrapped him in it, and had been making her way back to the estate. She could have shot the whole pack, but she chose instead to fire warning shots in the hopes they were afraid of her. Yeah, there was a lot to be thankful for.

Savage eased up beside Luc and sniffed Sasha. "No, boy, she's not yours. She belongs to Dominic." Savage looked at Luc and cocked his head sideways. "Sorry, boy."

Luc stood and told one of his men to stand guard over the wolves. Luc headed back toward the house, and Santana and Savage fell into step beside him. One of his men walked ahead of them, far enough to be out of sight, and another man was bringing up the rear. He didn't mind too much. He wanted to be alone with Santana, but he'd have to wait. The only private places he could call his own were his bedroom and his playroom.

The air was crisp, just right for a run, and it would help clear his head. Her sweet scent was driving him crazy.

"What do they need a guard for?" she asked as they moved through some thick brush.

"I don't want anything to attack them while they're under. The guard will make sure they get to wake up and terrorize these woods some more."

"And what's going to keep your man from being their next meal?"

"He'll leave before they get to that point. Let's go check on Willie, and then you can tell me what soured your view of life."

"Yes, let's check on Willie, but I'm not telling you shit about anything else."

He roared with laughter, the sound echoing in the night. No, he didn't think she'd tell him anything. She kept her wounds to herself, which he figured was her survival mechanism. He threw his arm around her shoulder, and she rested her head against him, which threw him for a loop. Could she be reaching for him in her own way? Taking what she could get, when she could get it? He savored holding her, but when she snuggled closer, pressing that sweet body of hers along his, his body immediately wanted more. He wanted her naked, writhing beneath him, and him torturing her with his tongue.

He couldn't figure her out, but his wolf didn't care at that precise moment. His wolf wanted her, to take what was his. She lifted her head, and he didn't hesitate to

claim her mouth. Her lips were so soft, sweet as honey. Her mouth parted and invited him in. He stopped walking, pulled her close, and thrust his tongue inside her warm mouth, and he wasn't sure if it was her or him who moaned. He slipped his hand down her back, and he almost wished he hadn't offered her his coat. Stopping at her ass, he pulled her against him, his cock pressed hard against his jeans and her soft belly.

He left her sweet mouth and kissed the pulse beating frantically in her neck. His fangs elongated. It would be so simple to sink his canines into her neck and claim her. His wolf pushed forward, but he couldn't do that to Santana. She had to make the choice. Even if it wasn't against pack law, he'd give her the chance to make her own decision. He forced his fangs back in and promised his wolf that tonight, he'd make love to Santana, even if he had to tie her down.

"Let me make love to you tonight," he said against her hair.

"It would be awkward," she said as she laid her head against his strong chest and snuggled closer to him, trying to push off the cold night air.

"Why?"

Why indeed. God, how she wanted nothing more than to do just that. She was safe in his arms. It wasn't the normal safe, due to his big alpha self. No, she felt something else. Something she couldn't name. Something she didn't want to name. It was getting harder and harder to resist him. It was a draw she couldn't control, and it was getting stronger every time she was near Luc. Even now, she wanted to crawl all over him like some wild animal. What would it be like? To run her tongue along his hard cock, suck it deep into her mouth? To run her hands along those muscles in his abs.

"Oh, what the hell," she finally said. Maybe, just maybe, she could satisfy this itch and then head for the hills. With any luck, a romp in the hay would free her. She was strong; there was nothing she couldn't walk away from. That was how she was, how she had to be.

Chapter Ten

Half an hour later, Santana straddled Luc's legs as he leaned against the massive oak headboard. Luc was letting her take control, not using his big size and strength to conquer her. How he knew that was the right thing to do, she didn't know. Luc was like that. Perceptive about her. Sometimes too perceptive.

"How's Willie?" She was delaying both their pleasures, but she really needed to know.

"He's fine. He's thawed out, and he's eating everything he can get his hands on."

"Good. Did he tell you what he was doing outside the walls?"

"He said he wanted to play in the woods."

Santana smiled. "That sounds like a boy." Michael had remembered playing outside before he was taken, but Santana hadn't saved him in time to let him enjoy that small pleasure again. Why hadn't she tried to kill the bastard before Michael took his own life? "I'm just glad he's okay."

"Santana, you did a wonderful thing. You could have kept on running and left Willie in the woods to die."

She shook her head vehemently. "No. I could never do that. Besides," she said through a smile, "Savage found him. I can escape anytime I want."

Poor Savage was locked in the bathroom because she didn't know exactly what her wolf would do if he thought Luc was attacking her.

"You could stay here until I get this damned conference over with and all these people out of my hair."

"We'll see," was her only answer. She'd love to stay and get to know Luc better, but right now she couldn't make any decisions. Her gaze landed on the tattoo above his right pec. She leaned in closer. It was a fierce wolf with an intricate sword and dagger under it. "What does this mean?" she asked, rubbing her finger over the tat.

"It's the sign of my house."

"And the sword and dagger?"

He shrugged slightly. "They're just part of the crest."

Santana arched a brow. "I don't believe you, but I'm willing to let it go." She swirled her finger over his nipple before she brought his bulging cock against her belly. "I've always wanted one of these," she said.

"Well, you can have mine anytime you want it."

She nodded. "I'm sure that's true, but I was talking about owning one of my own."

"You mean like strapping on a dildo."

"No, I mean a real one attached to me. I've always wanted a cock."

A laugh rumbled in his chest to match his full smile. There was something about his laugh that made her want to laugh. She figured he didn't laugh much, and maybe the fact that he could laugh with her was a treasure.

"Why?" he asked.

She brushed her thumb over his slit. "It represents power. Yours is magnificent." *Just like you.* "I'd want mine to be like this. Have you ever wanted a pussy...I mean, to have a pussy instead of a cock?"

Hi grinned and shook his head. "No, I can't say that I have."

"See. Pussy doesn't represent power."

"I think you're confusing power with powerful."

"What do you mean?" she asked as she slowly glided her hand down his cock and then slowly back up.

Luc's eyes almost closed as he pushed against her hand. He cleared his throat. "Males have to pound out their release. Females need the pounding for their release. Females aren't the pounder, but the poundee. However, you somewhat pound your clit for a release."

"Yes, but that's pounding on it and not pounding with it. I'll have to think about it. I still think the cock is the power."

He reached out and cupped her breasts, but she swatted him away. She wasn't ready for him to take her over the edge yet, and if he thumbed her nipples, she wouldn't last long. She wanted to go slow, remember everything about this night. After all, this was to get him out of her system.

"So," said Luc. "Who holds the power in a male/male relationship?"

She cocked her head to the side as she considered his question. "I suppose they both do." She bit her lower lip. Male/male wasn't something she knew much about, but she assumed it was the same as a female/male relationship. Lust, sex, and love for those fortunate enough to find it. In today's society, everything was a go. Yeah, she was a stripper, but she had kept the sex simple for those few times she was actually interested. She wondered if Luc had ever been with a man.

"What?" he asked. "I know you want to say something. Fire away."

"Okay, have you ever fucked a man?"

"No. I like the softness of a woman, the way they smell like heaven."

She should be thinking about seducing Luc, but instead she wondered what it would be like for two hunks to fuck one another. Someone would have to be the true dominant, wouldn't they? And why would one of them want to be the submissive? "Who dominates in a male/male relationship?" she finally asked, hoping he knew more than she did.

"I don't know. Do you want to find out?"

"What?" Surely he was kidding.

"Two of our fiercest, most cunning fighters have been together for years."

"And they're exhibitionists?"

"Probably, but let's find out." He reached for his cell and punched in a number. She knew his eyes were on her, and she couldn't keep the flush from her cheeks.

"Can you two come to my room? And you won't need any clothes." He flipped the phone shut and tossed it on the nightstand.

"I can't believe you just did that! You didn't even give them an opportunity to say no."

"If they're gonna tell me no, they'll tell me when they get here."

Damn, what had she gotten herself into? Yeah, she was a stripper, but sex wasn't something she was used to. Stripping was business. Sex was personal. But something skated along her spine, and it wasn't fear.

Excitement.

She yelped at the knock at the door. She scrambled beside Luc into the bed and pulled the covers up. What did they do, run down there?

Luc told them to enter, and she pulled the sheet closer. The two men entered the room, both naked as the day they were born. What kind of people ran up and down the halls in their birthday suits? And what kind of place was this that allowed it? Some kind of kinky club?

"Caleb and T.K., Santana wants to know who dominates in a male/male relationship. She also wants a cock, not a pussy."

Santana was mortified down to her toes. They must think she was some kind of an idiot. She saw the amusement in their eyes, while she was sure hers sported total embarrassment.

They were beautiful like Luc, with bulging muscles in their arms and abs that she wanted to run her hands down, knowing she'd find them rock hard. A woman's dream...and apparently a man's too. Both were well over six feet. Caleb had sandy brown hair, which contrasted with T.K.'s dark hair and tanned skin.

"We both play that role when it suits us," answered T.K.

"She thinks cocks have more power than pussies, and you two probably agree with her," said Luc.

Their cocks were limp, but Caleb grabbed his and gave it a little stroke, and seeing him do that shot excitement straight to her pussy.

"I don't know. I think the resulting orgasm is the same," replied T.K.

Santana frowned. "That can't be. You produce much more...cum, and you expel it from your bodies with such force, such power." She'd emphasized *power* a little more than she'd meant to.

"Yeah. We can piss farther than you can too, but the result is the same," said T.K. as he grabbed his cock. Both cocks were growing beneath those big, dark hands.

She didn't have a reply to that, but her brain wasn't really engaged in talking right now.

"We'd much rather have Luc fuck us."

Okay, so where did that come from? Did Luc know this? "Why?" she asked, still keeping an eye on their masterful hands.

Caleb shrugged.

"Tell me," she said. "Please." God, she sounded like a virgin.

"Luc's our...well, he's the..." muttered T.K.

"He's what?" she inquired. She waited as they both looked at each another and then at Luc.

"He's the big dog in the pack," answered Caleb.

Their cocks were now long and thick, but not as thick as Luc's. Were they talking about size or something else?

"To service him," said T.K., "would be an honor."

She blinked. Okay. Service how? She didn't expect that comment, and she wondered what Luc thought of that. But she dared not ask, at least not right here, this very second.

"So," she said. "You two are a couple, but you screw around on each other?"

"No," said Caleb. "We share, and we'd both let Luc fuck us if he was willing."

"And you'd fuck Luc if he'd let you?"

Both Caleb and T.K. nodded.

"But not me?" Damn, that question tumbled from her mouth before she could stop herself.

"Oh, you're beautiful," said T.K. "And I'll fuck you if you'll strap on a dildo and fuck me in the ass."

Beside her, she felt Luc stiffen, and she hoped it was because he didn't want to share her with them. She glanced at Luc before she shook her head. "I don't think I can do that, and it wouldn't be the same...I mean, for me."

"Well," said T.K. "Let's show you how two alpha males mate."

Mate? That was an interesting choice of words. And so was *alpha males*. She'd have to ask Luc about that later.

Her eyes widened when both of them moved to the end of Luc's bed. Before she could process that, Luc flipped the covers off her and him and then hauled her up on his lap. She thought it was only fair that she be nude too, but she certainly wasn't comfortable with it. She was much more at ease on a smoky dance floor with stage lights burning her eyes out. That was work. This was different.

"Lean back," said Luc, "and enjoy."

She rested against his hot chest, the warmth welcome against her back. His cock nestled between her legs, and it rose and rested against her pussy. It was long enough that it looked like she had a small cock of her own. Luc wrapped his arms around her, resting them under her assets, which pushed them higher. His warm breath on her neck was distracting.

Caleb moved to Luc's nightstand, opened it, and pulled out a tube. Santana couldn't help but wonder if all the nightstands in this place contained lubrication.

Caleb sat on the side of the bed, and T.K. moved and dropped to his knees before Caleb. Caleb ran his hands in his lover's hair before forcing T.K. to take his cock in his mouth. Santana's gaze was riveted on the two men before her. Their muscles bunched and moved under the subtle light. Caleb threw his head back when T.K. swallowed him whole, and tingles zinged through her body at the sight. T.K. pulled on Caleb's sac as he licked the cock from base to tip. Luc hugged her tighter, and she wondered if he was as affected by the sight as she was.

The sucking and licking went on, until all of a sudden, Caleb held T.K.'s head still and *pounded* into T.K.'s mouth. Caleb's leg muscles bunched, and his butt clenched right before Caleb threw back his head and closed his eyes. Santana knew he was coming, and T.K. kept swallowing as Caleb's body jerked from the aftershocks. Her own pussy clenched. Caleb fell back on the bed, his breathing labored, and T.K. crawled up Caleb and kissed him long and hard on the mouth.

Santana squirmed. Her pussy actually ached from the pool of blood in the folds. Luc's cock jumped between her legs as he kissed her shoulder. Santana's gaze followed Luc's dark hand as it move down her belly, slowly—too slowly—and then he stilled his warm finger over her clit. There was no pressure, and she resisted pressing against his finger, fought hard not to. She didn't want to appear as needy as she really was.

Caleb flipped over, positioned himself on his hands and knees, and T.K. stood behind him. T.K. applied lube to his cock and then ran a bead along his finger. Caleb's cock hung limp, as did his balls. Even though her angle wasn't the best, she knew T.K. worked his lubed finger into Caleb's ass, and her asshole flinched in response. Her womb quickened when T.K. positioned his cock at the entrance to Caleb's ass. Caleb's head snapped up as T.K. pushed inside, working it in little by little. When T.K. was fully seated in Caleb's ass, T.K. threw his head back. Caleb's cock grew as T.K. pumped slowly into Caleb.

Luc's fingers swirled against her swollen clit. Slow, lazy swirls meant to tease. His finger dipped within her folds, causing her to clench around his finger.

"You're wet," he whispered against her ear as he pulled her wetness back to her clit, and she knew it was true. She felt her cream seep down to her ass.

She studied T.K.'s and Caleb's faces. They were intent on pleasure, both giving and receiving. T.K. increased the pace, and the sound of flesh striking flesh echoed in the room as T.K.'s legs slapped against Caleb's ass. Caleb gripped his own cock, pumping it wildly. Santana's pussy clenched when T.K. threw his head back and roared with his release. Caleb's release quickly followed.

Luc felt Santana's body humming with sexual energy. He knew her folds were slick and wet, ready for him. Her sweet little body had wiggled against him so much that his cock throbbed to the point of pain. He needed her more than he needed his next breath.

Caleb and T.K. looked at Luc, waiting for an answer. Werewolves had huge sexual appetites, and just about anything, including voyeurism, was within the werewolf sexual realm. He knew he should let them watch, but he didn't want to share anything about her, especially since this was his and Santana's first time. He'd had a hard time dealing with them just looking at her beautiful, naked body.

"Do you want them to stay and watch?" asked Luc.

She shook her head, and Luc let out the breath he was holding, thankful she had taken that decision away from him.

"I owe you one," Luc told them. "Just not tonight."

Caleb and T.K. both nodded and left the room quietly. As soon as the door closed, Luc lightly nipped her neck. "I'm going to fuck you hard and fast, slow and easy."

She moved off him and then settled between his legs. She licked her lips, sending desire rolling through him like wildfire.

"I think I want to play first." Her tongue snaked out between her soft lips, and barely touched his cock.

"I don't like to be teased," he hissed.

"Oh, you'll like this, I promise."

Her lips slipped around his hard flesh, and she tongued underneath his head. His balls were on fire as she took a good portion of him into a mouth that was like warm velvet, made for sinning. She grasped his member with her hand and pulled down as it hit the back of her throat, her teeth grazing his cock.

"Yeah, baby. Just like that."

Her head bobbed, and her tongue swirled under the head as his balls ached for release. She was driving him crazy, beyond his self-control. His wolf wanted more, demanded more. His wolf had waited its entire life to mate, and Luc the man wasn't moving fast enough. She sucked, licked, and sucked some more.

"Enough," he finally said. "I want to come inside your sweet pussy." He reached for the condom he'd laid on the nightstand and handed it to her. It was a prop. He couldn't get her pregnant until he mated her, and werewolves didn't carry any human diseases, but he had to keep up appearances, at least for now.

She tore the packet with her teeth, those same teeth that had grazed his cock. She rolled it on him, her fingers squeezing the head. He wanted to be on top, to force his member deep within her, but he'd let her be in control this time, ride him like she wanted to. He'd have his turn later.

She straddled him, positioning him at the entrance to her wet pussy. It glistened with her cream, the scent of her arousal strong and spicy. She eased down a little, capturing the head. He fought his beast not to buck and drive his cock home and put an end to this torment.

Santana's pussy stretched against the invasion of Luc's cock. She had to go slow, afraid she wouldn't be able to accommodate him. His eyes were hooded as she pulled up and sank back down. God, it felt so good. His hard length seared her sensitive tissue; his cock pressed against her womb.

"I don't think I can take all of you," she said.

In a quick move, he had her on her back with his arms under her knees, opening her more.

"Better?"

She nodded. Oh yes, that was much better. She watched as he slid all the way in, and when he was fully seated, he stilled, giving her body time to adjust to his size. He pulled slowly out and slowly pushed back in, the ridge of his thick head scraping along her sensitive tissues, sending her need into a hot frenzy. It wasn't enough.

"Please, Luc, can you move faster?"

A laugh rumbled in his chest. "I think I can manage that."

He picked up his pace, the sound of flesh slapping flesh echoing in the room, reminding her of Caleb and T.K. Her pussy clenched around his cock. Her hands rested on his muscled arms that bunched with each push into her. Santana's body was at a fever pitch, burning from desire. Pleasure coiled inside her, building, rising, racing along her insides. Then lights exploded behind her closed eyes, and her whole body contracted as her orgasm tore through her womb. Luc leaned farther over her, forcing himself deeper. Her fingernails bit into his arms as she pulled him closer to her. She wanted him closer, and she sensed the need for something else, something elusive. Her nose twitched at his smell, and then she sank her teeth deep into the tattoo on his chest.

"Fuck yeah!" A growl rumbled deep in his chest, his body convulsing as his orgasm broke free.

A coppery taste flooded her mouth as he pounded into her.

She released his tat, and he collapsed over her, his skin slick with sweat, his scent wonderful.

"You bit me?" he asked, his voice still husky from desire.

She took a deep breath and smiled. "I believe I did."

Chapter Eleven

Santana slowly opened her eyes. It was late afternoon, and she was deliciously sore. She smiled to herself as she stretched her muscles and remembered Luc making sweet love to her. He had been gentle in the beginning, passionate as well as forceful, and dominating in the end. She rolled to her side and looked at the empty pillow beside her and sighed. She would have loved to have awakened, wrapped in Luc's arms, but once again she was alone. Oh well, it was good while it lasted. She noticed Savage was missing and hoped Luc had taken him out.

She showered and, like the times before, couldn't find anything to change into besides Luc's clothes. She puffed out a little steam of impatience. This was getting old. After she dressed, she turned the doorknob, expecting it to be locked, only to find it wasn't. Two men spun to greet her.

"Let me guess," said Santana. "You've got to keep me here."

They both nodded, and she rolled her eyes at the stupidity of the whole situation. Luc could fuck her, but she wasn't allowed to leave freely.

She stepped into one of the men's personal space and poked him in the chest with her fingernail. "Listen, buddy, you'd better get Luc's ass up here now."

Both men grinned, and one answered, "Yes, ma'am," and spun on his heel and left.

"You do realize," said the other man, "that you are the cutest thing when you're pissed."

"That's a crock of shit." She was dressed like a bum—and not for the first time. "Then I must be the cutest that I've ever been, because I'm as pissed as I've ever been. I've never been treated so badly in my life."

"It's for your own protection."

Her body shook from the pent-up emotions of being treated like a dog. She slammed the door and stalked over to the window.

It wasn't long before the door opened. She spun and advanced on him, but before she could do anything, Luc wrapped her up in his arms and kissed her.

"I've missed you," he said against her lips.

She pulled against his grip. "Don't try to sweet-talk me. I'm ready to leave. And where the hell is Savage?"

Luc stepped aside, and she saw Savage by the door, his head cocked to the side. She tugged free from Luc and went and knelt beside him, raking her hands through his fur. "Hey, buddy. Where have you been?"

"We went to potty," replied Luc.

She almost laughed at that word coming out of Luc's mouth. She sucked in a huge breath. She didn't want Savage to like anybody but her. They only had each other, and that's the way it had to be. Which was why she had to leave. Immediately.

She rose to her feet and turned to Luc. "Am I a prisoner here?"

Luc tucked his hands into his jeans. "Yep."

She rested her hands on her hips. "Why?"

"Because I like you, and I want you to stay here, but you've already decided you're leaving."

How the hell did he know that?

"Listen," said Luc. "I've got about thirty people coming to stay for a few days, and when they leave, I want to spend more time with you. I promise I'll devote all my time to you, and I promise you won't wake up in the bed alone."

"Luc. I can't stay..."

He walked to her and pulled her into his arms. "Stay, for me. Just for a little while."

"You want me to stay in your bedroom the whole time?"

"My people don't like outsiders."

She rolled her eyes. Hell, she didn't like them either, and she hadn't even met them.

"It will be better for everyone if you stayed here."

"It sounds like you're ashamed..."

"No," Luc said, shaking his head. "It's political, nothing more."

She didn't know if she believed him. What were they? Some kind of clan, cult, aliens, kinky sex club? Santana wavered. She really did want to stay for a couple of days and spend more time with Luc. Besides, she couldn't take out both of her guards unless she could get them to take the knockout drops, and she was sure they'd been warned about that.

"Now," said Luc. "I've got to shower and change. Someone will be delivering your dinner, so don't knock them in the head."

"I'm not making that promise."

He laughed. "I didn't think you would."

* * *

Luc stood in the shower and wished he could run every damn one of those people out of his home. He wanted to spend more time with Santana, and his

responsibilities were getting in the way. Hell, he wanted to court her, and he'd never courted anyone in his entire life. He was wolf, and he loved to fuck, and he always made sure that his partner was well satisfied, but actually courting was new to him. Did she like flowers? Wine and dinner? He could do that. Maybe a romantic getaway. But he'd had to have a security team, and a security team wasn't romantic.

And she'd bit him.

Damn, that was the most erotic thing he'd ever experienced. Yeah, he loved to sink his teeth into his women, but never before had one of them bit *him*. He touched her bite on his pec. She'd marked him, not as a wolf, but as a human, his mate. He couldn't wait to turn her and fuck her when she was a werewolf. His cock grew; his balls drew up, just thinking about mating with her.

Cool air flooded the shower, followed by little hands moving over the planes of his back. He smiled to himself as her hands moved to his front, and he felt Santana press her sensuous body against his back. Her skin was soft and subtle. Her hands traveled down his belly and gripped his cock. He couldn't help but wonder what was going on in that little head of hers.

"I could have sworn you'd already had a shower."

Her hand pumped him lightly. "I have, but I thought you might need some help with your back."

"I hate to tell you, but that's not my back."

"I'm pretending," she said.

"Pretending what?"

"That it's my cock, and I'm masturbating."

"Hmmm, how's that working for you?"

"I really have to use my imagination."

She was killing him. He slipped his hand between them and found her nub swollen with need. She spread her feet farther apart and tilted her hips forward.

"What you do to my cock, I'll do to your clit," he said.

Santana didn't know what on earth had compelled her to follow him into the shower. She was still somewhat pissed at him, but she was drawn to him like a moth to flame, unable to keep herself away, knowing it wasn't the best thing for her but not giving a damn. Her body demanded his; her mind knew she was somewhat insane. She'd stay a few days because she couldn't help herself, but then she'd go.

She pumped his cock lightly, so he swirled his finger against her clit lightly. It was wonderful, but she required more. She gripped him harder and pumped a little faster, and he did the same against her clit. She thrust her hips against his hand, felt the muscles of his ass contract. Her own muscles bunched as she wiggled against his fingers.

She abruptly pulled her hand away and stepped around him. "I need you in me now."

"Yes, ma'am."

He picked her up like she weighed nothing. She slipped her arms around his neck, and she wrapped her legs around his hips as he suspended her against the shower wall. Warm water caressed them both.

"I don't have a condom," he said.

"We don't need one. It's not the right time of the month for me to get pregnant, and I'm clean."

"I'm clean too."

His cock entered her, hard and fast, and she cried out as he pinned her hips against the cold, hard tile. "Yes, yes!"

"Damn, Santana. You feel so fucking good."

She clung to his body, and his cock worked inside her. Her flesh tingled, and her body demanded more.

"Bite me," she said.

Luc stilled. "What?"

"Get your glorious cock moving and bite me."

He frowned. "Are you sure?" His concern touched her.

"More than sure." She tilted her head to the side to give him easier access to her shoulder, and she squeezed her inner muscles around him. If he didn't bite her, she knew she'd try to bite him again. Her mouth salivated as he plunged deep and hard, taking her higher.

And when she was poised at the edge, his teeth sank into the soft flesh of her shoulder. She convulsed as pleasure skated along her entire body, leaving no part untouched, taking her higher than ever before.

Luc released her shoulder and threw back his head. She watched the pleasure cross his face as his cock pulsed, spilling his seed into her warm folds. He collapsed against her. Her mouth still ached to nip him, but instead she licked his tattoo with her tongue, causing him to shudder.

"Damn," he said.

Yeah, damn.

Chapter Twelve

Luc grabbed her arms and held her still, hoping he could say what he needed to say without pissing her off. "I'm going to lock you in and post two guards outside your room. That way, if you bash one of them in the head, maybe the other one can subdue you."

She smirked. "I doubt it."

He grinned. "Yeah, I do too."

He pulled her to him and kissed his faint bite mark. Everyone would know he'd marked her, but he didn't change her, nor had he mated her. It was just a sexual bite, and he was damn proud of it. He regretted that he had to leave, regretted that they couldn't crawl back into the shower or the bed or on the floor or anywhere. And the fact that she had on another one of his shirts, unbuttoned, showing those creamy breasts of hers, was driving him crazy.

"You and Savage will be safe here," he said. "But you've got to promise me that you'll stay in this room and not attack the guards, or I'll have to cuff you to the bed."

He detected that her heart accelerated, and a small amount of fear permeated the air. "I promise," she said.

"You do?" That caught him off guard. Compliance? That was so unlike her. And he didn't believe it for one minute.

She nodded.

"Why?"

She shrugged.

"You don't like to be cuffed?"

Her eyes rounded as he hit the mark. Someone had abused her. He wondered if that was the reason she had issues with trust, why she preferred to be alone with Savage instead of with people.

"I killed the last man who did that to me," she said quietly.

His nose told him she was telling the truth. Luc arched his brows. "Tell me what happened."

She shook her head. "I don't want to discuss it, but I sure as hell am not letting you tie me up and do anything that comes to your mind."

"I told you that I would never hurt you."

"Uh-huh, I've heard that before." She took a deep breath and let it out with a whoosh. "Listen, just don't."

“Okay,” he said. *For now*. He’d add that to the list of things he had to figure out about Miss Santana Jones. He remembered her saying her mom had died when she was ten, and she didn’t have a dad. So did an uncle or a friend of the family take her in and then proceed to abuse her? Too bad the bastard was dead, because Luc wanted to kill him with his bare hands.

He let her go and turned to face the mirror. After he finished tying his tie, he slipped on his dinner jacket, wishing the whole time that he’d issued an order to break tradition. Instead of having a royal pain-in-the-ass, sit-down dinner, he could have held a barbeque instead. Hell, a weenie roast would have been fine.

When he was finished and there was nothing left to keep him from going downstairs, he advanced on Santana and spun her around so that her back was against his front.

“Do you see what you do to me?” He ground his cock into the small of her back and cupped a breast. She pushed back, wiggled against him, and laughed a sultry little laugh. He slowly eased his other hand down. She rewarded him with a sharp intake of breath when he found her sweet spot. With his finger, he drew lazy circles around her clit.

“When I get back, I’m going to tongue you until you scream my name.”

“I...I don’t want to wait that long,” she said as she wiggled harder.

“Then go lie on the bed.”

He released her and grinned when she scampered over and lay down on the bed on her back, his shirt gaping open. “Have you ever worn a butt plug before?”

Her eyes rounded as she shook her head.

“Do you mind trying one?”

She shook her head again, but more slowly this time.

“I won’t hurt you, I promise.”

He took off his dinner jacket and then rolled up his sleeves. He’d be late, but they could wait. Santana couldn’t. “Touch your clit for me.” A little smile played on her lips as she swirled her finger over her sensitive bud. Never taking his eyes off her, he got the lube and the butt plug from the nightstand.

“Now pull your knees to your chest,” he said as he applied a generous amount of lube to the plug.

He dropped to his knees, not caring if he got his pants dirty or wrinkled, and took a long, slow swipe at her clit with his tongue.

* * *

Santana watched his tongue snake out and touch her.

“I can smell your arousal, and I can see it, creaming for me, getting ready for me. Do you want me, Santana?”

“Oh yes, please.” God, she was going to go insane if he didn’t douse this fire that burned within her. He smiled smugly before he placed his warm, slick tongue

on her and swirled, applying just the right amount of pressure. She squirmed, trying to get away and trying to get closer at the same time. He took her clit into his mouth and sucked at the same time as the plug pushed against her ass. The pressure built as he sucked harder, a bit of pain mixed with pleasure, the force of the plug, the force of her need building. She felt him work the plug, felt his teeth on her clit; then the plug pushed past her tight ring with the burn of pure pleasure.

"Luc," she cried out as her body arched and contracted, fire raging through her, wave after glorious wave of molten lava.

She fell back against the bed as little shock waves rolled through her, her breath coming in spurts as she fought to right herself.

"I knew you'd scream my name."

She didn't have to look at him to know he was grinning from ear to ear, because his voice betrayed his smug satisfaction.

"If I did, I can't say that I remember. I think I was having an out-of-body experience."

He retreated to the bathroom. Soon she heard water running. Santana wondered if it were possible to be addicted to sex. *No, not sex, addicted to Luc.*

She was relaxed, satisfied, almost happy, feeling like perhaps life had a purpose.

Damn, Santana, I think you're in trouble.

When Luc came out of the bathroom, she was still surprised at how he affected her. He was so handsome, all decked out to the nines. He didn't look comfortable, but he sure looked scrumptious.

She was surprised when he buttoned his shirtsleeves. "Don't you want to...I mean, aren't you going to..."

He gave her that smile that warmed her insides like a cup of steaming hot chocolate. He shook his head.

"Nope. I'm going to think about you for the next three hours and what I'm going to do to you. I want you to wear that butt plug until I get back. I'll be thinking about how it's stretching you, getting ready for my cock in your ass." He slipped on his jacket and adjusted his tie. "I'll be thinking about how it teases you every time you move."

His words painted an erotic picture in her mind, and her pussy and anus flinched. Oh, she'd had anal sex before, but it had been the master's wish, not hers. The master—her old master, the dead one—had been into humiliation and terror, not into giving pleasure. Her heart fluttered. Luc had given her the best orgasm of her life and expected nothing in return. Even the losers she'd dated—who were few and far between—had thought she'd been put on this earth to give them pleasure, which was why she'd opted for a white picket fence *without* the husband and 2.3 kids.

"And what if I take it out before you get back?" She smiled as she swirled her finger over her clit.

His eyes narrowed when her finger disappeared into her silken folds. "Then I will have to punish you. I won't let you come for a week."

He leaned across the bed and kissed her sweetly on the lips. "Behave, and I'll be back as soon as I can." His finger trailed down, found the plug, and pushed against it. "Think of me."

That's not going to be hard to do.

An hour later, Santana lounged on the bed, flipping through a gun magazine she'd found, and wondered if any of the women had anything better to read. She tossed the magazine on the floor and eased down to the edge of the bed, the plug reminding her of pleasure yet to come. Savage's ears perked up. "I'm getting bored," she said.

She stroked his warm fur. "You know I don't do well confined to one place for very long, just because Luc's *people* don't play well with others." She was going stir-crazy. She was used to coming and going as she pleased, not being cooped up. Besides, she was feeling mischievous tonight. Except there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it...or was there? Her brain churned, rooting through the possibilities. Then she smiled.

She jumped off the bed, buttoned up Luc's shirt, and pulled on a pair of socks. Then she retrieved her burglary tools from her backpack. Excitement coursed through her veins as she worked the lock on the balcony door, which was a really poor match for her skill, she thought in disgust. She put her tools back in their hiding place and turned to Savage.

"Stay here, Savage. Mommy's going to go have some fun. I'll be back soon."

She slipped out the balcony door and shut it behind her. The sun was sinking in the sky, but she had enough light to see that she could drop from the balcony to the ground below. She grinned as she scaled the low railing and then dropped silently to the ground, the plug sending a different type of thrill through her.

* * *

"I hear you have a human here."

"Hi, John, welcome to my home." Luc almost snarled his greeting. The man didn't even have the decency to exchange pleasantries before he was pushing for information. Luc had greeted all the other council members and had purposely avoided this inevitable confrontation.

John Earlander hesitated. "It's good to be here, but I'm more interested in the answer to my question."

"The answer is yes."

"Do you think that is wise? We are trying to hide from them, you know."

Hide. That was a crock of shit. "What did you want me to do with her, John? Throw her back in the river like your daughter suggested?"

"I can be a compassionate man, but for you to take in a human goes against everything we've ever preached."

"You mean what *you've* preached. I treat them as equals, not as an inferior race like you do."

"They are inferior, Luc. They're not as fast or as strong."

Luc knew John believed every word that came out of his stupid-ass mouth. John was all about what he could get: how much, how fast, and to hell with the humans. Luc was glad that the humans outnumbered werewolves, because he was sure John would do something foolish if that weren't the case.

"No, they're not any of those things compared to us," replied Luc. "But they are just as smart as we are, they feel just like we do, and they bleed just like we do. And they're a hell of a lot more compassionate than some of us."

John took a draw of his cigar and blew the smoke into the air. "Oh, I think we are compassionate. We could take over the world if we really wanted to."

"Is that what *you* want to do, John? Dominate the human race? We are part human ourselves."

"Are we? I don't feel human. I feel invincible."

"John, you were always so full of yourself and full of shit at the same time."

John turned cool eyes toward Luc. "That's rude of you, Luc."

"Yes. I meant to be rude," replied Luc. John always wanted more power at anybody's expense. Calculating. Manipulative. That was John.

"I've heard you've already fucked your little human."

"Yes." Luc barely refrained from growling, which would betray what Santana really meant to him. "Haven't you fucked a human before?"

"Yes, but I prefer our women. They understand the power, what their place is in the pack."

"You mean they're easier to manipulate."

John smiled and nodded. "Mark my words, Luc. You'll regret having that little human here in our midst."

Luc shrugged his shoulders. He regretted a lot of things where Santana was concerned, but having her here wasn't one of them.

"You know Gabriella is a beautiful woman, and an alliance between our two houses would be a good move for the nation. Make the pack stronger."

"I will not take a mate to obtain more power, and I certainly won't do anything to give you more power."

John smirked. "I have all the power that I need."

Luc arched a brow. "Do you? Sounds to me like you're auctioning off your only daughter in order to get that power."

John shrugged. "There's no auction. You're the one she wants."

Luc didn't doubt that statement. Gabriella had been trying to get into his pants for years, and the more she ramped up her efforts, the more his stomach protested every time she was around him. He almost felt sorry for her. One, because

she was so easily manipulated by her father, and two, because she really wanted that much power.

"Gabriella will be coming into her first mating heat within a few days."

"Well, John, unless you want her mated with whoever wins—and it won't be me—I suggest you take her back home with you and lock her up until it passes. In fact, I insist you take her with you when you leave." It was true that Luc was the only unmarried member of the council, which rendered him a prime target for those seeking a place in the pack. Luc's dad and mom had been true-mates, and his mom happened to be from a ruling family. All the council members had married among themselves.

Before John could reply, Gabriella eased herself against Luc's side and looped her arm through his. She flashed Luc her beautiful smile and snuggled against him.

"Darling," said John. "We were just talking about you."

Luc patted her hand. "Yes, we were. We were talking about how you can return home with your father." Luc disentangled Gabriella from his arm.

"Luc." She pouted. "You don't mean that."

"Yes, Gabriella, I do. It's time for you to go home." *Past time, actually.*

Gabriella's eyes flashed fire. "Luc. What is wrong with me? Why am I not good enough for you?"

"Gabriella, don't," warned her dad.

"We aren't meant for one another," Luc said.

"Don't tell me you believe you'll find your true-mate?"

Luc had to be careful how he answered that question. If he lied, John was strong enough to smell his lie. "Yes, I'm waiting for my true-mate." *Waiting to figure out what to do with her.*

"Don't be stupid, Luc," chided Gabriella. "True-mates are for the lower pack members. You know people of our stature marry for..." She frowned and hesitated.

"I'm sure the word you're looking for is power," offered Luc. That was so like Gabriella, not being able to put the truth to something so vital.

Gabriella looked over Luc's shoulder. Something behind him caught her attention because her entire demeanor changed.

"Damn, I don't believe it," she spat.

A creepy feeling eased up Luc's spine as he turned, noting that everybody's attention was drawn to the top of the marble staircase.

Luc's heart thudded against his chest as he watched Santana float down the stairs in a royal blue gown. Luc inhaled the lust that poured off the men in the room, and his beast snarled a low rumble in Luc's chest. He also detected the hate rolling off Gabriella.

He suppressed a growl when Edward Yopp greeted Santana at the bottom of the stairs, extending his hand to help her down the last step. Then Edward brought

Santana's hand to his mouth and kissed it. Luc was thankful that Edward wasn't a spry pup anymore. Otherwise Luc would have to call him out. Too bad Edward's mate wasn't a true-mate, which meant Edward and Camilla fucked around...a lot. Well, Edward could find someone else to fuck tonight.

As Luc moved toward Santana, Edward's son, William, moved in from the other side. Gabriella stepped in front of him, stopping his advance. Luc forcefully moved her out of the way as Santana laughed at something William said. Claws replaced his nails as Luc moved across the floor. *Keep it together*. He didn't need to change right now. Boy, would that mess things up. When Luc reached Santana, he kissed her firmly on the cheek. The cheek beat the hand any day.

"Santana," said Luc as he struggled to keep his eyes off her puckered nipples that the silk could barely contain. There was no bra to hide them, he saw. No wonder the guys all looked at her like a piece of candy. "I see you've met Edward and William Yopp."

Her smile was bright, which pissed off Luc's beast.

"Yes."

Luc placed his hand on her arm and swirled his thumb on her too-soft skin. Santana's gaze found his. Luc gave her a little tug. "Come and let me introduce you to the other guests."

William reached out and put his hand on Santana's other arm. "Hey, not so fast. We haven't finished getting to know her yet."

Luc resisted the urge to bear his fangs. "Trust me," said Luc. "You're done."

Luc maneuvered Santana around the room and introduced her. The males' nostrils flared, taking in her sweet scent. They were highly interested in her delicate shoulders and creamy bosom that peeked over the blue, corsetlike bodice. None of the men seemed to care that she had a bite mark on her shoulder. That pissed Luc off. It was a mark of ownership, and one the men should be respecting. And the few females in attendance were anywhere from lukewarm to highly irritated by Santana's presence. Luc could hear their snide remarks. *How dare he prance a human around in here? He has a lot of nerve. Maybe she's his pet. They say he's into kinky sex.*

"You are a minx," Luc whispered into her hair.

"Who, me? I just wanted some fresh air."

"Uh-huh. What did you do with your guards?"

"I promise they are just like you left them. I didn't lay a hand on them."

"Did you drug them?"

"Nope. They're still up there, guarding Savage like the good little soldiers that they are."

"I'm going to spank you when we're alone tonight. I know you think you won't like it, but I promise that you will."

"I'm totally opposed to violence." Then she grinned. "Except when it's necessary."

Luc inhaled deep, her sweet, exotic essence enticing his beast. His wolf wanted to go caveman, throw her over his shoulder, and take her away from all these people. Then the wolf wanted to fuck his mate. But he couldn't do that. Luc had to play host to a bunch of people he didn't even like. He took a deep breath and said, "Promise me that you'll behave yourself."

"I have a hard time making that promise. Behaving is not something I do very well." She batted her eyes at him. "How about you?"

"You know what I mean," he growled.

"I'll try my best."

"You know I'm going to fuck you long and hard tonight," he whispered low, warning her. He was sure that most of the people could hear exactly what he said, and he did it just to drive the point home. She was his.

She smiled. "I'm counting on it."

His gaze roamed over her, and his cock swelled some more. She looked like sin, smelled like sin, and her skin was pure sin. And the bite mark on her shoulder gleamed like a beacon. If he'd known she was going to escape and join the party, he would never have bitten her, not until he'd figured out who was after her and why. He'd actually endangered her life by marking her. Now they would know she was important to him. He could give himself an ass kicking. He'd fucked up royally.

And she had too much skin showing for this gathering. "Where did you get that dress?"

"I think it's Gabriella's, but I don't know for sure. I'm sure she won't mind."

Yeah, she's probably going to stab you in the back the next chance she gets.

"Are you still wearing the butt plug?" Luc whispered in her ear.

She nodded as heat flushed her delicate features. He scented her arousal and knew the others could smell it too. She leaned in and whispered, "And I'm not wearing any panties."

His cock jerked, knowing the silk of her gown was sliding over her silky, bare ass, that her pussy would be creaming, coating those folds, getting them ready for his cock. Her clit would be throbbing, waiting for his tongue to dance across it, bringing her to the brink again.

"Tonight," he said. "I'm going to bend you over, slide that dress up over your delicious ass, remove that plug, and slip my cock deep into your tight ass, and I'm going to make you come so hard, you won't be able to walk for a week."

Her little gasp let him know he'd stirred the fire inside her. She swallowed hard, and he knew she fought the lust between them, just like he did.

"How long do I have to wait?" she whispered.

He smiled and then laughed, knowing she was in the grip of lust too, that time would pass too slowly, that the night would drag on, and the lust would build to something almost painful.

Luc saved John and Gabriella for introductions until last, and his gut tightened when John and Gabriella both glared at Santana.

"Santana, this is Gabriella, whom you've already met, and her father, John Earlander."

Santana extended her hand to John. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Earlander. Gabriella, thanks for loaning me this gown. It's quite exquisite."

"You know damn well that I didn't loan you anything, you bitch."

"You're right, of course, and you have every right to be angry, but really, I didn't have anything to wear. Luc keeps hiding my clothes."

Santana smiled at John, but John didn't return her smile. Luc knew the moment that John figured out who Gabriella's competition was, and John wasn't too pleased. Luc couldn't tell John that he'd already shunned Gabriella before Santana showed up. Since the Earth *revolved* around Gabriella as far as her father was concerned, John would never believe that.

Luc was relieved when dinner was announced. He had a firm grip on Santana as they moved into the dining room, but somehow William captured her when Edward stopped Luc to discuss an issue. And when Luc finally reached the table, someone had moved Gabriella's name card beside his. It wasn't too hard to figure out who'd rearranged the placards.

Dinner was going to be hell.

Chapter Thirteen

Somehow Santana had become sandwiched between William and his dad, which was not what she wanted. She didn't think Edward was interested in her. No, she would bet he was running interference for William, as he kept the other men around her occupied with business discussion, which was fine with her. The men didn't even attempt to hide their appreciation of her, which was sort of strange, because most men did try to hide that fact when other ladies were present. She was used to men's frank appreciation of her assets, but not quite so blatantly in mixed company.

She didn't miss the patrol that marched outside the huge windows. They were wearing dinner jackets instead of cargos, but she'd still caught glimpses of guns in their shoulder holsters. Luc's *people* were apparently powerful, and she wondered if they were into something illegal.

She stole a glance at Luc. Poor thing looked like he was ready to explode, and Santana was sure that fingernails on a chalkboard couldn't hold a candle to Gabriella's cackling. Gabriella took every opportunity to touch or lean into Luc, and Luc didn't look too happy about it. Santana could almost see him bristle. A few men threw sultry glances at Gabriella, but most did not. For whatever reason, the men weren't drawn to Gabriella, which made no sense. Gabriella was about the most beautiful thing Santana had ever seen.

And sitting here without panties at a dinner table was ever so erotic. Yeah, she was a stripper, and those thongs she wore for her shows didn't offer much coverage—and neither did the lacy things she wore at home—but going bare was a whole new level of sensuality. She smiled. And Luc had promised to make her pay tonight.

"So," said William, drawing her thoughts away from Luc. "How long have you known Luc?"

"Not long."

"Well, I have to admit I'm jealous as hell."

She glanced at him. "Of what?"

"Luc."

"Why?" Of course she knew the answer, but what the hell. Chitchat was chitchat, and she was good at pulling it out of her ass if she had to.

"Because he found you before I did." William brushed the back of his hand down her bare arm. "But I can be so much more fun than he is."

"You can, huh?" She didn't believe that for a second. William was probably good in bed, like she imagined the rest of these people were, but better than Luc? Not possible.

William hitched his head toward Luc. "It looks like Gabriella is staking her claim."

She couldn't help but glance down the table in time to see Gabriella place her hand possessively on Luc's arm, but Luc still didn't look happy. A twinge of jealousy coursed through her, and she didn't like that feeling.

"But you shouldn't worry about being alone tonight. I'll be more than happy to take Luc's place while Gabriella takes yours. I'm sure I can give you exactly what you need."

If William thought she'd jump from Luc's bed to his, he could fucking think again. If Luc wanted Gabriella, he could have her, but Santana wasn't running to William or anyone else.

William's arm went around the back of Santana's chair, and it wasn't long before William was swirling circles on her bare shoulder. She shuddered—and not from desire. She knew William's type: sleazy.

Santana leaned into William and whispered, "Please keep your hands to yourself."

"I can't help myself," replied William. "You are so enticing."

"Nevertheless, keep your hands off me."

A low growl came from the end of the table, sending chills down her spine, and Santana wondered if Savage had chewed off the legs of his guards and was hiding under the table. William hitched his brow. He didn't remove his arm from her chair, but he did stop touching her.

"Looks like Luc's getting...irritated," said William.

Santana didn't know what to think about the growl or William's comment, but hell, there was a lot of shit going on here that she didn't understand.

She sipped her wine and let her gaze roam around the table. All the men were handsome, even the older gentlemen, and the women were what she'd call polished, like Gabriella. Money did seem to have a different look on people.

The woman across the table caught her eye and said, "I'm Mrs. Wingate."

She nodded her head. "Santana Jones. Pleased to meet you."

Mrs. Wingate struggled to smile, a smile that Santana noticed didn't reach the lady's eyes.

"You're...not one of us."

Santana would swear the woman's nostrils flared. Talk about looking down your nose at someone; this woman had the market cornered. A diamond necklace with matching earrings glistened on Mrs. Wingate. Santana glanced around at the other ladies and noted they all wore dazzling jewelry. Of course, Santana's throat and ears were bare and would always be, except for her mother's diamond pendant.

No sense in spending money on useless things. No, Santana knew she'd never be one of the wealthy.

"You are correct. I am not one of you." *And never will be one of you*, she wanted to say but decided rudeness wasn't called for.

The conversation lagged as Mrs. Wingate and the other prim and proper ladies tried to decide if they'd been insulted. Santana took another sip. In fact, she knew she was taking too many sips. She didn't drink much, but tonight it was her crutch.

"What do you do for a living?" Mrs. Wingate finally asked.

"I'm a stripper," Santana replied and smiled behind her wineglass. The woman placed her hand at her throat and gasped, and so did several other ladies. Santana stole a glance at Luc and saw him frown. So he was ashamed of her? Too bad.

But maybe that info would put William off.

"And you?" Santana asked Mrs. Wingate over the rim of her wineglass, calm, cool, and collected. Shocking people was her life's work.

"I...I don't work. My husband"—the lady patted the arm of the man beside her—"is in the import/export business."

"I see," replied Santana. Privileged bunch of people, just as she suspected.

William leaned into her and whispered, "You can strip for me anytime."

God, how many times had she heard that line? She rolled her eyes and wanted to tell him to kiss her ass but decided it wasn't worth it. She didn't want to spar tonight.

The meal was delicious, but Santana was relieved when it was finally over. The guests floated in small groups into a big sitting area, and Santana floated right along behind them. She supposed the huge room had a fancy name, but she'd call it a den-times-ten, with its huge fireplace, expensive rugs scattered about, and heavy furniture that was nicely built. Definitely not like the flimsy stuff Santana had in her house.

Suddenly Santana regretted the hell out of crashing the party. She found herself shunned by the women. Santana knew they were talking about her. It was a woman thing, sort of intuition. She could just tell.

And she was overrun by overly attentive men. Several of them actually leaned into her. Didn't the privileged people understand personal space? Her personal space was bigger than most, and they were trampling all over it.

She'd lost sight of Luc and wondered if he was in as much hell as she was. He hadn't looked too pleased with anything all night long.

Oh shit. Gabriella was making a beeline toward her. Santana didn't feel like catfighting tonight. In fact, she should excuse herself, retire early, and wait for Luc and his promises.

Gabriella stopped outside of Santana's circle of gentlemen. "May I have a word with you?"

There was no mistaking whom Gabriella was speaking to, so Santana slapped on her most gracious smile and handed her wineglass to William. "Sure. Will you please excuse me, gentlemen?"

The sea of men parted, barely, and Santana slid through the opening. She followed the haughty Gabriella out of the den-times-ten and down the hallway until they reached a huge oak door. Gabriella twisted the doorknob with such force, Santana thought it would break off. Spinning, Gabriella held the door open for her. Santana glided in but quickly turned to face Gabriella, not daring to give Gabriella a chance to stick a shank in her back. Especially when Santana knew the woman was highly pissed at her. Gabriella shoved the door closed with a loud bang.

"You're not wanted here."

"And I don't want to be here."

"Then why don't you leave?"

"Luc's keeping me prisoner."

"I don't believe you."

Santana shrugged. She wasn't going to waste any effort trying to convince Gabriella otherwise.

"If you're a prisoner, why didn't you escape instead of stealing my best gown and showing up down here?"

"Because I can escape anytime I want to. I'm having fun tonight." Well, the statement was true, but the fun part was turning out to be a lie.

"Luc is mine," Gabriella said through clenched teeth. Her eyes flashed.

Santana tapped her finger against her chin. "See, that's where I have a problem. Luc and I seem to have hit it off." She didn't want to come right out and tell the woman that she and Luc had made love—earth-shattering love—several times, in fact, not to mention that she was wearing a butt plug that Luc wanted her to wear.

"You're nothing but a fuck for him. That mark on your neck means nothing."

It meant something at the time. "Maybe so," replied Santana.

"Our engagement will be announced in a day or two. I don't want you here. Do you understand?"

"What I understand is that Luc wants me here, and I'll leave when he tells me to, or I decide it's time to leave."

"You'll regret ever coming here."

Santana shrugged.

"Why do you want Luc when he's not totally yours?" asked Santana.

"You stupid bitch. We're not marrying for love; we're marrying to improve the bloodlines. It's what's expected of us, has been for years."

Bloodlines? Maybe they were show dogs instead of aliens.

"Then I pity you, Gabriella. You and Luc deserve so much more than to be bound to a loveless marriage."

"I don't want or need your pity. The alliance between our families will make us unstoppable. It's what's best for all of our people."

There was that "our people" again. And exactly who wanted to be unstoppable? Luc? Santana didn't think so.

A grin crossed Gabriella's face. "Don't you know everybody's laughing their asses off at you? You're just his last fuck before his engagement." She gave her a look. "A pity fuck. And trust me, that's all it is, a fuck. It will never be anything more than that. And all the men are lining up to fuck you when Luc casts you off. Look around you. Do you think Luc would stoop so low as to marry you? If he wanted to show you off, he would have bought you a gown and invited you to dinner. Instead all he's done is fuck you and keep you hidden. He won't stop what's been planned for years."

Santana felt like she'd been slapped. Maybe that's why he'd ordered her to stay in his room tonight and not join the festivities downstairs. She wasn't good enough to wine and dine with his people, but she was good for a fuck. A dull pain twisted around her heart. *Oh, Santana, you're so gullible.*

Santana didn't know if Luc and Gabriella's engagement would be announced, but she wasn't planning on staying to find out. She couldn't stay and let her heart shatter any more than it already was going to. Luc did something to her body that made her crave him. It wasn't the sex, it was something akin to a soul mate, if there was such a thing, and she was pretty sure that this attraction of the souls wasn't a two-way street.

She knew this thing she had with Luc was temporary, but she hadn't expected it to be so short. She had at least wanted to get rid of her addiction to him, wanted him to make her come one more time, ease this lust, ride her ass like he promised.

With her mind made up, Santana smiled at Gabriella. "I'll be gone by sunrise. I hope you and Luc can find happiness somewhere in that *alliance*."

Gabriella looked about as surprised as Santana was. Santana always fought for what she wanted, but this was different. Normally she'd stay and fight, irritate the hell out of anybody she could. This she couldn't win...because she didn't belong.

Gabriella spun and headed for the door. She opened it but hesitated. "Thank you."

Damn, thought Santana. Now Gabriella had gone and blown her totally bitchy image. Santana only nodded. She wasn't going to tell the woman *you're welcome* because that would be a lie. After the door closed, Santana moved closer to the fireplace, seeking its warmth. The dancing flames mesmerized her as she wrestled with herself. It was hard to swallow giving up, but she knew it was for the best. She'd always heard the whispers that strippers were so easy. Well, she wasn't going to be that girl. She deserved more than that.

She glanced over her shoulder when the door opened, expecting to see Gabriella with another bitchy request, but a man entered, closed the door, and locked it, causing the fine hairs on the back of her neck to stand up. Her eyes narrowed.

"Well, well," the man said. "We meet again."

Her body trembled, her heart stopped, and her gut tightened. *That voice.* Oh, God. Her attacker from the woods. When her heart kicked back in, she drew in a deep breath. "I'm sorry. Do I know you?"

"Oh, you remember me, darling. I can smell your fear."

Damn, this house was just full of crazy people.

She noticed the man was handsome, like all the rest of the men she'd met tonight, and she was beginning to think these people did have to worry about bloodlines. Hell, even she didn't want the gene pool to get contaminated.

She forced her voice to be calm. "I'm sorry, but I don't think we've met."

"Oh, honey, we've met. But you didn't play nice. You were supposed to die."

Dying either then or now wasn't part of her plan. Her eyes searched for a weapon, wishing to hell that she had her IV pole. So Luc *was* right. Someone wanted her dead. Her best bet was to buy some time.

"Why?"

He moved closer, causing her to step back. The man shrugged. "I actually don't know why. I do the job. I get paid handsomely."

"Well, I hope they've cut your pay since you missed the first time."

His eyes narrowed, and he glared at her. He tightened his fists. Well. She'd hit a nerve.

"In fact, I wonder if you're worth anything at all. I mean, I am *just* a woman and you *are* just a man."

"Oh, I'm more than a man."

And that was what she was afraid of. Either that or her sanity. Her assassin removed his dinner jacket and shoulder holster, which confused the hell out of her. She'd learned on the streets to never give up your weapon.

"Are you sure you won't need that gun?" she asked, hoping to get a rise out of him. Sometimes your opponent's anger during a fight was your best defense.

He shook his head as he toed off his loafers and unbuttoned his shirt, which made no sense. Why in the hell was he undressing? If he wanted to rape and kill her, wouldn't it be faster to keep his clothes on?

"You're wondering what I'm doing."

"Oh, I know what you're doing. I just don't know why."

He tossed his shirt and undershirt onto the pile. "I don't want to get my clothes messed up."

“You think you can kill me, then put your clothes back on before someone hears my screams?”

“No one will hear you scream. Soundproof walls.”

“And you know this how?”

“I’m good at what I do, which means I check out everything before I make my move. No one will hear you. No one will come running.”

He unbuckled his belt, unzipped his slacks, and shoved everything to the floor.

She noticed his erection but didn’t know if it was from lust or bloodlust. “Am I supposed to be impressed with that?” She pointed. “Because I’m not.”

“It’s unfortunate that I don’t have time to fuck you before I kill you, but I’m sure I’ll survive...unlike you.”

A chill ran down her spine. If he wasn’t going to fuck her, then the only reason he’d need his clothes off was because it was going to be bloody. And lots of blood meant it was personal...to someone.

“I’m going to enjoy the kill, and I’m going to enjoy you realizing what I really am.”

Okay, this man was insane. Then she heard something pop, like a bone breaking, and before her disbelieving eyes, the man’s hands grew fur and claws, and his nose grew to a...*snout*? More cracking and popping, and the man’s whole body morphed into a... Oh. My. God. A wolf, a very *large* wolf that snarled and showed his fangs. Images replayed through Santana’s mind like a bad movie. She’d seen the beginning of the change in the woods but hadn’t waited around to see the rest.

So she hadn’t been crazy back in the woods, unless she was also crazy now. The wolf paced back and forth in front of her, its teeth bared, snarling.

And yes, Santana, there are such things as werewolves.

And you are totally fucked.

Chapter Fourteen

Luc was almost to the point of losing his mind. He couldn't focus on anything for trying to keep tabs on Santana. When she had waltzed down those stairs, he should have snatched her ass up, taken her back to his bedroom, and chained her to his bed.

William, being the werewolf that he was, was all over Santana, and Luc's beast had been on the verge of breaking free and challenging him. And Luc the man couldn't let that happen. He couldn't claim her as his mate. Her life would be in constant danger, and he wasn't sure that he could protect her. She fucked with his mind so much he couldn't concentrate. My God, he'd even *bitten* her.

He'd had enough of incessant bullshitting for one night, so he excused himself and went to look for Santana. He was tired of playing host, tired of trying to be nice. He spotted William and his meddling dad, Edward. Who knew what lies they'd fed Santana tonight.

"Hey, buddy," William said when Luc joined the men. "You have all the fucking luck."

"Uh-huh." Luc glared at William. There was no love lost between him and William, and Luc knew it was only going to get worse.

"You've got Gabriella, who's the blood catch of the century, and then there's your sweet little stripper. How can one man be so damn lucky?"

Luc fought hard to contain his claws and his fangs. "Her name is Santana, and she's a guest here. I expect you to extend her the utmost courtesy." And as for Gabriella being the catch of the century, that was only for people who wanted power.

Luc wanted to smash William's grin, along with his teeth, down his throat.

William shoved his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his feet. "I'll take her when you cast her off."

Over my dead body. "She's off-limits, William. You'd better find someone else to sniff around."

William laughed. "Do you think Gabriella's going let you keep Santana? I'm only offering to help you out by taking Santana off your hands before Gabriella blows a head gasket."

Luc would deal with William later. "Do you know where Santana is?"

"Gabriella wanted a word with her."

“Shit,” Luc muttered under his breath as he spun on his heel. He snatched his communicator from his pocket and slipped it into his ear.

“Does anyone know where Santana and Gabriella are?” he said into his comm as he scanned the room. For once he was glad that Santana knew a little bit about protecting herself. But she would be no match for Gabriella’s wolf’s strength if things got physical.

His comm crackled. “I saw them both go down the main hallway.”

Luc turned and headed down the hall, his men immediately following him. He opened the door to the first room and used his wolf vision to quickly scan it. Empty. He proceeded down the long hallway, checking each room as he went. Each was empty, and none of them carried Santana’s scent.

The last room was the library, and then after that, he’d have to go to full lockdown. But before he got to the library door, her sweet essence reached him and wrapped around his soul.

And so did her fear.

As he reached for the doorknob, his hearing picked up a faint growl. He gripped the knob and turned it. Locked. With brute force, Luc threw all his weight against the large oak door. Wood cracked but didn’t give way. Luc stood back again, and along with Adolf, they both rammed the door with their shoulders. The door frame splintered, sending the door toppling into the room with a thundering crash. Luc rushed into the room, his men following.

Luc’s nose registered Santana’s terror as his gaze settled on her and the wolf that was launched in midair, aiming for her throat. Before Luc could move, Santana grabbed the fire poker and brought it up in front of her. The large wolf yelped as the poker lodged in his chest. Santana twisted at the last possible second, letting her end of the poker slam into the wall beside the fireplace with a loud thud.

The wolf fell to the floor with a howl, the poker protruding from its chest. Relief rolled through Luc as the wolf jerked with death and morphed back into a man. Santana’s eyes were round, her face pale. Panic rolled off her in waves. Her hands shook.

She lifted her gaze from her attacker and found Luc’s. “What *are* you people?”

Luc let out the breath he was holding. Santana was safe. She was smart, and her smarts had saved her life. Again. And he had failed to protect her.

“What do you think we are?” he asked as calmly as his voice would let him.

She glanced around the room before her gaze settled back on him. “Werewolves.”

“That’s correct.”

“And you’re not going to let me leave here now, if ever, are you?”

Luc’s heart twisted with pain as terror crossed her face. He was sure she was feeling like a trapped animal. Luc couldn’t answer her. He’d never kept anybody

prisoner, but at the same time, he couldn't jeopardize his people by letting anyone run around with the knowledge she now possessed.

He crossed the room and knelt beside the man who'd threatened his mate. He cupped the man's chin and rolled the assassin's head from side to side. Luc didn't know the man, but his nose told him that this was the same man from the woods. Luc knew the type of man bleeding out on his expensive rug. *Killer for hire*. Luc was proud of the poker lodged in the killer's chest because it showed Santana had used her head. Not many women could kill a werewolf, especially a human woman.

"Adolf. Go to lockdown and find out how this man got in."

Adolf spoke into his comm. A few seconds later, the alarm went off.

Luc gently took Santana's arm, moved her around the dead assassin, and ushered her to the doorway. The crowd loitering in the hallway parted to let them through. He looked each person in the eye and dared anyone to say a word, because if he heard one utterance, he would explode. Luc pulled her close to him, and she quickly stiffened. Great. She was now afraid of him. He led her down the hall to his office, which was located in the other wing. He didn't think his bedroom was the place for this discussion.

He punched in the security code on the cipher lock and opened the door for her. She reluctantly walked in and went to stand at the window. His beast was antsy. He wanted to comfort her, make her understand everything would be all right. Luc leaned against the big mahogany desk, crossed his arms, and wrestled with the words that needed to be said.

She crossed her arms, and his wolf wondered if she was cold.

"Is this room soundproof too?"

He frowned. "Yes. How did you know that?"

"The assassin told me."

Damn. He'd been compromised big-time. Adolf was going to have a cow.

"I guess that means if you try to kill me, no one will hear me scream."

"Look at me, Santana." He waited, hoping she would comply, knowing she could be obstinate when she chose to. "Please," he added.

She slowly turned to face him, her skin pale, her eyes wary, her lips a thin line. And he hated that look on her.

"If I wanted you dead, I would have thrown you back in the river. Or I could have killed you at any time, but I didn't. I don't kill innocent people."

"Do you kill people who aren't innocent?"

"Yes. If you hadn't run that poker through that guy, I would have killed him."

"And you wanted to, didn't you?"

"Yes. I would have killed him and enjoyed every minute of it. Does that bother you?"

"No. I've killed before and had no remorse then, and I certainly have no remorse for my would-be assassin. But I didn't enjoy it."

"And now you want to know if it was the man or the wolf that would have enjoyed it?"

She shrugged.

"It would be both. Both of us wanted to kill that man because he was a threat to you, and you are an innocent person." Well, that was partly true. He really wanted to kill the man because he'd threatened his mate.

"I know you're full of questions, so ask me anything you want."

Her eyes registered surprise. "Are you going to kill me?"

"Definitely not."

"Are you going to let me leave here?"

He sighed, hoping she'd ask that question later, wishing she wouldn't have asked it at all. "Yes."

Her brow lifted, disbelief pouring off her in waves. "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"But you have to protect"—she made little quotes with her fingers—"your people."

"Yes. It's my duty to protect my kind."

"At all costs," she said.

"No. We don't harm innocents."

"Then tell me what the fuck was that that just happened?"

Luc sighed and rubbed his neck. "That was a pawn in a very dangerous game. Someone wants you dead, and I don't know why. And apparently it has to happen on my land, and I don't know the answer to why that is either."

She finally moved from the spot she'd been rooted in, walked to his bookcase, and ran her fingers along some of the bindings.

"I made a promise that I'd leave tonight, and I always keep my promises."

"A promise. To whom?"

"To Gabriella. Before the engagement announcement."

"She's not announcing any engagement."

"I'm pretty sure she's engaging you."

"I'm not engaged to Gabriella. Hell, half the time, I don't even like her." Luc knew he had made a mistake by not setting Gabriella straight years ago. He'd always hoped she'd find someone else so he didn't have to.

"Your engagement is in two days, and I told her I'd leave to make it less painful for *all* of us."

"I'm not engaged. Gabriella is delusional." Hell, Luc considered that she might be mad. "Any more questions?"

"So when you say 'your people,' you mean part man and part wolf."

"No, all man and all wolf. Both of us coexist."

"I thought werewolves only changed during a full moon?"

"Only in Hollywood," he replied. "I can change when I will it."

"And Willie?"

"He's learning."

She moved across the room and stationed herself behind a chair. His nose told him she wasn't afraid of him, she was just uneasy, and he hated the hell out of that.

"I heard breaking noises. Do your bones actually break when you change?"

"Yes."

"Does it hurt?"

"It's uncomfortable but not unbearable. But it's worth it."

"What do you mean?"

"I become a creature of the night. I can run across the frozen snow, smell prey from miles away. It feels great just to run. It's a freedom unlike any other I've ever known."

* * *

Freedom? That was a surprising twist. Santana wasn't even sure she knew what true freedom was. When she was trying to escape from the master, she'd thought that was freedom, but now she didn't know. Looking at snarling teeth befuddled one's mind.

"Any other questions I should ask you if I were up on my werewolf lore?"

He smiled that beautiful smile, and she questioned if *all* werewolves were as beautiful and as handsome. *His people* surely were.

"I have great eyesight, phenomenal hearing, super strength, and an exceptional sense of smell. Like right now, I smell your uncertainty."

"Emotions have a scent?"

"Yes, and so do people. Your scent is wonderfully sweet, erotic, and very sensual. You have no idea how your scent drives me crazy. And when you're aroused, that drives me and my wolf wild."

"So I can't hide anything from you."

"You can hide your thoughts, but when you're sad, mad, angry, aroused, I'll know it."

Which meant Luc knew too much about her, probably even before she knew it herself. And she could never lie to him; he'd know right off the bat. A wolf nose would be a good thing to have unless you weren't the wolf. It was apparent to her that the playing field wouldn't be equal with Luc, would never be equal. He'd always have the upper hand every time, and there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it.

"Can you control...your other self?"

"I can control my wolf, but he can be hardheaded at times."

Well, that wasn't surprising. Luc the man was hardheaded.

"I want to see you change," she finally said.

His brows furrowed. "Are you sure?"

Hell no, she wasn't sure. It was probably the stupidest request she'd ever made. She should be calling 911 and telling them to bring her a straitjacket and some psych meds. But she wasn't afraid of Luc. He would never hurt her; that was something she just knew in her heart. "What do you smell?" she finally asked.

"I sense your uncertainty."

Hell, she'd probably never get over *uncertainty* as long as she lived. Tonight's events changed everything, what she thought of the world and its inhabitants. Did vampires exist too? Did she even want to know?

"Yes. I want to see you change."

He slipped his jacket off and tossed it on his desk. He removed his tie and threw that on the pile too. "On two conditions."

She should have known there would be strings attached. "What's that?"

"You scratch me behind my ears."

"Okay. And?"

"Come stand over here by the desk."

She did as he bid, wondering what the second condition was.

He removed a tube of lubrication from a desk drawer and placed it on top of the desk. "And I want you to lean against my desk, haul that lovely dress that you stole up over your hips, and spread your legs."

"What? I can't believe you're even thinking about sex."

"I'm a wolf, and wolves love to fuck."

"And when I do what you ask, what are you...I mean, what is your wolf going to do?"

"I'm going to run my rough tongue over your clit."

"I don't know about that," she said, instantly appalled and yet intrigued. "That seems borderline perverted."

"I am a man," he said as he toed off his loafers and pulled off his socks. "And I've got a wonderful tongue. You like my tongue, don't you?"

"You know I do, but that is...just not right." From a man, yes. From a wolf? Weren't there, like, rules when it came to sex between different species?

"It's still me, just in a different form."

She watched Luc unbutton his trousers, slide the zipper down, and free his cock from his briefs. Then he ran his finger over the flared head.

"I want to prove to you that I won't harm you, that my wolf still respects you. He knows you are innocent."

"How about if I just take your word for it?"

Luc gave her a look that could singe trees. "Come on. I never thought of you as a chicken. I dare you." He pushed his trousers and briefs off his hips and let them drop. His glorious erection sprang free. And her mouth watered.

She clenched her teeth at his challenge as he stepped free of his pants. He palmed his cock, sliding down the shaft with a firm stroke. Her womb tightened, and so did her puckered flesh around the butt plug.

"Touch your pretty little clit for me."

She shook her head. Sex wouldn't erase today's events from her mind, even if the sex was with Luc and it promised to be mind-blowing.

"I can smell your desire."

Of course he could, and it was so damn unfair.

"But you can see mine," he pointed out.

Yes, she couldn't miss it, and she couldn't drag her eyes away from his cock if she wanted to. His hand moved, bringing back the memory of how his soft skin felt stretched over hard steel, the enticing smell of his cum. How it filled her completely.

Her breath caught in her throat more from amazement than from fear. Bones cracked as he transformed before her very eyes. He was big, much bigger than her attacker had been, and completely black. His yellow eyes stood out against all that black fur. He moved toward her, and she took a step back, bumping into the hard wood of his desk.

The wolf moved toward her, then stopped only inches from her and nudged her gown with his nose, right at her crotch.

No one would ever believe werewolves existed, so no one would believe one had licked her clit. *Damn. You are so weak.*

Santana couldn't believe she was really going to do this. She propped herself against the desk, spread her legs, and grabbed her dress at her thighs. Using her fingers, she pulled the silk up inch by inch. Would a wolf even appreciate the slow, sexy way she did it? The wolf—Luc—remained perfectly still except for licking his lips occasionally. When the fabric cleared her hips, she stopped and waited, chiding herself for the excitement that filled her. She was perverted, and yet she'd never felt more alive. She was offering herself to a wolf; she only hoped she'd still be alive when all was said and done.

And he made her wait, which was so like Luc to tease her. She narrowed her eyes and inched the gown down, causing him to move forward a small step. Yes, Luc was in that black wolf, toying with her libido, but when he still didn't give her what she wanted, the fabric slipped down some more. Only then did he move and bury his wet nose against her folds, and she eased her legs wider.

One long swipe of that warm tongue caused an uncontrollable shiver to race thorough her, his rough tongue causing just the right amount of friction. Her head dropped back when he took another slow lick, and her body squirmed. She forgot all about the perverted aspect when he thrashed her clit furiously. She couldn't help tilting her hips down to meet the upward glide of his tongue. Oh, she was so close.

The tonguing stopped, and the sound of breaking bones caused her eyes to fly open. Luc morphed back into a man, his eyes hooded with lust.

"Turn around and bend over," he said, his voice deep with emotion.

Her insides trembled as she obeyed, spreading her legs wide and placing her palms flat on the desk.

"I've been waiting all day to do this."

She had too, since he'd placed those wicked thoughts in her mind. He reached around her and picked up the tube. He didn't touch her, but she felt his heat, smelled his wild scent. The cap popped, and she knew he was stroking himself as he applied the lubrication.

"Spread your legs wider, and bend over more."

She did and waited. He eased the gown over her hips, inch by inch, just like she'd done. The silk sliding over her ass was erotic as hell as cool air rushed against her heated skin. She felt a tug, and then the plug slipped free. She instantly missed the pressure, the fullness.

His slippery finger eased in, coating her.

"Beg me, Santana. Beg me to fuck you."

"You know I want you too."

"Beg me."

She should stand up and stomp from the room, letting him know she wasn't that needy, but he pressed against her back, his erection thick, heavy, warm, and slick against her backside, and she knew she'd lost.

He nipped the tender flesh of her shoulder. "Say it," he whispered.

"Yes, Luc. Please fuck me hard."

She instantly missed his heat as he stood. Her puckered flesh contracted when he positioned his cock against her. His hands parted her cheeks as he pressed into her. The head slipped in, and pain mixed with pleasure seared her. He inched in, giving her more pain and pleasure, until she was unable to tell where the pain ended and the pleasure began. He moved back and forth, pumping out and back in a little farther each time, stretching sensitive tissue.

"Look to your right."

She did and caught their reflection in the bookcase. He towered above her as his legs pressed against her ass. The root was bigger, seared her more. She purposely contracted her muscles around his cock.

"Damn, woman," he said. "That feels too good."

"Fuck me harder," she said, her own voice unrecognizable with need. She needed more.

Luc pulled almost all the way out and pushed back in, scraping against her flesh. She braced herself as he gripped her hips and pounded into her. She watched their reflection, two people locked in passion, as a slow burn settled within her.

"Faster," she screamed.

Slick flesh slapped against her ass as he pounded into her, molten heat building, boiling, making her rage with lust. As the heat erupted, spreading through her like wildfire, Luc bent and bit her neck, held her in place as he erupted with his own orgasm. She arched her back as her body contracted, convulsed violently as the pain from the bite melded with the pleasure from her own orgasm.

She collapsed on the desk, taking Luc with her. He licked her bite, which felt swollen and tender, and she knew this moment was somehow special, at least for her.

"You forgot to scratch my ears," he said against her ear.

"I forgot a lot of things just now," she replied.

Chapter Fifteen

Luc watched the council members file into the conference room, and dread filled his soul. He actually hated this shit. He wasn't good at negotiation, and with a room full of stubborn werewolves, negotiation was sometimes impossible.

There were only seven council seats. All the members of each house were welcome to sit in on the meetings, but only the heads of each family could vote. Luc studied the room as people milled in and fixed their coffee or other morning beverage. Eventually they seated themselves, and he called the meeting to order.

"As you can see," Luc said, "Don Cantor isn't here, because all flights were grounded out of Calgary due to ice conditions in Canada. However, he should arrive tomorrow, so we'll be moving the schedule out by two days. Please make arrangements accordingly."

A subtle moan came from around the room, but it wasn't half the moan that he was feeling. These people would be here two more days. *Fuck*. He'd left Santana curled up sleeping this morning with Savage at her feet. He'd wanted to jump her bones again but knew she needed her sleep. Wolves were hardwired for sex, but humans weren't, at least not to the extent of the wolf. His cock stirred as her soft moans of pleasure, her trembling body, her sweet scent flooded his memory. Besides, she owed him a scratch behind his ears.

Luc cleared his head from the lustful thoughts and forced his focus back to the council members. "Does anyone have any announcements or items they wish to discuss that don't require repeating for Don?"

A murmur of noes and the shaking of heads elated him. Now if he could just avoid his guests for the rest of the day, he'd be a happy man. Besides, Santana wanted to go to her house and get a few things his men hadn't picked up, and he wanted to take her horseback riding. Hell, he reckoned he'd have to offer riding to everyone, but he was sure they could slip away from the group. No one knew the woods like him and his men, and he'd find a nice quiet place to just talk.

William raised his hand. "Tell us what you've found out about the incident with your little stri—"

Luc's growl cut off William's snide remark, and he scowled at the man. Luc shouldn't have defended her. He shouldn't be so protective of her in front of the pack elite, but it was getting harder and harder to let insults slide.

"I mean"—William coughed—"your guest," he said, correcting himself.

"I do have some information, but I wish to discuss it with the person it pertains to instead of doing this with an audience."

"Come on," said Edward. "We all want to hear what you've found out."

"I will give you my full report after I consult with this councilman in private. I think this person has the right to address the issue without the council's involvement."

"I vote you tell us now," said Edward. The other four council members spoke their affirmation. The vote was five to one, his being the lone nay.

"Fine." If the party he wished to talk to in private wanted everyone to hear, then so be it. He pressed a button on a remote, and a video screen descended from the ceiling. He pressed another button and then sat back in his big leather chair to witness their reactions.

The screen flickered, and the dead assassin appeared on the screen. "Here's the assassin." The screen flickered again, and the video showed two SUVs carrying a security detail and a black limo barely out of the picture. As the security detail piled out, Luc pressed the Pause button, freezing the assassin's face on the screen.

"You're saying he came from *our* security team?" asked William. Luc picked up on the surprise in William's voice, but was that surprise from being caught or genuine surprise?

"Yes, that's what I'm saying."

"Why, that's preposterous," Edward blurted out. "William, who is that man?"

Edward and William both were clearly upset. William used his cell phone to order the head of his security to the conference room, and Luc took the time to examine each face in the room. Someone was behind the plot to kill Santana, and Luc was going to find out exactly who that was.

Edward's head of security entered the room. Adolf had had Edward's team under scrutiny since late last night, doing background checks. Luc was sure that Adolf was noting when each one of them took a piss.

William pointed to the screen. "Do you know that man?"

The head of security studied the screen. "No, sir, I do not."

"Then tell me why he's getting out of my vehicle, wearing my insignia on his Kevlar vest?" Edward asked, his face flushed with anger, teeth clenched.

Luc's gaze slid around the room, looking for anyone who was overly pleased that this security breach wasn't theirs, but no one threw off any warning flags. Gabriella caught his eye and smiled, and Luc figured she didn't know what had happened between him and Santana last night. Otherwise she'd be spitting nails at him and threatening to cut his balls off and not acting all coy and flirtatious. She was a problem that had to go real soon.

"I don't know, sir. I need to go over the video at your estate. This man was in the second vehicle, so I didn't pay any attention to him."

Luc had noticed the assassin did avoid Edward's head of security after he exited the vehicle, but Luc kept that info to himself for now.

"Then get out of my sight and go figure it out," screeched Edward.

The man, whose face was as flushed as Edward's was, turned and left.

"Luc," said Edward. "I had nothing to do with this."

"Obviously," Luc replied, "you either have a security breach or you're lying to me." Luc turned his head and looked directly at William. "Or William has something he wants to share."

"Me?" cried William as he shot from his chair.

Luc arched a brow.

"My son had nothing to do with this," said Edward. "Neither of us did."

"Why would we want to kill your little wh—guest," said William. "Your party was the first time we'd met her."

Luc stood and approached William, leaned into him, and sniffed. Oh, he could smell them from his seat, but he wanted to show he didn't trust them by making sure they were telling the truth. Then he turned and sniffed Edward. Damn. "I believe you," Luc said. "But did you know of her before a couple of days ago?"

"No," they said in unison.

Luc sniffed again. "I believe you."

"I demand an apology," William said. "You can't treat us like common criminals."

Luc's brows shot up. "You bring an assassin into my home, putting all the council members at risk, and you demand an apology from *me*?"

"Luc, you're right, of course." Edward pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his brow. "I will personally oversee this situation."

Embarrassment, then anger, flared in William, and Luc's nose twitched. William was responsible for the security detail, and his father had just announced to everyone that William wasn't capable of that responsibility. But that was their problem to work out.

Luc returned to his seat, sure that he'd gotten the truth from them.

"How many people are on your security detail?" Edward asked Luc.

"Sixty or so," replied Luc. "And you?"

"About the same. So you understand if we don't know all the people we employ."

"No, Edward. I don't understand."

William sat down and glared at Luc. "You're telling me that you know all the people you employ?"

Luc leaned forward on his elbows. "Yes, that's exactly what I'm telling you. I interview every person we hire. Do you?"

"No," William said. "We can't possibly know all the people who work for us."

"Not only do I interview everyone before they are hired, I personally get to know them."

"Why would you want to do that?" Edward asked. Several other council members murmured their agreement with Edward.

"Because I make it my business to know everyone we employ, not only their names, but also what they like or dislike, where they've worked before, whether they have any family. They're employees, not servants."

And that was the problem with some of the council members, the area that had been rubbing him raw lately. They considered themselves royalty instead of leaders. And *that* was what all the uproar was about the upcoming vote. One house was going to declare an heir who wasn't blood related. Luc's head hurt just thinking about the debates that would start in a couple of days. His people had researched the archives, and this particular situation had never been encountered before. That meant this vote would set a precedent for future generations.

It was very rare for a male werewolf not to have offspring; after all, they did love to fuck. Kind of reminded Luc of his own situation. He had no heirs. He'd always figured if he died, it would be someone else's problem. Why would he give a shit after he was dead?

Luc's gut told him that the attempts on his life were because of this upcoming vote, but he'd be damned if he knew why. Unless someone wanted two houses to be in the *no-heir* situation. But it would have made more sense for the assassin to have killed him instead of Santana. He rubbed the back of his neck. The good thing about all this was that Santana couldn't get pregnant because she wasn't a werewolf, which meant he didn't have to worry about someone killing her because she carried his heir.

"I suggest we review the video of all the security teams and see if any other assassins are hiding among us. Lunch will be served in the main dining room at noon, and your afternoon will be free."

By the time lunch rolled around, Luc was contemplating shooting himself in the head. All the security teams were verified as legit, but the review was boring as hell. He excused himself and made haste to his bedroom, hoping Santana was there waiting for him. He hadn't left a guard today, even though his security team would track her movements if she left his room—for her safety, of course.

He opened his bedroom door and let out his breath when he found her sitting by the window, reading a gun magazine, which Luc decided wasn't the sort of material that she needed to be reading. Savage growled, and Luc growled back.

"Hey," she said. "Don't be trying to intimidate Savage."

"He's got to learn I'm not the enemy."

She looked up and smiled. "Who said you weren't the enemy?"

"You did when you screamed my name last night and this morning."

Her eyes narrowed as her cheeks flushed. "Well, I do have lapses in judgment every once in a while."

“Let’s sneak out of here for a few hours. The chopper’s waiting to fly us to Charlotte. We can swing by your house to pick up your things; then we’ll have dinner somewhere and be back here by nightfall.”

“Have you got time to run to Charlotte with all *your people* here?”

No, he should stay and play the host, but Santana needed some clothes, and he didn’t want her leaving without him. “They won’t miss me.”

She stood and grabbed his coat and slipped it on. His men hadn’t even thought about getting her coat when they picked up a few of her clothes, but they did have good taste. She was dressed in tight-fitting jeans and a snug top that accentuated her assets.

“I know of one person who will miss you,” Santana said as she stepped past him.

His smile faded a tad. Yeah, he could only hope Gabriella would behave until she left with her father. But he didn’t want to think about Gabriella. Santana was the only one he thought about, all day and all night.

He needed to figure out how to introduce her to his playroom.

Chapter Sixteen

"You have information for me?"

"Yes. There's been a death here."

"Oh really? Who?" He felt his heart pick up as anticipation hummed within. Could Joe have been successful? And why wasn't Joe calling to gloat?

"The man who attacked Miss Jones," replied his lowly informant. Cooks, maids, and gardeners made great informants because no one ever noticed them.

His stomach went into a free fall. "Damn." He should have known Joe would fuck things up and get himself killed. The only good thing was that he didn't have to eliminate him; Joe had managed to do that himself.

"Sir?"

He blinked, pulling himself back to the present mess.

"Yes?"

"You wanted to know if Miss Jones left. Well, she and Mr. Delemere are going to her house to pick up some of her clothes."

"Thank you. That is most interesting. I'll make sure to compensate you."

He flipped his phone shut, tossed it on the desk, and steepled his fingers to think. So Luc was venturing out of his fortress, for what? A piece of ass? He spat. And a human at that. That was so like Luc—to protect the innocent humans when really, the humans should be serving the superior race. Several of the council members were in agreement, but Luc and a few others were against their logic. Luc was a problem, and he didn't like problems.

He picked up his cell, punched in a number, and waited for his call to be picked up. "Targets just left for Charlotte. Eliminate one *and* two." Luc wasn't the priority, but if the opportunity arose...

He flipped the phone closed and smiled, extremely pleased with himself that he'd hired two more assassins, one of them to specifically eliminate Luc here at the estate, if possible. The other he'd had stationed in Charlotte, just in case the human bitch went home. And it looked like she was going home with Luc sniffing behind her. Maybe he could accomplish both objectives today.

* * *

This was Santana's first ride in a helicopter, and she loved it. It was like the ultimate freedom. They landed at Charlotte Douglas Airport, then piled into three

rented black SUVs: two SUVs for Luc's security team and one SUV for her and Luc. She was elated when Luc pulled into her driveway. Even Savage barked. Luc wanted to leave Savage behind, but Santana had challenged him to give her a good reason to do that. When he couldn't come up with one, he'd relented.

She loved her little rental house. It was small but had that cottage feel. One day she'd have a house of her own, but right now, it was good to be home, even for an hour. Luc put the SUV in park and waited.

She glanced at him. "What are we waiting for?"

"My men to check the place out."

Men were piling out of the lead SUV. At least Luc's men were dressed in khaki slacks and nice polo shirts instead of cargo pants and Kevlar. But she knew they were armed to the teeth under their jackets. Next door Santana saw the front curtains move at Ms. Nosybody's and wondered if the blue-haired lady was taking notes. She tolerated Mrs. Harrelson, barely, only because the woman was in her seventies and apparently had nothing to do all day or night but watch the neighbors. Mrs. Harrelson had mentioned many times that it was improper for Santana to come home after two a.m. "*What would people think?*" Mrs. Harrelson had said.

If Mrs. Harrelson only knew.

The men disappeared into her house. Minutes later, Adolf emerged with a scowl on his face. Luc let the window down.

"I'm sorry, Miss Jones, but your place has been trashed."

"What?" Santana opened the door and leaped out. Savage jumped over the seat and got out with her. By the time she reached the door, Luc was right behind her. She stepped into her house, and her heart dropped to the bottom of her stomach.

She placed her hands on her cheeks, the sight before her overloading her brain. "Oh no," she cried. "Look at my house!"

Santana told Savage to stay and stepped over a vase shattered into a million pieces. Her antique bookcase had been overturned, the couch shredded. Her music CDs were out of their cases, dumped on the floor like so much trash. She walked through every room downstairs. There was nothing left whole, nothing untouched.

She spun at Luc. "Did your men do this?"

Luc held up his hands in surrender. "No, it was your assassin."

"How do you know that?"

"I smell him."

Oh yes, the were-nose. "When were your men here? Before or after the shooting at the club?"

"They came straight here after the shooting to get your things. Everything was in order," Luc said.

"So the assassin did this after he shot at me and after your men were here. If it was him who did the shooting."

"It was him," replied Luc and Adolf together.

Santana gave them both a look. "How do you...?"

Luc tapped his nose.

Damn wolf nose was a handy thing to have.

"Get what you can salvage, and we'll stop by some stores and get the rest."

A flicker of fear passed through her. "Oh shit." She turned and headed for the stairs, trying to avoid the minefieldlike devastation, Luc following fast on her heels. She raced up the stairs as fast as she could and went straight to her bedroom. The door was ajar, giving her a view of her shredded mattress. She moved to her closet. Her weapons had been thrown haphazardly on the floor. "He didn't take any of my weapons. I've got great weapons."

Luc picked up an assault rifle. "You do have great weapons, but he's obviously not interested in them. Do you know what he's looking for?"

"No," she said as she picked up a Ka-bar knife off the floor and moved toward the bed. She stepped inside the bed frame, since the box springs and mattress were already upended, and used her knife to cut the carpet.

"What are you doing?"

"I have a strong box that apparently he didn't find."

She sliced through the carpet like butter and peeled back the edge. Luc placed his boot on the edge to keep it out of her way. She used the knife to pry up a piece of wood, then removed the wood to reveal the recessed box. After entering a code into the keypad and pressing her thumb against the biometric pad, the door sprang free. She pulled it open, and Luc held it for her. She smiled as she removed a file folder and a velvet pouch.

"What's that?"

She held the file folder up so he could see. "This has my birth certificate, weapon serial numbers, and pictures, other personal papers, and this"—she held the purple velvet pouch out in her hand—"is the only thing my mother ever gave me."

She handed Luc the file folder, untied the pouch, and dumped the pendant into her hand. She turned the pendant over. It was round, the size of a silver dollar, and covered in diamonds. "The appraiser said these diamonds were real."

Luc picked it up and looked closer. "It's spectacular."

"And if you press this button, it opens." She pointed to the button on the side, and Luc pressed it. The lid sprang open. She tapped the picture on the right. "That's my mother."

"She's beautiful," said Luc.

She smiled. "Yes. Yes, she was. Apparently I look like my missing dad." Santana knew she and her mother were like night and day. Her mother had had dark hair and dark sultry eyes, while Santana had blonde hair and blue eyes.

Santana tapped the picture on the left. "And this is me right after I was born."

"You look spoiled."

She made a face. "You can't tell that from the picture." She was anything but spoiled. She and her mom had had nothing but a rat-infested apartment with crappy neighbors.

"It's heavy," Luc said as he tested the weight.

"Mom always said this was my ticket to being a princess."

Luc frowned. "What does that mean?"

Santana laughed. "I suppose it means I can sell it and live like a princess for a month or two."

"Are you sure it's not a family heirloom?"

"It is for me."

"I mean maybe it belonged to your great-great-grandmother who was royalty."

"Well, if so, Mom never told me about anybody." Her mother, God rest her soul, had been talking out of her head most of the time, especially near the end, and Santana had basically ignored her, marking it down to a woman touched in the head. The only person her mother had ever mentioned was *him* when she referred to Santana's father, and her mother only mentioned *him* when the bottle was dry.

"Where did you keep this after your mother died?"

She grinned because she was so pleased with herself. "I hid it in abandoned buildings all over Charlotte. One time I got it out just before the big ole wrecking ball crashed into the very room I'd stashed it in. Have you ever seen a wrecking ball up close and personal? The thing is *huge*. Anyway, after that I kept a better eye out for any activity at the building where it was hidden."

She knew she was very fortunate that the pendant had still been where she'd left it before her captivity by the master. It wasn't easy finding good hiding places.

"I have a safe in the house that you can put your stuff in," Luc offered.

She barely glanced at him.

"What? You don't trust me?"

"I trust you," she said as she took the pendant back from him, but she didn't want to stash it in a safe and not be able to get to it when she had to slip away. "And don't forget about my twenty grand that you owe me. After all, I did win."

"Yes, you won, but you don't play fair."

She stepped into him and snaked her arms around his back. "Nope. Never have. I like to win too much."

He hugged her hard. She stood among her broken things and clung to Luc, reveling in his strength, his warmth.

"Do you want me to call the cops?" Luc asked, breaking into her pity party.

Cops? The logical part of her brain hadn't even thought of that. "I think I have to file a police report before my renter's insurance will pay."

"Or you could let me handle it."

What did she look like, a charity case? "Why? Why would you want to do that?"

"Easy. I just thought you may want to get out of here sooner and go eat. The cops aren't going to catch the guy because he's dead."

A jolt spun though her at the word *dead*. *And she had killed him*.

"They'll take forever to file a report, and if you file a claim, your insurance is going to go up."

Her mind hurt with the truth of his statements. The cops couldn't solve this break-in because it was already solved, and the insurance money didn't seem worth it at this precise point in time. Next week, she was sure, she'd feel different. "Just leave it; I'll clean it up later." She placed the pendant back inside the pouch and handed it to Luc. She sifted through her clothes that were scattered like confetti on the floor, knowing full well that if she found anything worth scavenging, she'd have to wash it before she wore it.

Suddenly she couldn't wait to get out of there. Her peaceful home had been violated, turned into a constant reminder of a werewolf assassin. And the hell of it was, she still didn't know *why*.

* * *

An hour later, the afternoon weather was pleasant enough that he and Santana sat at a little café that she'd recommended as her favorite. Luc didn't care where they ate; he just wanted a beer. And it didn't bother him a bit that his men had run off any customers who wanted to share the fresh air. Santana had agreed to let Savage stay in the SUV, but she promised to bring him a burger. Come to think of it, they should have let Savage sit with them. Savage could have helped run the customers off. He doubted many customers would want to lunch with a wolf.

Santana's sorrow at seeing her house despoiled was like a knife to his heart, and he was having a hard time containing his anger. Luc wanted to snatch her up, wrap her in Bubble Wrap, and dare anyone to even look at her the wrong way. But she wasn't that type. She had a thing for living.

They ordered beer and burgers, and it pleased him that she was a down-to-earth girl who drank beer instead of wine and ate a burger instead of a salad. She didn't put on airs. She was wholesome, pure. Luc had almost forgotten what that was like. His mother had been like that; she was herself and didn't apologize to anyone for it.

"Tell me about your mother."

"My mother's name was Kristine Marie Sinclair. We had no family, very few friends."

"Why did she put Santana X. Jones on the birth certificate instead of Sinclair?" Luc's men had discovered her middle initial during their investigation, but they couldn't find out what it meant.

"She said my father wouldn't remember her, but he would definitely know me."

"Know, not remember?"

The way she rolled her lower lip between her teeth was sexy as hell.

"Yeah, she said *know*, but my mother wasn't a stable person. She was depressed most of the time, crying for hours on end. It was almost like she was physically hurting."

"So is Jones his last name?"

"I asked her that one time. She just shook her head and then cried softly. I never asked again."

"What does the X stand for?"

"Nothing. My middle name is X."

Luc had to agree with Santana; her mother was insane. What mother named their daughter an initial, unless it was a clue to the father's name? But why not just name your daughter the father's name? *Unless you were trying to protect your daughter*. And where did the pendant fit into this?

"What did your mother say about the pendant?"

"The only thing she ever said about it was that it would make me a princess, but I don't know how it will make me a princess. I'm sure it was just her delusional self or the straight-up whiskey talking."

"So your mother died when you were young."

She nodded and took a deep breath. "I was ten when she died. I came home from school, found her in the bed. So I packed my meager belongings, called the cops, and left."

"Why didn't you let social services put you in foster care? That had to be better than living on the streets."

The concern in his voice touched her. She shrugged and finished the last bite of her burger before answering. "I had a friend who was in foster care. She'd been with three families in two years. None of the families wanted her, they just wanted the money. Don't get me wrong. Now I know that some foster families do want to help the children, but I was ten, and my friend Susie was miserable in foster care. She kept her clothes stashed in a garbage bag so that she'd be ready to leave at the drop of a hat. I didn't want that life, so I left."

"And were the streets any better?"

"It wasn't when I was ten, but now I'm thankful that I grew up on the streets. You either learn a lot of skills on the streets, or you don't make it."

"But something happened, something made you not trust anyone."

Damn, why was he so perceptive? "Yes, but I think that's enough info about me for today. Tell me about your parents..."

The deadened *thunk* was followed by the sound of a rifle echoing within the tall buildings in downtown Charlotte. Luc's face registered surprise, and her eyes settled on the bright red stain that grew on his chest beneath the jagged hole in his shirt. Her brain stopped, frozen in the moment where life and death seemed

separated only by a sliver of time, a half breath. She couldn't hear anything but the blood rushing in her ears.

Muffled shouts penetrated the fuzzy cotton that seemed to have wrapped around her as Luc pushed her to the ground. Instantly another ping hit the wall behind where she'd been sitting. She closed her eyes and forced herself to breathe quick breaths to flood her system with oxygen. When she opened her eyes, she could see the mayhem, hear the shouts, feel the fear.

"Luc. Oh my God," she said, unaware of the tears spilling down her face.

"Bring the SUVs around," Adolf shouted into his comm.

"SUVs? You need to call EMS" Luc was on his back. Santana pressed her hand on the wound and looked at Luc. His eyes held hers, and she managed a weak smile, her lower lip quivering.

She fought the flashback. Michael. Lying in the dirty cell. A dirty blanket to keep him warm. A knife protruding from his gut. A knife that Michael had shoved into his own belly. Because he couldn't take the abuse anymore. He hadn't made the choice to live.

"I love you, Santana."

"I love you too, Michael. Hang on, let me get some help."

"No, I don't want any help. I'm going to that better place that you always told me about."

"You can go to that place later, but not now. I need you, Michael."

"I won't let him hurt me anymore. I'm not as strong as you."

Which was the one thing that she hadn't done...protect Michael.

Luc's eyes closed, and a fist wrapped around her heart. "No, Luc, stay with me."

She was forcefully pulled away from Luc as tires screeched on the pavement. She stumbled as Adolf hauled her backward into the backseat. Several men picked up Luc and rushed him into the back cargo area of the SUV. The vehicle lurched forward before the doors were even closed.

Savage growled at all the commotion. She ordered him to sit on the floor and told him to hush. Then she twisted around and leaned over the backseat. "Do you know where the hospital is?" she asked.

"We're not going to the hospital," said Adolf. His voice was too calm for her.

"What?"

"Just watch."

"What? Are you insane?" She hauled her arm back and punched Adolf in the arm.

Adolf tilted his head toward Luc. "Watch."

She turned her gaze to Luc and wondered what she could do to get him to a hospital. If she wrecked the car, that might do more harm than good. Luc was going

to die, and she couldn't let that happen. She punched Adolf again with her right hand and used her left hand to slip his pistol from the holster. She pulled the hammer back and pointed the gun at Adolf's head. "Get him to the hospital, or I'm going to blow your brains all over this fucking vehicle."

The other team members pulled their weapons and pointed them at her, but she didn't give a damn. Adolf growled, his eyes becoming slits. But another growl, one much louder, came from the back. Her eyes darted back to Luc. He smiled at her. Then he shifted. She'd seen it before, but the transformation process still amazed her.

Adolf cleared his throat. "He's shifting so he can heal himself."

Her gaze zipped from Adolf to Luc and back. "You're shitting me."

Adolf shook his head. "It's one of the benefits of being a werewolf. And trust me; it seems to be in high demand for our kind, especially lately."

She studied Luc. His wolf's eyes were closed, his body rising and falling with each breath. "Are you sure he's going to be all right?"

"Positive."

It was so very hard to believe in any of this. Assassins, werewolves, shifting to heal. Adolf extended his hand to her, palm out. She cut her eyes at him just for good measure before she reluctantly handed the weapon back to him. "Sorry," she said, even though she wasn't. And she made a mental note not to ever be without a weapon of her own again.

She dismissed Adolf and leaned over the backseat. Luc's fur was sticky with blood, but it looked like the flow had stopped. Her eyes swept over him, looking for any sign that he might be in trouble. After all, you could kill a werewolf if you impaled him with a fire poker. Something on his fur caught the sunlight. She leaned closer, narrowing her eyes at the object.

"Is that what I think it is?" she asked of nobody in particular.

"His wolf is pushing the bullet out," replied Adolf.

Her brain ached just processing what her eyes were seeing. And it dawned on her that a werewolf in a hospital wasn't a good thing, because there were bound to be anomalies in their blood, organs, and other medical stuff that she didn't know about. The bullet, ragged at the tip, fell to the carpet with a soft *plunk*.

A team member picked up the bullet and slid it into a plastic bag.

"You got your own forensics back at the estate?" she asked, her eyes wide.

"No," said Adolf. "We send it out."

"With no questions asked?"

Adolf nodded. "It just so happens that one of us works in a forensic lab, and she helps us out on the side."

"Figures," she said. She pictured the werewolf society as a small underground community with lots of resources. But then, money could buy almost anything, and from what she'd seen last night, money wasn't a problem.

"Are we driving or flying back?" she asked Adolf.

"Flying."

"Hmmm. How about we do a rope-a-dope." She lifted her brows and waited.

Adolf frowned. "Which is?"

"Pull the chopper into a hanger, pull the vehicles into the hanger, get several delivery vans in the hanger, and shut the hanger door. Then either put Luc on the chopper or leave him in here or on one of the other vans. Then we all leave. That way, no one knows if he's in the chopper or one of the vehicles."

Adolf cocked his head to the side and studied her. She could almost see his mind trying to find a flaw with the plan. Or maybe he was trying to figure her out. Frankly she didn't give a shit one way or the other.

"Listen, I grew up on the streets, and the only way I survived was to be unpredictable. Make them guess. We'll all be safer that way."

"It's a good plan," Adolf finally said. "How would you get home tonight, if it were left up to you?"

"Not by chopper."

"I agree. Have you ever been in the military? Your tactical planning skills are exceptional."

Santana was surprised at a compliment coming from Adolf and felt it took a lot for him to say it. "No, much worse. I stole food to eat. I slept in abandoned buildings every day, not at night. I stole clothes and shoes to wear, blankets to stay warm. I also stole for people who didn't possess my skills, but I never stole more than I needed, and I only stole from people who could afford it. But the hardest thing I had to do was to stay out of the reach of vermin that came out at night. You either got good at evading them, or you didn't live to tell about it...especially if you were a girl. Be unpredictable, and trust no one."

Adolf nodded and then pulled out his cell to make the arrangements. She'd said too much, given too much of her life story away. Hell, she'd even made the uptight Adolf care.

Chapter Seventeen

By the time Big Bob's Septic Tank Cleaning Service van, stolen of course, pulled into the estate, Luc had shifted back and walked, just as naked as you please, through the house to his bedroom. He was resting peacefully now, but Santana was on edge. Her mind replayed the scene at the café, trying to figure out if that second shot had her name etched on it or if it was just another attempt at Luc. If they wanted her dead, wouldn't they have shot her first, knowing full well she couldn't shift to heal? That was assuming the new assassin was a werewolf and was privileged to such information.

She didn't like caring for Luc. It reminded her of how fragile life really was. She was sure she couldn't take losing Luc. The last person she'd cared about had been Michael, and when Michael died, she'd promised never to get too close to anybody ever again because they would die just like her mother and Michael. Santana looked at Savage as fear gripped her heart. God, if something happened to Savage, she wouldn't survive. A sinking feeling gripped her. And she wouldn't survive if something happened to Luc either. She hated this feeling. It was a cross between utter helplessness and fear. She hadn't known fear in a long time.

Her gaze rested on the light pink indentation near Luc's heart where the bullet had struck him. A half inch to the right and Luc would be dead, that much she knew from jabbing a poker into her assassin's heart. Luc's wound was healing nicely, which was a werewolf miracle as far as she was concerned. She skimmed her finger over his wound and found herself flat on her back with a very awake Luc pressing his hard, lean body along hers.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey back."

Her arms were pinned to her sides. "Is there a reason you're acting like a caveman?"

"Yes. Your scent is driving me crazy." His teeth nipped her lower lip, and she smiled into his mouth. He took the opportunity to plunge his tongue in. She kissed him back, needing to reassure herself that he was fine.

"And you touched me, but I want to wait."

That's not what she wanted.

"I'm going to take a shower and rinse the grime off, and then I want to have my way with you."

"That'll work," she said. His erection was hard and growing harder by the second against her pants, and suddenly she wished she were naked.

"I want you to surrender yourself to me. Let me be in charge of your pleasure. I promise not to hurt you. All you have to do is say stop."

Fear eased along her spine. She didn't like the sound of this. It was suspiciously too familiar.

"I can smell your fear," he said. "But you have nothing to fear from me."

On some primitive level, she knew that, but her gut tightened anyway. One didn't throw away instincts that were burned into one's brain.

"Tell me," he said.

If she told him, would he think less of her? Would being a stripper and an unwilling sex slave be a burden no man could deal with?

Perhaps now was the time to find out. She took a big breath to calm herself.

"At age sixteen, I met this very handsome man who promised to take me off the streets and treat me like a queen. And he was right. He did get me off the streets, but he and I had differing definitions for queen. I became his whore. He kept me locked in a dirty cell in his basement, and when he wanted to *play* with me, he'd take me out, make me bathe, and we'd go to his playroom." She quoted *playroom* with her fingers. "His favorite thing was chaining me to a spanking bench, a spider gag in my mouth, and then he and his buddies would beat me and fuck me. There was never any pleasure for me. He and his friends liked inflicting pain on people who didn't like pain."

"There were others?"

She nodded absently. Her captor was more about creating fear and humiliation with a beating thrown in just for good measure. For days, she'd be raw in lots of places. She was always blindfolded when his friends came to the party. Which was a good thing because if she knew who they were, they'd be dead.

Her captor never once tried to pleasure her, which was fine, because her hate for him was what finally propelled her to kill him—her hate and Michael's death. Santana still didn't know how Michael got the knife, since he'd been a shell of a little boy when he took his own life, but she couldn't let Michael's suicide go without retribution.

"Willie reminds me of Michael, who was a little boy held captive with me. But Michael didn't feel the hate that I felt. Maybe he was too young. I don't know. I used to hear Michael crying softly and could only imagine what they did to him. Anyway, somehow Michael got hold of a knife and killed himself. I couldn't...didn't save Michael."

"I'm sorry," Luc said, his voice low with concern.

"Don't be," she replied. "I killed the bastard with the same knife that Michael had used on himself. So you see, Michael not only freed himself, he freed me."

"I'm glad you killed him, and at the same time, I'm not."

“Why is that?”

“Because I wanted that pleasure for myself.”

“I don’t need you to fight my wars.”

“I know, but I can’t help that I feel that way.”

No, sometimes it was very hard to fight one’s feelings. Like now. Luc’s face was washed with concern and a touch of pity. Pity was the last thing she wanted. Shit happened, and she’d gotten over it. She just wasn’t sure that her mind would allow a total submission to Luc. Who knew how she’d react if Luc had the same instruments of torture?

He kissed her and then nipped her breast. A jolt of pleasure shot through her. Her captor had bitten her, but that was pure degrading pain. Luc’s bite was different. His only inflicted erotic pleasure.

“The Dom/sub lifestyle is about the dom taking care of his sub. I put your pleasure above my own. If you’re not enjoying it, then it needs to stop. It’s not about degrading anybody. It’s about trust. I don’t want to press you,” Luc said. “The choice is yours. If you want to totally submit to me, be dressed in one of your outfits. If not, just be naked in my bed. The choice is yours. Either way, I’ve got to have you tonight.”

He kissed her hard and then pushed off her. She watched his fine ass until it disappeared into the bathroom.

Trust. It was such a short word, but it wielded so much power. She really didn’t believe Luc would lock her up and throw away the key. But she had to face her fear that she didn’t know how she’d react. Would her going off the deep end push Luc away? Did she want to find out? After her mind fought with itself over the what-ifs, she decided it was best to know if she could get through it, to know if Luc was true to his word. That stop meant *stop*.

She rose from the bed and fetched her backpack. She knew exactly which outfit to wear. She donned the white, virginal bustier with matching thong and stockings. Even though she had probably experienced a lot of sex if you counted only her slavery, tonight she was unsure. Like a virgin.

* * *

Luc stared at his reflection in the mirror and prayed he wasn’t making a mistake. When he woke up and flipped her on her back, the only thing on his mind had been tying her up and having his way with her. He craved being totally responsible for her pleasure. He craved earning her trust. But the last thing he wanted was to frighten Santana. Heaven only knew the real horrors she’d experienced at the hands of that madman. Anyone who would use sex as a means to degrade someone needed killing. And he had no doubt that his mate had done that. Luc shook his head. She was something. She inspired such awe in him.

Taking one last deep breath, Luc opened the bathroom door and found her sitting obediently on the edge of the bed, dressed in white. He was pleased that her

bustier left the creamy skin of her ample breasts open to him, that silk stockings encased her long legs. His wolf howled within, demanding he claim her as his mate tonight. But Luc couldn't do that. Yeah, he was dancing around the issue of how much she meant to him, but that wasn't the same as declaring her his true-mate.

Tonight, he and his wolf would have to settle for her trust and nothing more.

Luc took Santana's hand and led her to his playroom. He opened the door and stepped back to let her go first. "You can change your mind at any time," he reassured her.

She entered the room gingerly, but he saw her gaze fly to the black leather table with the ankle and wrist cuffs. He noted that her fear spiked. She approached the table hesitantly and then trailed a finger across it before stopping in front of his whip and flogger collection. From across the room, his nose flared as he caught a whiff of her fear spiking again. She continued her perusal. There was still a spanking bench, bondage cross, and bed to be seen.

She finally turned to him. "Any rules?"

"Only two. Stop means stop, and you have to beg me to fuck you."

Her eyes twinkled as a small smile touched her lips. "Okay. Where do you want me?"

He expelled the breath he'd been holding. He still wasn't sure this was a good idea. Her fear clawed at his beast. She had determination in her eyes, though, and he wondered how much of her bravery was for her personal benefit, not his. He decided to stay away from the items that had caused her the most fear.

"Okay. Stand over there," he said, pointing to the corner of the room that had chains anchored to the wall. She didn't hesitate to follow his orders. He opened the nearby cabinet and handed her a leather strip. "Tie this around my balls."

She arched a beautiful brow. "Why?"

Normally he wouldn't allow his sub to question him, but this was uncharted territory. She wasn't a sub, even though a domlike bastard had abused her, leaving scars on her soul. "Tie it tight. I don't want to come too soon. This will keep me in check. Make me wait."

She took the leather from his hand and grabbed his balls. She rolled them between her fingers.

"I didn't say you could pleasure me."

He saw a little smile on her lips, and he could barely remember who was in control. She wrapped the leather around his balls and pulled it tight. The pain cleared his mind.

"Now place your feet near the cuffs on the floor."

She did, and this time he didn't smell any fear. His beast relaxed a bit. Luc snapped the leather cuffs on her ankles; then he cuffed both of her wrists to the two chains attached to the walls. He turned a wheel to tighten up the slack on her arms.

Her face was relaxed, telling him she trusted him...so far. Her gaze roamed from his face to his cock.

He fisted his cock. "You like my cock?" he asked. His hand felt good, but his wolf wanted her pleasing him. Her hands, her mouth, her pussy.

She nodded. He started to correct her and have her address him as Master, but his gut told him that would be a mistake. In fact, she might never be able to address him as Master, and hell, he couldn't blame her. Maybe Sir, but it would take some time before they got there.

Instead he dropped to his knees in front of her, the cold floor biting into his flesh. He needed that. He needed grounding to control his passion. His gaze roamed over her. She was so damn beautiful, and the fact that she was his took his breath away. Her gaze held his, telling him that she trusted him...for now.

Santana took a much needed deep breath and pulled against her bindings. These felt different. They were leather, not cold, hard steel. They were meant to caress, to pleasure, not to dehumanize, degrade, and instill fear. She knew he studied her, watched for any sign to end their play, so she nodded at him, affirming that so far, she was fine.

She watched his head dip as he kissed her on the hip, his soft hair teasing her belly. Her womb quivered. His breath fanned her skin as he traveled to her other hip and kissed it too. His tongue snaked out and traced the fine line of her thong, and gooseflesh followed.

"I like your thong," he said. "But it's covering the treasure I seek." He grabbed the front of the silky thong with his teeth and pulled it away from her body. The string tugged between her cheeks right before it snapped.

Luc let the flimsy thing drop. "Sorry," he said. "I'll buy you a hundred more."

Sorry? She knew that was a lie. He wasn't sorry, not one damn bit...and neither was she. His gaze held hers as he leaned forward again. She inhaled and tilted her hips ever so slightly. He rewarded her with a slow swipe up her folds and across her clit. Her head dropped back as pure pleasure sizzled through her. She loved his tongue. Pulling against her cuffs, she wanted to hold his head right where it was, but she couldn't, and perhaps that was part of this game. He laughed, and she wondered if he could read minds too.

Another lick of his tongue brought forth a moan from her, and she tilted her hips as far forward as possible. She needed more, and he knew that, damn it. His tongue plunged past her warm folds, and she wiggled against him, cursing the restraints for a different reason than she had before. She needed to get closer. His tongue darted in and out of her channel and then back to attack her clit.

He pulled away from her and stood up. She opened her mouth to ask what he was doing. He put his fingers over her lips.

"Be quiet and trust me."

Oh, she trusted him all right. Trusted him to drive her insane with need. She felt the wetness of her pussy as her juices trickled down her leg. Only he could do this to her, make her burn for him. He moved to his little cabinet, and when he returned, she caught his dark eyes filled with lust.

He held up a clip. "I have clit and nipple clips. A little pain to enhance your pleasure."

Right now, she was game for anything. She watched him pinch her nipple and then clamp it. The pain shot a jolt straight to her pussy and scared her. Luc bent his head and sucked her other nipple into his mouth. He sucked hard before he nipped her. The other clamp quickly went on. The chain between the two clips teased her belly, adding weight to her nipples.

Luc bent and tongued her nipple, his hand traveling down her belly, stopping to tease her sensitive nub, the one place she wanted him to be. Just a little more would give her the release she craved.

Luc bent before her. "You're so fucking beautiful. I can see your wetness dripping just for me." His skillful hands traveled up the inside of her thighs. Her body trembled with delight. His dark head dipped toward her, drew the little bundle of nerves into his mouth, and sucked. Her head fell back, a moan escaping her lips. There was something erotic about being chained to a wall with no fear, only anticipation of the pleasure. She cried out in surprise when a clip clamped on her clit, shooting more erotic sensations through her pussy.

Luc released her ankles from the shackles and then hugged her close as he released her wrists. "Go to the bed and bend over it. Display that perfect ass for me."

She purposely twisted her butt as she moved to the bed, the swinging of the chains tugging on her flesh. Anticipation hummed through her as she spread her legs wide and leaned over the bed.

He came up behind her, kissed one round globe, and palmed the other one. She loved his caress. She loved his kiss. A slap landed on the cheek of her ass, causing her pussy to clench, adding to her arousal. His hand rubbed the sting as he kissed her hip with lips that were light as a feather. He was playing with her, drawing out her desire.

"Tell me what you want."

She didn't hesitate. "Oh, please fuck me."

Something pressed against her puckered flesh. A butt plug. It was cool and slick. She relaxed and pushed back against it. It easily slipped past the tight flesh, shooting pleasure-filled fire through her.

Then he was there, pressing the thick head of his cock against her pussy. With a growl, he slammed into her up to his balls. She cried out at being completely filled. He moved against her, hard and forceful, scraping sensitive tissues, sending her higher than ever before. The sound of flesh on flesh, the swing of chains tugging

on nipples, the pressure on her clit, the fullness in her ass, the pounding in her pussy—everything threatened her consciousness.

The vortex of pleasure/pain churned within her. She felt him lean on her back and lick the tender flesh of her neck, but when his teeth sank into the bite, she unraveled, screaming his name as too many sensations culminated in her pussy. He held her captive as his release spurted within her. It was powerful, forceful, mind-blowing for her, and something within her changed. A sense of belonging merged with her pleasure. The merging was silent, but the feeling was powerful.

Her legs gave way, and she collapsed on the bed, taking him with her. The way he licked her bite was sweet and caring, touching her deeply. She barely knew that he pulled from her, but when he rolled her over and removed the clips, she moaned as the blood rushed back to her sensitive places. She was satisfied, spent, and weak from the orgasm of a lifetime.

“Just remember,” he whispered. “You’re mine.”

He said something else, but she couldn’t catch it before she slipped into a deep sleep.

Chapter Eighteen

Luc sat at the head of the conference table and waited for everyone to be seated. He'd been here fifteen minutes and already wanted to slit his wrists. He'd come to the conclusion that he wasn't the leader type. Leadership reminded him of babysitting, which meant one needed patience, and hell, he didn't have an ounce of patience.

"Edward," said Luc. "Do you have anything to report concerning your security breach?"

"Yes," replied Edward. "But I defer to William."

All gazes shifted to William as he cleared his throat. "We hired a man who started working for us about a month ago. The assassin, Joe West, killed our new hire a couple of days before we came here. He used the new hire's ID to gain access to our estate."

Luc and the council waited, but apparently William was done providing information. "Do you have any idea if he was here only to kill Ms. Jones or if he had other intentions as well?" Luc asked, his gut roiling at the thought that Santana had been singled out.

"We've found no evidence that indicates any motivation or target."

The lack of information didn't surprise Luc. The puzzle was much more complicated than that. Someone wanted Santana dead, and Luc hadn't done a very good job of protecting her. Was his shooting tied to Santana, or was it a separate incident? Who the hell had the answers? He sure didn't.

"We heard about your incident in Charlotte," John said. "Do you think it's safe for you to be around Ms. Jones? Seems that trouble is following her."

Gabriella glared at Luc. "I agree. She's going to get you killed."

"Or"—Luc paused—"they were aiming for me."

"Don't be ridiculous," chided Gabriella. "Obviously someone in her unsavory past wants her dead and doesn't like you protecting her."

"That may be the case, Gabriella. But someone took a shot at me when I was in town a month ago. Alone."

Gabriella's eyes rounded as the other members murmured. "Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"And why do you think that happened?" asked John.

"I think it has to do with the next topic on the agenda. We'll still have to have this discussion again when Don Cantor gets here, but Edward wants our kind to come out of the closet. Edward." Luc nodded to Edward, giving him the floor. The other council members shifted in their seats. Luc hated having to discuss this topic twice, but Edward insisted it would help pass the time. Luc believed Edward wanted a practice run.

Edward stood and buttoned his silk and wool Armani jacket. "I personally am tired of taking a backseat to the humans. We are so much more intelligent than they are. We're better athletes, better warriors—overall, just a superior race. And I, for one, am tired of hiding. We should take our seat at the head of the humans, not beneath them. We've hidden for too many years, and it must stop."

"First of all," Luc interjected, "I don't think of myself as being beneath them, and I don't think winning the pass, kick, and punt contest is gonna make the humans accept us."

"But no one knows we even exist," said John. "We hide in our homes, afraid that someone will find out what we are."

Luc couldn't help but laugh. "So what do you plan on doing? Running a commercial and advertising our greatness?"

Edward glared at Luc. "No. I propose meeting with the president and letting him know what we're capable of."

"You're going to threaten the president of the United States?" someone asked.

"No. I didn't say that."

It was apparent to Luc that Edward hadn't thought through his plan. "What do you want from the president?"

"I don't want anything other than to be able to tell everyone who we are, to stop hiding."

"Don't you mean '*what* we are'?" Luc clarified. "And I think you're gonna get our were-asses killed. What do you think the humans are going to do, welcome us with open arms, knowing we can kill any one of them without breaking a sweat? We *are* the beasts of their nightmares."

"Well, the humans have to understand that if we wanted to harm them, we would have already done so," said William.

Luc leveled his stare at William. "We've had rogue werewolves killing humans before, and we've seen the panic when they thought the killing was done by wolves, not werewolves. Imagine the panic if the humans knew the killings were done by the beasts that we are and *not* by a wild animal wolf."

"Every society has its scum, and we're not any different than the humans in that regard," interjected John.

"So all you want," said Luc, "is recognition?"

"Yes," said William.

"That sounds like arrogance to me." *And a bunch of bullshit.* "What's going to happen when they want to capture and study us?"

"Then we'll just have to kick some ass," said William.

There was the audacity that Luc was expecting. How far would Edward and William go to "*kick some ass*"? Luc took the heels of his hands and pushed on his eyelids. "Our numbers are too small to take on the military."

"Who said anything about the military?" said Edward.

Luc leaned forward and placed his elbows on the table. "The military would be highly interested in cloning our abilities, and heaven forbid they find out that we can convert humans to werewolves. They'll turn us into a conversion factory. If you think we're not free now, you just wait until the world knows about us."

As the meeting went on, Luc knew that if he called for a vote now, it would be tied three to three. That left Don's vote being the swing vote, and Luc had no idea what Don thought. With the possibility of losing the vote, Luc needed to come up with options to save the packs that didn't buy into this harebrained idea. Knowing they were deadlocked, Luc decided to end the meeting. They'd just have to rehash everything tomorrow anyway, and he was sure it would be just as unpleasant as it was today.

* * *

Santana opened Luc's bedroom door and found three guards outside.

Jim's eyebrow quirked, and he gave her a smile. "Where would you like to go?"

"Savage has to go out. Then I need some lunch and then a walk," she replied, surprised they were going to actually let her walk out of the room. Perhaps Luc knew he couldn't keep her locked in if she didn't want to be in there, which spoke volumes, since she now knew werewolves did exist. Not that anyone would believe her. Hell, she could easily talk herself out of what she'd seen. And she could just as easily be locked up for having a hysterical tirade.

"There's a buffet set up outside on the patio."

"Great." She followed Jim down the hallway, the other two guards at her back. Savage kept up his constant growl, and Santana couldn't blame him. There'd only been her and Savage for several years. No one entered her dressing room at the club, and Santana had had no real friends. No girls to go shopping with or out to lunch. But that was fine because she'd had Savage.

Santana followed Jim through the patio and out to the edge of the property. After Savage sniffed every tree and handled his business, Jim escorted them back to the patio. Several ladies dressed as caterers attended the buffet line, and she wondered if these were the ones who brought their children for Willie to play with or if they were hired just for this shindig. Her belly rumbled at the smell of food. She filled her plate and sat with her back toward the wall. Savage sat beside her. As usual, Santana fed Savage under the table. She couldn't resist his pitiful face. Besides, he'd eat anything, even the stuff she didn't like.

Santana heart sank when Luc's *people* filed onto the patio. She'd known this spread wasn't for her, but she'd wanted to be finished and gone before they arrived. She cringed when William spotted her and came directly to her table. Savage growled. She told Savage to hush and put her foot on his back and rubbed him. William was smart. He sat across from her and eyed the wolf under the table.

"So that's your wolf I've heard so much chatter about," said William. "He won't bite, will he?"

"Only if I tell him too."

William let the tablecloth drop. "I didn't think you'd still be around."

"Oh. Why not?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe the fact that someone's trying to kill you. I mean, you were attacked in the house *and* in those woods." William hitched his head toward the wall.

"Well, don't forget the shooting at my work and the café in Charlotte."

"I thought they just shot at Luc?"

"I'm not sure that one of those bullets wasn't meant for me."

William got an interested look on his face. "Well, that does make it interesting. Why do you think someone wants you dead?"

"I have no idea."

"You know Gabriella thinks someone from your unsavory past is after you."

Santana grinned. "Impossible. I've killed everyone from my unsavory past." She saw his nostrils flair. "You can smell that I'm telling the truth."

"I do smell your truth, and I'm extremely interested in your story."

She just shrugged. She wasn't telling William shit. For all she knew, William was behind the attacks on her and Luc. She didn't trust William or anyone else of Luc's *people*.

"My offer still stands," he finally said.

She frowned. "What offer is that?"

"When Luc gets tired of you, I'll be standing in the wings waiting. I won't treat you like a sex object. In fact, I'd be honored if you'd accompany me when I leave in a few days."

"Who says I'm getting treated as a sex object?"

"Oh come on. We all know about Luc's fetishes. And with your background, I'm sure you fit his obsession just fine. But he tends to lose interest easily."

She blushed, remembering last night. It was true, she'd enjoyed all the things that Luc had done to her, so in that regard, she did fit Luc just fine. She couldn't wait until the next visit to the playroom. But was it all about sex between her and Luc? Her heart thumped at the thought. She didn't think so. Something had happened last night when he bit her. Her orgasm had been off the Richter scale, and somehow she'd changed on a primitive level. She just couldn't put her finger on

it. It was something wild and untamed. Whatever it was, she knew she was never going to be the same again.

"I'm not sure if I fit his *obsession* or not. I'll have to ask him," she said through a cheesy grin.

She thought William paled a little. Served him right, indicating she was a throwaway sex object. That wasn't what she had felt like last night.

"Well," said William as he stood. "I'd better go get in line before all the lobster gets taken."

She watched William retreat; then Gabriella came into view and made a beeline for Santana's table. Maybe she should put up ropes and a WAIT HERE sign, keep everything orderly and give everyone their turn.

Gabriella plopped down, and Santana noticed that Gabriella's expensive pantsuit was accented with gobs of jewelry. Gabriella was a walking jewelry store. Santana felt a twinge of jealousy. What would it be like to never wonder where your next meal was coming from or where you were going to sleep?

"I thought you said you were leaving," Gabriella asked point-blank.

"I was, but that was before I was attacked by...one of your kind."

"That doesn't change anything. I want you and that mutt gone."

"Or?" asked Santana, hoping Gabriella was stupid enough to threaten her, because Santana's ire was rising.

"Somebody's already trying to kill you. You're putting Luc at risk, and he's too smitten to realize you're a danger to him."

"I agree that Luc's in danger, but the first shot was at Luc, not me."

"Perhaps Luc or you moved at the last moment, and Luc was shot instead of you."

"Or the shooter was an amateur," Santana offered. "Or he couldn't tell the difference between a male and a female. Or he was dyslexic." Santana was sure that Luc was the first target. She just didn't know about the second target.

"You're going to get Luc killed," Gabriella reiterated. "And if that happens, don't think you won't be held responsible."

Santana wanted to roll her eyes, but Gabriella's words niggled at her a little bit. She'd never intentionally put Luc—or anyone else for that matter—in danger, and the fact that Gabriella and the rest of these yahoos thought so only confirmed that they didn't like her.

Gabriella's father, John, sat down between Gabriella and Santana, and Savage did growl then.

"Gabriella, would you please go in the house and fetch your father his favorite glass of wine."

They both watched Gabriella stand and leave the table.

"Instead of sending her all the way into the house, you could have just told her you wanted to speak with me in private."

He smiled at her, and his eyes crinkled at the corners. "But that would have been too obvious, and I still wouldn't have my favorite wine."

"Too obvious to whom?"

John laughed. "You've got balls; I'll give you that."

"Why, thank you. You're so sweet to point that out."

"Our...women are more... What's the word? Reserved than—" John lifted his hands as he tried to find the word.

"Human women," supplied Santana. "And you like that?" Santana definitely didn't see Gabriella as reserved.

"I'm from the old school."

"Let me guess," she said. "Women were put here to serve you."

"No, I never said that. I'm just used to more obedience."

"Times have changed."

"Not always for the best."

She shrugged. "Depends on who you ask. You want to keep us women stuck in the kitchen with a baby on each hip?"

"No, no. Not at all."

"Then what exactly do you want?"

"Men are stronger than women for a reason."

"You got that right. Men are big and strong so they can haul that heavy trash can to the road, mow the lawn, and lift heavy furniture." Santana grinned. "And don't forget you can do the laundry, cook the meals, wash the dishes, *and* feed the dog."

"Well, according to you, there's nothing that we can't do, except the obvious, of course."

"What?" she asked. "Your male werewolves don't birth the babies too? I'm in shock."

"I doubt seriously that anything shocks you."

"Only things like men who turn into werewolves and try to kill me—twice." She looked him over. "But you haven't answered my question. So why don't you describe to me your perfect female. What does she do all day?"

"She keeps the house, prepares the meals, takes care of the children, and arranges parties."

"I'm sorry, John, but I just can't see Gabriella settling for that."

"No, she wouldn't, but she won't have to because Luc will allow her to do whatever she wants to do, within reason, of course."

Ah, so it was finally out on the table. If John thought he could rattle her, he was mistaken. Santana knew Luc wouldn't settle for Gabriella, duty or not. It was all Luc could do to be civil to Gabriella. Before Santana could voice her mind, John stood.

"There's Gabriella with my wine. I'll leave you to enjoy this beautiful day."

"Hey," Santana said before he could leave. "Answer me one thing. Do you really want your daughter to marry a man she doesn't love?"

John smiled. "Duty always takes precedence over such a trivial thing as love. Luc will marry Gabriella. Where will that leave you?" John turned and walked off.

Out in the cold...again.

Santana leaned down, almost crawling under the table, and gave Savage a piece of her leftover lunch. "But I'll always have you, won't I, boy?" Savage's tail thumped the tile.

Santana sat back up and found William's dad, Edward, standing at her table. "If you're here to tell me that I'm nothing but a sex object, that I'm not welcome, or that Luc and Gabriella will marry, you're too late."

Edward gestured to the vacant chair. "May I?"

"Sure. It should still be warm."

Santana made up her mind that when Edward stood, so would she. She'd found that the lunchtime conversation was ruining her digestion.

Edward sat down and crossed his legs. "No, I'm not here to tell you any of those things. But the part about Gabriella and Luc is probably true."

Perhaps duty would win out over common sense, but would Luc do that after what they'd both shared last night?

"I just wanted to tell you that if you need anything, just let me know. I'll be more than happy to help."

"I apologize for my rudeness, but why would you want to help me?"

"I make it a habit to always help damsels in distress."

"Do I look like a damsel in distress to you?"

"Well, someone's trying to kill you, and Gabriella wants to claw your eyes out."

"Gabriella I can handle. And I could handle the second assassin if the spineless bastard would show his face."

"I hate to point it out, but we are stronger than humans. Not even you could beat one of us."

"I've already killed one of you. Are you talking about the second assassin being a werewolf?" Did Edward know something about the assassin?

That startled Edward. "Yes, you did kill one of us, but what you did is very rare. A brilliant stroke of fate and luck. And I was talking about Gabriella being a werewolf. She's stronger than a human man."

"Well, I guess that makes me superwoman."

“No, it makes you very lucky.”

“Yeah, well, we all need a little luck.” *I need some to escape this lunch.*

Edward patted her hand. “Let’s just hope that yours doesn’t run out, dear.”

Santana opened her mouth to ask if that was a threat, but Edward abruptly stood, smiled at her, and excused himself. She didn’t know of any reason why Edward would want her dead, but Gabriella and her dad were another matter altogether.

“Let’s go for a walk, Savage.” Santana needed to escape before anyone else plopped down and told her their thoughts on matters that didn’t concern them. Her belly was in a knot. She needed to think. Standing, she made her way through the throngs of people to the edge of the patio with Savage right behind her. She almost laughed at the way everyone reacted to Savage, like he was a wild animal or something. Wasn’t that what all these people were, humans mixed with wild animals? Talk about hypocrites.

Chapter Nineteen

Santana sat in front of Luc on his horse while Savage trotted along behind them. The night air was cool, crisp, and exhilarating, and the moon illuminated the nightscape beautifully. It was peaceful—a welcome respite from Luc's *people*.

"What are we doing out here?" she asked, not that she cared what they were doing; she just wanted to talk.

"I've neglected to exercise Storm in the past couple of days, and tonight's just right for a ride."

"No, it's lovely." *More than lovely, actually.*

"There's a clearing up ahead where I can turn Storm loose so he can run."

"Is that why we're riding bareback?" There was something to be said about feeling Storm's powerful muscles flexing beneath one's legs.

"Yes. All I'll have to do is remove his bridle and let him run. And Savage can run too."

"Oh, Savage will love that."

Luc wrapped his arm around her and pulled her against him. She snuggled close. It felt so right. She felt safe with Luc, safe on more than just a physical level.

"How's Willie?" she asked. "I've watched him playing with his friends in the side yard. He's a leader and a negotiator. I've seen him step in and protect the smaller children."

"Yes, he is a fine boy. I've assigned a permanent bodyguard to the children when they are outside."

"Trying to keep the mischief down?"

"That, and I realized we may not have found Willie in time if it wasn't for you. I want to prevent that from ever happening again."

"Yes, children will be children, and *bored* children are even worse."

"I'm sorry I haven't been able to spend more time with you, but the meetings will be over soon. All these people will finally leave, and then I can set my sights on spoiling you."

She could get used to Luc's spoiling, since he was so considerate of her needs in the bedroom. And she'd decided to stay awhile and see what happened between them. It was hard for her to admit, but she felt something for Luc, something deep, something that scared her. "Really? How do you plan on doing that?"

“Oh, I’ve been thinking about it all day. And once we get back to the house tonight, I’ll give you a taste. Tonight, you’ll be my sex slave, and you will pleasure me first with that mouth of yours, and then I’ll make you scream my name again when you come.”

A taste sounded promising. His words sent a thrill to her. “Promise?”

“Yep.”

The woods gave way to a clearing, and Luc halted Storm. He dismounted and then helped Santana down. Storm pranced like he was anxious to run and play. Luc removed the bridle, and Storm bolted.

“Wow,” said Santana. “Look at him go.” Storm was beautiful with the moonlight shimmering off his coat. She smiled to herself. He was experiencing true freedom.

Santana looked down at Savage. He was watching her with anticipation. She squatted beside him and cupped his head in her hands. “You can run, but don’t chase Storm, okay?”

She stood, and Savage bolted too.

“Well, I think we’ve made our kids happy,” said Luc.

Kids. What she wouldn’t give to be standing here now with her hand on her belly. Luc would be a great father, she was sure of it. He’d be strict, perhaps overprotective, but he’d be fair and loving. She was relatively happy at this point in time, standing out here in the cool night air, watching Storm and Savage run. Luc was her anchor.

“I heard you had a lot of company at lunch today,” Luc said, interrupting her thoughts.

She rolled her lips together and studied Luc, wondering how much she should tell him. Tattling felt so childish, and if Luc knew what had transpired at her table today, would it make a difference? “Yes, too much company, in fact.”

Luc grinned. “I’ll bet. Well, just for the record, I don’t consider you a sex object, and you are always welcome here.”

Santana hitched her brows and waited. Luc looked at Storm pawing at something in the ground.

“I didn’t realize wolf hearing was so good, especially since I didn’t see you around.”

He looked back at her. “It’s good but not that good.” He wagged his brows.

Her eyes rounded when realization struck. “You eavesdropped on your own people. That’s so...wrong.”

“Maybe, but if I was at their homes, they’d be doing the same thing to me.”

“Then that means they knew you were listening.”

“Probably.”

She didn't know what to think about that. If they all knew Luc was listening, were they trying to get her to incriminate herself? Damn, these people were so weird. Luc was ignoring her again, staring at the open field.

Santana took a deep breath and propped her hands on her hips. "Well, if you heard everything, I guess you know that you and Gabriella are *still* getting married. When do you plan on proposing to her, because I'd really like to be gone before that happens."

Luc turned to face her and gave her his killer smile. "Are you jealous?"

Her left eye twitched, and she started to tell him no but knew he'd know if she lied. "I do hate being at a disadvantage."

"How are you at a disadvantage, darling?"

"If I say 'no,' which would be the normal response, you'll know I'm lying."

He laughed. "So you are jealous?"

"Yes."

In a swift move, Luc cupped her face in his hands and kissed her long, hot, and heavy. His kiss made her weak in the knees, sent her belly quivering. She returned his kiss, their tongues dancing with each other. He reluctantly pulled back. "I promise I am not going to propose to or marry Gabriella."

"Well, maybe you should tell her that."

"I have told her, for years now, but she and John just don't understand. And I'm done trying to get my message across."

"And what about 'what's best for your people'?"

"If I did the right thing, I'd mate a true-blood like myself, but I'm not planning on doing the right thing. In the end, I'd only end up hating Gabriella and myself."

That was a bold statement from a man who seemed intent on doing the right thing. "So what are the repercussions of your decision?"

"It doesn't matter."

"But I want to know."

"I'll resign my position on the council and then spend the rest of my time getting to know you."

His words startled her. For her? She didn't want Luc to give up anything. That was wrong on so many levels. "It sounds like you are doing this for me."

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I'm doing it for me. Besides, Gabriella and her father won't want me if I'm not on the council. I won't have enough power for them."

Santana didn't know if she agreed with his answer, because she considered Luc a great catch, with or without the power that the council provided. "So if you don't marry a true-blood, that means you're children will be...what? Shunned?"

"No, it just means they can never sit on the council, that's all. Nothing else."

"Are you born to your position or elected?"

"Born."

"That's pretty archaic." She shouldn't be surprised. Hell, she knew the people she'd met thought they were privileged.

"I agree, but that's the way it's been for hundreds of years."

"Well, maybe you should lead a revolution and overthrow yourself."

He grinned, his white teeth reflecting in the moonlight. "Probably, but I'm tired of fighting the system."

"So what, you're giving up?"

Luc shrugged.

"You're not giving up because of me, are you?"

"Maybe." He hugged her close. "I don't know where our relationship will go, but I don't want anything to interfere with it. You're special to me."

His answer caused her heart to flutter, but she didn't miss the fact that he hadn't said he loved her. Of course, she was a fool to think he could love her when they'd only been together a few days. Neither was she stupid enough to think love bloomed in that short period of time, especially for a man. But she couldn't deny she felt something for Luc that was real close to love. She knew she couldn't wait to see him each time they were apart.

An eerie howl split the air, and Luc immediately let her go and whistled for Storm. "Call Savage."

The urgency in Luc's voice frightened her. Savage stood at the far end of the clearing, staring into the forest. Santana called him. Savage looked over his shoulder at her and then back to the woods. She called him again as another howl echoed in the night air, this one closer than the last.

Santana's heart raced as she feared for Savage. What if he was attacked by a pack of wolves? She took off running, wishing she had her weapons. She would kill those wolves if they attacked Savage. She heard Luc call her name; then footsteps sounded behind her.

Luc caught her by the arm. "Stop. You don't know what's out there."

"I don't care what's out there. Let me go!" She jerked against his hold.

"No, your safety is more important than Savage's."

"To you maybe, but not to me." Her mind raced, trying to figure out what to do. Luc trapped both of her arms at her sides as she continued to call to Savage. She saw another wolf at the edge of the trees.

"Luc, there's another wolf. I'm begging you to let me go."

"No. It looks like a female, and I'm sure he can handle her."

Santana stilled. A female? "How do you know the rest of the pack's not waiting to pounce on him?"

"I don't know, but my guess is she's out hunting alone."

Her mouth dropped open when Savage bounced around the female, wanting to play. The female growled and wouldn't let Savage near her.

"That's Arianna, and I think she's coming into heat."

"Don't the other wolves know that?"

"Eventually."

"But I thought only the alpha's mated."

"Maybe Savage wants to start a pack of his own. Maybe he'll challenge the alpha male."

The young female bowed down, and Savage still jumped around her. Then the female took off across the field with Savage right behind her. They jumped and loped around each other, and Santana was touched by their play. She had to admit Savage seemed to really be enjoying himself.

The female disappeared into the forest. Santana called for Savage. Savage stopped, looked back at her, and then disappeared into the trees. Her throat swelled with emotion, emotion she didn't want to face. Her heart stopped as the stillness of the night settled over her.

"Breathe," said Luc.

"Where did he go?" she asked, her voice barely a whisper.

"I think Savage has found his mate."

"No," she whispered. "That can't be." She tugged against Luc, but Luc turned her to face him and pressed her head against his chest. She couldn't hold back the sob, the evidence of her heart shattering. Savage had never disobeyed her. He'd been with her since the day they'd found each other, since he was a babe.

"You should be happy for him. He's found the one wolf that he wants to spend the rest of his life with."

She struggled to free herself, but he held her captive. She turned murderous eyes on him. "He's supposed to spend the rest of his life with *me*."

"You'll have to think of him as a child, one who's left the nest."

The ache around her heart was as real as if a boulder had slammed into her. The only other times she'd felt like this were when her mom and Michael had died. She'd hated the helpless feeling then, and she damn sure hated it now.

"Let me go, Luc."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to wipe my face, and then I'm going to find Savage. If you try to stop me, I swear you'll regret it. This is about me and Savage. You have no right to interfere."

"I have a right to keep you safe."

"Bullshit. You have no rights where I'm concerned, especially if keeping me safe means me losing Savage." She struggled against his hold. "Please, Luc, let me go."

A howl echoed in the night, followed by another one. Both were like knives slicing through her soul. She rammed her knee into Luc's groin and head butted him at the same time. Then she turned and ran, hoping she had at least slowed Luc down, hoping she was running toward Savage. She crossed the clearing and ran into the woods where Savage had disappeared. She called his name and prayed for the second time in her life.

Luc knew for certain having your balls shoved into your body hurt worse than a head butt. He straightened, trying to will the pain to ease. He took a painful step forward, and then another one. He should have anticipated Santana would do something like this. The hurt that had rolled off her was almost more than he and his wolf could bear. Her heart was breaking, and she was going into self-defense mode. He used his cell to call for backup, whistled for Storm, and then limped across the clearing.

He heard her sorrow in her every gut-wrenching call for Savage. He managed to pick up his pace, but not without intense pain. Her smell was strong, so she wasn't too far ahead. Maybe he'd be recovered by the time he got there. He took another step and winced. *Or not.*

He trudged ahead but stopped abruptly when he saw her kneeling. Savage was fifty yards up. Luc heard her begging Savage to come back to her. Savage seemed to hesitate before he disappeared into the brush.

Santana's wail sliced through the night as she crumpled onto the cold, hard ground. Luc went to her and pulled her slowly to her feet. Her gaze was blank, her eyes puffy, her face wet. "It will be all right," he said. "Once Savage and Arianna get to know one another, I'm sure he'll at least come to see you."

"But not...c-come with me?"

"No, I think he's found his perfect female. Sometimes a female does that to us."

Her sadness turned into rage. She balled her fists and pounded on his chest. "It's all your damn fault. If you'd left me alone, I would have been gone from here, and this would have never happened."

He wrapped her in his embrace, more to protect her hands than his chest. It had never occurred to him that Savage would find a mate among the wolves on the reserve. He sensed his men before they emerged through the trees behind them.

"Savage has run off with Arianna. See if you can track them."

Adolf glared at Luc. "And what do you want us to do when we find them?"

"Nothing except call me." Luc didn't have time to spar with Adolf over how to handle the wolves. Luc handed one of his men the bridle and soothed the horse as the man put the bridle on. Luc released Santana long enough to swing up onto Storm; then he hauled her up onto his lap. She openly sobbed and shuddered, trying to catch her breath.

Right now Luc knew he'd do anything to get Savage back to Santana, and if that meant domesticating Arianna to some extent, then that was what he'd do. Her sorrow was physically debilitating to her, and her pain caused his heart to hurt. And if he could do something about it, damn it, he would.

Chapter Twenty

Her tears had long since dried up, but not the hurt. It was like a knife plunging into her heart over and over. No, it wasn't Luc's fault. It was hers. She should have stuck to her guns and run instead of lingering to see what would come of her and Luc. Her indecision had cost her too much. In her heart of hearts, she knew she loved Luc.

The cost of loving Luc had come at a price too high for her to pay.

A tear slipped down her cheek when she remembered how happy Savage had looked, and perhaps on some level, Santana was jealous. She wanted happiness like that, but Savage's happiness had caused her grief. There was pain to being all alone. She wondered if anyone had actually died from grief, because she wanted to die, die to take the pain away.

She pushed her sadness aside and focused on a solution. There had to be a way to get Savage back. Hell, if she had to camp in the woods for the next hundred years, she would get Savage back, and his mate too, of course. She wouldn't separate them, but at the same time, she wouldn't be without her longtime friend. She supposed she'd have to ask Luc if she could camp on his land, and he'd surely throw a hissy fit, but it didn't matter. If he said no, she'd leave and then sneak back onto his land and dare him to interfere. He certainly hadn't offered to help her when Savage ran off, so she had no reason to believe he'd help her now.

Or she could hire someone to capture Savage, someone who wouldn't mind poaching on posted land. Her mind instantly thought of Luc's tranquilizer gun. That's what she needed. She could tranq Savage and Arianna and then take them out west somewhere. It was a brilliant plan. Now she just needed to figure out how to do it without letting Luc know.

* * *

Luc sat at his big desk, leaned his head back against his chair, and closed his eyes. Last night Santana had practically thrown him out of his own bedroom. She'd blocked the door with what he surmised was a chair. He could have broken the door down but decided to give her some time. The screaming he could handle; it was the sobbing that ripped through his soul. She was an emotional wreck, and he was fast sinking along with her.

He tried to recall his parent's deaths and how he'd felt after losing them. One night poachers had killed them during their nightly run. The poachers were never caught, and Luc had always wondered who pulled the trigger. He'd been away at

college when he got the news. He remembered the hurt, but he also had the pack for support. Santana wasn't used to leaning on anyone. Hell, she probably didn't know how to lean, only how to crawl into herself or kick the shit out of anyone who came near.

The knock on the door filled his belly with hope. "Come in."

Adolf entered and closed the door.

Luc opened his eyes but kept his head on the chair. "Did you find Savage?"

"You know we did."

Yeah, Luc already knew that because all the wild wolves had tracking devices implanted under their skin. "And was Savage with Arianna?"

"Yes."

"And what were they doing?"

"Bonding." Adolf's voice was flat.

That was what Luc didn't want to hear. He wanted his initial instincts to be wrong.

"I want you to use the tranquilizers to capture Savage and Arianna."

Adolf's lips formed a thin line, and his eyes narrowed. "Sir, I will not do that."

"Why?"

"You know damn well why. Wolves are wild animals meant to be free. They are *not* pets."

"Here's the deal, Adolf. Savage belongs to Santana. She's practically in mourning. Arianna belongs to Savage, and Savage also belongs to Arianna. The best thing to do is reunite Santana with Savage and throw in Arianna for good measure."

"No."

Luc couldn't fault Adolf for the way he felt. Before Santana, Luc had felt the same way. But Santana was lost without Savage, and Luc had the power to reunite them. Everyone could be a winner, especially Santana, and that in turn meant him.

"Do you think Savage has had a horrible life?" he asked Adolf.

"Well," Adolf hesitated. "No."

"If Arianna is given to Santana so that they can bond as friends, will Arianna have a horrible life?"

"Yes, you've taken away her freedom."

"If we take Savage back, will Arianna survive?"

"Yes, but it's not fair to take Savage away from Arianna just to appease a human."

"Why not? Santana feels the same way about Savage as Arianna does about Savage—not sexually of course, but as a friend. Santana needs Savage. Arianna needs Savage. They all three need each other."

"It's not right," replied Adolf.

Yesterday, he would have agreed with Adolf. "I promise that after Santana and Arianna get to know one another, Arianna and Savage will be released back into the wild."

"And if the pair decides not to come back and see Ms. Jones, what will you do? Tranq them again?"

"I honestly don't know what I'll do. All I want to do right now is give Santana and Arianna a chance."

"Before Ms. Jones arrived, you would never have considered such a preposterous idea."

Adolf had him there. Before Santana, everything was crystal clear, black-and-white, easy. It was funny how a mate could trash all the rules you had lived by your whole life. "Adolf, Santana is my true-mate."

Luc didn't miss Adolf's sharp intake of breath or the surprise fleeting across his face.

"Are you sure?"

Luc refrained from rolling his eyes. "I'm positive."

"But she's hu—"

"Human, yes, I know."

"You can't mate a human; you must mate a true-blood."

"Before Santana, I would have agreed with you, but by some quirk of nature, Santana is my mate, and frankly, Adolf, I can't deny myself. She's ensnared my wolf, and I'm tired of fighting it."

"So when you claim Santana, what will you do?"

Luc smiled for the first time. "I'll renounce my position, and then Santana, Savage, Arianna, and I will move somewhere far away. Savage and Arianna can start their own pack."

"But who will take your place?"

Luc clearly heard Adolf's surprise. Adolf didn't like surprises, and Luc was sure this was the mother of all surprises. Council heads didn't renounce their positions—turn them over to younger heirs, yes, but not renounce. "That's the simplest part of this whole thing. Whoever wins, of course."

"You mean fight for dominance, like the wolves do?"

"Yes. The new leader will be the leader because he's the strongest."

"The strongest isn't always the best leader."

"That's true." There were a few strong werewolves in Luc's pack who were hotheads, and hotheads weren't leaders. But it was also true that some people born into the council seat weren't leaders either. It was a crapshoot.

"We could vote on the next council seat," offered Adolf.

"I considered that option too, and maybe what I'll do is have the pack vote on which decision method they want to use." Luc had also considered just naming a replacement like Don Cantor was going to do, but Don's replacement was a true-blood. Besides, Luc would end up pissing somebody off if he made an appointment, and right now he didn't want to do that.

"But sir, the werewolf nation will be in chaos without you. Maybe you could propose an amendment, so you can stay on."

Luc shook his head. "No true-blood has ever had a non-true-blood mate and sat on the council."

"Well, no true-blood council member has ever renounced his position either."

"You got me there, Adolf."

"But why are you leaving your home? Whoever takes your position is not entitled to your family's estate."

"It will be easier for the new person to step in because this is where the pack is. I don't want some of the pack deciding to stay here with me instead of aligning with the new leader." Luc thought a moment. "Maybe I'll sell the land to the pack, and this can be the permanent place for them."

Not to mention that if the council voted to come out of the closet, it would be easier to protect Santana if they weren't here. Hell, the entire pack would be better off to scatter to the wind.

"But this is your heritage."

Yes, it was, but it meant nothing if Santana couldn't be part of it. He belonged with Santana. "I will give it all up to be with Santana."

"Damn," said Adolf, a look of fascination on his face. "I hope I never find a true-mate."

Luc grinned. "But I hope you do. Then you'll understand why I'll do anything possible to get Savage back to Santana."

Luc waited while Adolf recovered from the information. When Luc resigned, there was going to be pandemonium, but Luc would forsake his council seat for Santana.

"So you'll get Savage and Arianna for me?"

"Yes," replied Adolf. "Because I trust you to do the right thing for Arianna and Savage in the end, even if that means your mate loses them."

"I give you my word."

* * *

Santana woke from her nap and tried to peel her swollen, crusty eyelids open. Her eyes burned, and her nose was stuffy, which she was sure contributed to her massive headache. She sat up and instantly glanced around for Savage. Her lower lip quivered as her sorrow flooded back. Damn, it felt like someone's hand was gripping her heart, ready to tear it out again.

Something white caught her eye as it fluttered under the door. She quickly slipped from the bed, padded barefoot across the carpet, and scooped it off the floor. She unfolded the plain sheet of white paper, and her heart stopped.

Leave tonight, or Luc dies.

The message was written in block print. Looked like a child had scratched it out in haste. She bit her lower lip. Should she show this to Luc? Someone had already proven they could get to Luc with a sniper rifle. Was this really about her being here?

Her mind churned over the possible ways Luc could die. A bullet could apparently do the trick if it entered the werewolf's body at the correct place. She assumed an assassin would aim at the head or the heart. Yet with all these people here, who would be stupid enough to try and shoot? A poison would be her choice, since sneaking up on a werewolf would be near impossible with their superb sense of hearing and smell.

Of course, if she left, any threat to Luc would go away—if she could believe the note. Either Luc had a mole in his midst or the mastermind of this plot was here at the mansion. Hell, for all she knew, it was one of his people. The threat was close, too close, and her only hope was that no harm would come to Luc if she played by the rules. But none of it explained why anyone was after her. When she left, she somehow needed to warn Luc.

But leaving without Savage was not an option, and pulling all this off by tonight was crazy. What she needed was an ally. She pondered asking William, since he'd offered to take her with him when he left, but she had no idea what he'd do when she refused his advances—and she would refuse his advances. That didn't seem fair to William, but it was an option.

The only other person was Gabriella. Gabriella wanted her gone. Would Gabriella have slipped the note under the door? She was sure Gabriella wouldn't kill Luc, but Gabriella did want to get rid of Santana in a bad way.

Yeah, she had to go to the devil herself and make a deal.

Chapter Twenty-one

Santana quietly dropped from the balcony to the floor below and made her way to Gabriella's room. Either Gabriella would hear her out or throw her out. Santana knocked on Gabriella's patio door, praying she was there. Santana released the breath she'd been holding when a finger peeled back the curtain.

When the door opened, Santana gave Gabriella her best I-need-a-favor smile.

"What do you want?" Gabriella asked with a sneer.

Santana kept her smile plastered on her face. "Can I come in?"

Gabriella opened the door wide. "Sure."

Santana stepped inside and closed the patio door. "I need your help."

Gabriella's brows rose. "Why on earth would I help you?"

"Because I can give you what you want."

"Which is?"

"I'll leave tonight."

"What? You need me to help you pack?"

Santana didn't tolerate rude people well, but she swallowed her pride. "No, it won't be that simple. I need you to help me trap Savage and Arianna, and then I'll leave. I need access to Luc's tranquilizer guns."

Gabriella couldn't believe what the bitch had just said, because she'd heard the same thing before, and Santana was still here.

"How do I know you won't get what you want and then *not* leave?"

"I give you my word that I'll leave North Carolina as soon as I have Savage and Arianna."

It was all too surreal. Gabriella had overheard a couple of guards discussing where to put that stupid pet wolf and his mate for the night. Seems Luc couldn't resist giving Santana what she wanted. Gabriella didn't give a damn about the wild wolves that Luc kept on his land, but she was surprised Luc would capture a wild one for anyone.

So if Gabriella wanted to help Santana, and that was a big *if*, all Gabriella had to do was figure out where the wolves were and get them on a truck. Damn. She didn't want to help the bitch, but she was also running out of time. She would be in

full mating heat by morning, she was sure of it, and the last thing Gabriella wanted to do was come into heat and not get Luc to mate with her.

And getting Luc to mate with her would be harder than getting those damn wolves out from under his nose.

"I can't help you. I have other things that I need to do," said Gabriella. She had no plan on how to get Luc to mate with her. She needed to focus on solving her own problem.

"Okay. I understand."

Gabriella felt a certain satisfaction that she was at least in control of the situation, and couldn't decide if she should tell Santana her pet was already caged. "I may be able to help you tomorrow, but I have other plans tonight."

"No, I have to leave tonight, and I'm not leaving without Savage." Santana turned and headed for the patio door.

Tonight. Tonight. There was a lot of shit that had to *be* tonight, but Gabriella's was so much more important than Santana's. Too bad Santana couldn't help her.

Or could she?

"Wait."

Santana stopped and turned.

"I'll help you if you'll do something for me."

"Something besides just leaving?"

"Yes. I want you to subdue Luc like you did last time."

"You mean knock him out."

That's exactly what she meant. "Yes."

"How do you know about that?"

"Oh puh-leeze. The hired help can't keep a secret for shit."

That bit of information made Santana uneasy. Did Luc know tongues were wagging? Perhaps Gabriella didn't know everything, because if she knew Luc had taken Santana to his playroom, Santana was sure Gabriella would be ripping Santana's throat out.

"And when he's asleep, chain him to the bed."

"Chain him?"

"Yes. Because of his werewolf strength, you'll need to chain him spread-eagle with his arms and legs very tight. I'll bring you the cuffs and chains when I get a chance. And bring those drops too. I may have to use them to subdue the guards."

A twinge of fear eased down Santana's spine. She really didn't have a problem with subduing Luc, because he would wake up, but chaining him to the bed reminded her of her own captivity. She hated the feeling of helplessness, and being at someone else's will wasn't fun, but Gabriella wasn't going to kill Luc—shotgun

wedding maybe, but Luc would be alive. What choice did she have? She had to leave, or Luc would die.

"What are you going to do with him after I chain him?"

"Don't worry about that," Gabriella said.

"For personal reasons, it will be hard for me to chain a person," said Santana. Unless it was for some naughty sex games. Damn, why did she even think about that? Sex was probably what Gabriella had in mind.

"Oh, he'll be in good hands, I promise."

Santana didn't know about this. She was, after all, in love with Luc. But this was for Luc's own good. His life was in danger, and Santana was pretty sure that Gabriella wasn't the one who'd sent the note because Gabriella seemed preoccupied with something else, and it wasn't getting rid of her. Whoever was behind the note could possibly follow through with the threat against Luc, and Santana couldn't risk it. That was the problem with this whole ordeal. She couldn't fight when she didn't know who the enemy was. Chained up verses dead. That was a no-brainer.

She could just walk away and leave Savage behind. Then she wouldn't have to chain Luc, but she didn't know if her heart could take losing both of them. In fact, she knew it wouldn't. She wouldn't survive

"Okay," agreed Santana. "But it has to be done tonight."

Gabriella glanced at her expensive watch. "Luc will soon be getting ready for tonight's meal. When it's done, meet me here, and I'll take you to Savage."

"And Arianna too," said Santana.

Gabriella rolled her eyes and mimicked, "And Arianna too."

* * *

Santana left Gabriella and returned to her room feeling good about saving Luc and feeling bad about how she had to do it. She would be betraying Luc to save his life. He'd be pissed, but at least he'd be alive. Her gut was a bundle of nerves. She knew she'd have to answer Luc's questions carefully because of that werewolf nose of his.

She spiked Luc's toothpaste and crawled into bed to wait. She didn't have to wait long.

"How are you feeling?" Luc asked as he lounged inside the doorway. Damn, he looked good...too good to betray.

"I feel like a hole's been ripped out of my chest." *And that hole is only going to get bigger tonight.*

"I have a surprise for you. Let me take a shower and get dressed for tonight's dinner, and then I'll take you somewhere special. You can hang out at this special place or you can come to dinner with me if you want to, and then we'll go to this special place together again afterward."

Even if she wasn't going to leave tonight, Santana didn't feel like putting up with Luc's *people*. And when he said *special place*, it almost broke her heart. Luc was trying to ease her pain, and here she was going to betray him and never look back. "I think I'll go to this special place and wait for you to get done with dinner." *And your uppity people.*

Luc went into the bathroom, and Santana wanted to follow him into the shower and let him fuck her senseless. She could tell Luc about the note, beg him to help her catch Savage and Arianna, and all of them could be gone by morning. But would Luc do that? No. Luc would never run from danger, and he'd wind up with a bullet in his head or poison in his soup. No, Luc wouldn't run, so it was knockout drops in his toothpaste.

Her belly had rocks in it by the time Luc emerged from his shower. He disappeared into his closet, and she hoped he'd be closer to the bed when the drops kicked in, because there was no way she could get him up here. Maybe she should entice him into the bed and really betray him.

Luc stepped from the closet, buttoning his pressed white shirt. Suddenly he steadied himself against the doorjamb as the room took a spin.

"What's wrong?" asked Santana.

"I don't feel well."

"Why don't you come and lie down?"

Luc stepped forward as the room darkened. The bed appeared to move as he tried to reach it.

Santana got up and helped him into bed. "You want some water?"

He nodded as he tried to fight the murkiness in his mind. And then realization hit him. He'd felt like this before. When she returned, he shot his hand out and gripped her arm. He thought he felt her flinch.

"Why?" he asked as a pain shot through his chest that had nothing to do with the drug snaking through his system.

"Because it has to be this way."

"No...no...it...d-doesn't," he managed to say with his thick tongue.

His hand dropped from her arm as he fought to stay awake. His eyes drifted closed to rest, just for a second. He realized trust was something he could never have with her. He awoke when he felt cold metal on his wrist. He lifted his head only to let it flop back on the pillow, too tired to barely do even that. What was she doing?

Santana looped the chain under the bed and secured his other wrist. Then she straddled him and cupped his face in her hands. "Luc. I'm so sorry, but I've got to go. I just want you know the reason I'm leaving is because I love you. Do you understand?"

He shook his head. Did she say she loved him? Was this how she loved him? Luc tugged on his restraints and tried to speak, but nothing came out.

"If there were any other way, I would have done it. You have to believe me."

Luc was having a hard time focusing, but he knew when her sweet lips brushed against his. And he recognized it for what it was.

Good-bye.

Santana's eyes burned with deep emotion as she ended the kiss. This was almost as hard as losing Savage. A wayward tear escaped, and she quickly wiped it away, knowing she had to leave now before she changed her mind. Luc's eyes drifted closed, and she was sure he would be out for a while. She could only hope he'd be cognizant enough to understand her words and at least try to use that werewolf nose to smell that she was telling the truth.

The note's words burned her soul. *Leave tonight, or Luc dies.*

For his life, she'd risk Luc hating her forever.

She pushed off Luc and slipped from the bed. After securing his legs, she grabbed her backpack and left by way of the balcony, never looking back, afraid that she'd change her mind with one more look at him. The sun was a slim light over the horizon, and she knew she had very little time before someone would come looking for Luc. He couldn't very well miss supper since he was the host.

She knocked on Gabriella's patio door, and Gabriella immediately opened it. She looked flushed, like she'd just run three or four miles. She was gasping for air, and her eyes were a little wild.

"Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine in a few hours. Let's get this over with."

Gabriella's must have a bad virus, and Santana sure as hell didn't want it. Santana stepped aside as Gabriella brushed past her carrying a frosted wineglass full of what she supposed was wine. Keeping to the shadows, she followed Gabriella past the barn to another building. Gabriella halted outside the door.

"Here's the key. Savage and Arianna are in the blue truck parked inside."

"You already have them captured?" That was just a little too hard to believe. Santana wasn't sure Gabriella could track and tranq anything. Maybe she'd had help.

"Trust me, it wasn't easy."

Santana held her hand out with the handcuff key and the vial of knockout drops. Gabriella pocketed the handcuff key and then took the vial.

"I'll create a diversion and handle the guards. You wait here until I return."

Santana's brows rose at the "create a diversion" part. Why would Gabriella have to create a diversion if she had captured the wolves? And Gabriella didn't come across as one who could create a successful diversion. Unfortunately Santana didn't have a plan B unless she pulled her weapons, barged in, and just took Savage.

Gabriella put several of the knockout drops in her wineglass.

"Do you have a plan on how to get them to drink that?"

"No," replied Gabriella before she slipped inside the door.

* * *

Gabriella entered the garage and wrinkled her nose at the smell of gas and oil. Hell, she'd probably have to take a shower after she got out of here. "Hello," she called. "Is anyone here?"

Of course, she had no real plan other than seduction, which always worked. Men, especially werewolf men, liked to fuck, and women just had to know how to use that information.

One guy poked his head out from under the hood of a car he was working on, another one walked out from the back, and she hoped there were only two of them. Any more and the wine wouldn't be enough.

"You need something?" Grease Monkey Number One asked.

She didn't recognize either of them, but then again, she didn't mingle with the help. They were just rungs on the ladder that she was climbing. She plastered on her best sexy smile. "I might," she replied as she purposely let her gaze roam up and down his big frame. That caused him to straighten, walk around the car, and give her that I'm-interested smile.

Her bright red nail traveled over one exposed breast. Two sets of eyes followed. Men were so easy. "What I need is for you two to get naked"—she glanced at the camera in the corner—"somewhere away from the cameras."

One of them sniffed. "You're in heat."

She nodded. One of them wiped his hands on what looked like a dirty rag as the other one motioned her toward a door at the back. She stepped past the first one, dragging her nail across his jaw. When she reached the one who held the door open for her, she ran her nail up the thick bulge in his pants.

"You're playing with fire," he said.

That much she knew for sure. She didn't even want to think about the consequences of what she was about to do, but it would be worth it when she carried Luc's child. Her life would be set then.

She walked into a storage room and turned to her prey. "Strip," she said. She pretended to take a sip of her wine as she watched the two men shed their clothes. They were fine specimens, but then most werewolves were. Thick, heavy cocks jutted out to greet her. She slithered up to the first guy and bit his pec.

"Yeah, baby."

She held her glass to his lips and made him drink about half as she stroked his erection. The second man moved behind her, his member pressing into the small of her back. "You two are big boys," she purred.

Gabriella was only attracted to these two because of the mating heat, and it was all she could do not to rip her clothes off and take both of them. But she couldn't risk it. She was too close to the full-blown thing, knowing she'd be out of control at some point.

She turned to the second guy and made him drink too. When the glass was empty, she placed it on a stack of crates. Since avoiding their lips was a key part to the success of this plan, she dropped to her knees. They stepped closer so that both their glorious cocks were together. She licked one, then the other; she sucked one while she rolled the other's sac. She felt her pussy growing slick just from servicing the two. She should have done it with two before now, because after tonight she'd belong to Luc.

She licked and sucked but wanted some pleasure for herself before they both passed out. She stood and seductively unbuttoned her blouse, peeling it away to expose herself. She wasn't wearing a bra, so she cupped both of her breasts and gave the nipples a squeeze. Their nostrils flared as satisfaction surged through her. She spread her legs, leaned back against a rack, gripped the shelf over her head, and arched her back. "My turn," she said. When they each latched on to a nipple, she felt the jolt straight to her pussy. She wanted to rip her pants off but wasn't sure she could control them or herself. Teeth grazed flesh, making her wish for one more to suck her clit.

They were good; she had to give them that. One nipple made a popping sound when the first man stumbled backward. She quickly palmed the other man's head, keeping him pinned to her breast. The first man slumped against the stack of crates, toppling the wineglass. The sound of glass shattering alerted the second guy, but she held on to him a few seconds longer before he too swayed. He pulled back and glared at her when he realized what she had done.

She shrugged.

The second man finally collapsed, and she let out a calming breath. They had stirred her blood, and now she *really* needed Luc. Somewhere in her mind, she should feel sorry about this, but she didn't. None of this would have been necessary if Santana hadn't waltzed into the fucking picture.

But the end always justified the means.

* * *

Santana waited forever until the door opened and Gabriella motioned her in. She slipped inside and wondered where all the men were, but hell, maybe she didn't want to know. She almost laughed when it crossed her mind that maybe Gabriella had taken them all out.

"They're in the back of the truck," said Gabriella.

Santana turned to Gabriella. "Listen, I need you to tell Luc that someone on the estate wants him dead."

"What? How do you know?"

"I just know. Promise me you'll tell him. His life depends on you telling him."

Gabriella nodded, but Santana wasn't sure Gabriella believed her.

"Promise me," Santana said.

"I promise."

Gabriella's response was weak, and Santana hoped it was because Gabriella didn't feel well due to whatever virus she had and not because she wasn't being truthful. She glanced at the old, beat-up 1971 Ford truck and decided she didn't need to disable OnStar, but perhaps she'd have to work on the old thing before it started. It reminded her of her truck Bessie that she'd left in the woods the night of her attack. Luc had returned it to her, but there was no way she could swing by her house and transfer the merchandise.

She crossed to the back and lifted the blue tarp. Savage immediately growled at her. She was a little taken aback at his greeting. Had he forgotten her already? "Hey, Savage. It's nice to see you too. I know you're mad at me, but you know I won't hurt you or your mate."

She glanced at Arianna, who was in a separate cage. Arianna also growled at her, but that didn't bother Santana. If she was locked up in a cage, she'd growl too. "Yeah, I'm sure you like me even less, but soon we'll get to know one another better."

Santana secured the tarp and turned to thank Gabriella, but she was gone. Oh well. One less impediment to her getaway. She slipped inside the cab, said a prayer, and turned the key. The old truck cranked right up. The double doors were already open, so she put the truck in first gear, thankful she'd learned to drive a stick when she was boosting cars on the street.

She held her breath until she was outside the gates of the compound and wondered again where all the guards were. She glanced at the gas gauge and figured she could go through a town or two before she'd have to fill up. Santana was so thankful she'd taken the time to withdraw a bunch of cash while she was in Charlotte, even though Luc did protest, stating she didn't need any cash as long as she was with him. Cash was always a good thing when you were on the run.

Her plan was simple. She needed to withdraw all her money from her account, find a new cell phone, one of those cash-only ones, stop along the way in rinky-dink towns with libraries and search for an isolated farm out west, do some research on fence sizes for wolves, and arrange getting a fence set up before they arrived. *Piece of cake.*

Taking a deep breath, she grinned when she had to manually turn on the truck lights. This truck was a classic. Somehow she'd get it back to Luc.

Of course, she had to get her mother's pendant back as well. Why in the hell had she let Luc lock it in his safe? But she knew the answer. She'd been planning on staying for a while. Funny how five little words had changed her life.

She settled back into the old, worn seat to plan out her life and tried not to think of what she'd left behind.

Chapter Twenty-two

Luc cracked his eye as soft skin straddled his legs. A blurry figure sat before him. He tried to focus to bring the person into view as his mind struggled to figure out why he was in his bed. He was sure he was supposed to be somewhere else. The person leaned down and finally came into view. Gabriella?

"I see you're awake. How do you feel?"

Luc tried to raise his hand to wipe the fog from his eyes, but it didn't move at all. "What the hell?"

"Oh that," she said flippantly. "I thought we'd play some of those kinky sex games you love so much."

Luc jerked against his bonds. "Let me up, Gabriella."

She leaned in close and kissed him, causing his beast to growl at the contact. It all came flooding back to him. Santana had drugged him. He used all his strength to pull against his cuffs until the metal bit into his flesh. "Get off me."

"What's the matter, sugar? I thought you liked to be tied up while a woman had her way with you."

"I do if it's the right woman."

Her hand snaked between them and palmed his member. "That's not a very nice thing to say."

Luc wanted to ask where Santana was so he could wrap his hands around her pretty little neck but decided Gabriella might not appreciate his question. And he was definitely at a disadvantage. "Gabriella, what's going on?"

"I'm in heat, and you're going to satisfy my itch."

Shit!

Luc decided to be up front with her, hoping there was some rationalization left in her. "I may satisfy your itch, but I'm not going to spend the rest of my life with you."

"Of course you will, sweetie. I'll be carrying our child. You wouldn't want our child to be born a bastard, would you?"

"No, I wouldn't, but I also don't think our child would want to know he or she was conceived in such a despicable manner." He left out the part about there being no guarantee she'd get pregnant. It was just like a human pregnancy...hit-and-miss, especially since they weren't a mated pair. But he supposed Gabriella was

hoping to get pregnant and tie him to her. And with his lousy luck, she just might get pregnant.

Normally when a female was in heat, she'd run and males would run with her. The males would fight to see who had the right to copulate. Sometimes there was a bond, but most of the time there wasn't. The most important thing was easing the female's discomfort, and the males didn't have a problem with doing that.

"Oh, you won't tell him. I know you. You'll protect him from such a scandal. Just think, Luc, our child will someday be the leader of our nation. We'll be unstoppable."

She pumped his flaccid member, and Luc could smell she was in heat. His beast wasn't even interested. "You know, Gabriella, I think you're even crazier than I originally thought."

She laid down on him, chest to chest, and rubbed against him. Wolves exchanged scents, marked each other, but his wolf was only repulsed, and Luc the man was totally okay with that. The problem was what to do with this insane woman who had him tied down. Well, actually Santana had staked him out—which he'd never forgive her for—but obviously Gabriella was taking full advantage of the situation.

He couldn't waste time thinking about Santana; he had a more pressing woman to deal with. He was vulnerable, perhaps more so than he'd ever been in his entire life.

Because Luc's arms were stretched out to his sides, he couldn't shift. Wolf legs only moved from front to back, not side to side, and he wasn't sure his hands would slip from the cuffs before his arms turned into legs. Of course if he broke his limbs, he would heal, but four broken limbs would take some time.

"Why aren't you getting hard?"

Because I belong to another.

And she betrayed me.

Focusing on Santana wouldn't do him any good now. Could Luc possibly talk some sense into Gabriella, or would he have to resort to devious methods? At this point, anything was worth a shot. "My wolf's not attracted to you."

She sat up, and he saw the confusion on her face, but he couldn't help it. Nature had made her statement.

"I don't believe you," she said as she stroked his cock. "I just think you're still feeling the effects of the drug your little human gave you. She's really not meant for you. I know you were infatuated with her, but that's over. How do you think you got like this? Santana betrayed you. She traded you for that pet wolf of hers. You mean nothing to her."

Luc already knew of the betrayal. It was like acid burning in his belly, but he couldn't believe Santana would trade him for Savage. His mistake was not taking her straight to her wolf. "You didn't tell her I had already captured Savage and Arianna for her, did you?"

"Duh. That would be a no."

So not only was he betrayed by Santana, Gabriella had betrayed him too. Pain sliced across Gabriella's face, definitely a side effect of the heat, replacing her sly smile. Luc knew if she didn't get fucked soon, her symptoms would only get worse.

"Aren't we supposed to be at dinner?"

"Don't worry about that. I told them you were sick and I was helping you recover."

Apparently she didn't tell Adolf, because he would have already busted the door down. "Did anyone smell your lie?" he asked her, hoping someone might eventually get a conscience and inquire about him.

"No. I didn't stay around long enough."

That could be true, of course. He was sick, kinda, sorta, if you counted being drugged as a sickness, but she wasn't helping him recover. Gabriella licked his nipple and threw him a brazen glance, but it didn't work. He wasn't aroused. She wasn't Santana.

Santana the betrayer.

"Damn," said Gabriella. "How much of that stuff did she give you?"

It was obvious to Luc the mating heat was clouding her mind so much that she'd never see reason. He hated to speculate what would happen if he couldn't get an erection and she couldn't get fucked. She'd either jack him to death with her hand, or perhaps attack him in her mindless state. Since reasoning with her wasn't working, he'd try the crafty way.

"Let's go to my playroom," he said, hoping he kept his voice calm, because the last thing he wanted was her in his playroom.

"No. You have to stay right here until you fuck me."

"I'd much rather fuck you in my playroom, where I can show you all my toys. Don't you want me to tie you up, spank you, and fuck you like you've never been fucked before?"

He wasn't sure he was getting through to her. All he needed was one hand free. She pumped him harder, chafing his skin, but it didn't matter. His wolf wasn't going to mate with her.

"We don't have to go to my playroom. Just get on your hands and knees right here."

Something registered in her eyes; he wasn't sure what, so he forged ahead. "Touch your clit for me."

He almost tripped over those last words. He remembered telling Santana the same thing. He quickly forced his mate from his mind; otherwise he'd get a hard-on just thinking about her, and that was the last thing he needed right now.

Gabriella's hand traveled to her clit, and swirled hard against her nub.

"That's it, baby. Do it harder." He almost gagged on his own words.

Gabriella bit her lower lip and drew blood as her hand moved frantically against her flesh. Her head dropped back. She continued pounding his member and her clit, but Luc knew it wasn't enough. She had to have an orgasm or wait until the heat passed.

"Gabriella, listen to me. You need to let me up, so I can give you what you need."

"No," she whispered. "You won't finish me."

"I promise to finish you," replied Luc. He didn't really have a choice. If she didn't climax, she'd go halfway insane until the heat passed, and even though Gabriella was his least favorite person in the world, he couldn't let that happen. "Gabriella, free me before it's too late."

Her eyes were glassy, distant, and he wasn't sure she'd heard a word he'd said. "Gabriella!"

She slid from him, stumbled to the chair, and retrieved the key from her pants pocket. She slowly crossed back to the bed. Luc noticed her hands were shaking terribly, so much so he was afraid she wouldn't get the key into the lock. Then the cuff clicked free on his right foot, and Luc released the breath he'd been holding. "Now release the other one, baby, and then my hands."

She released his other foot and then his right wrist. Luc rolled from the bed before she could change her mind. He held out his hand, and she dropped the key into it. After freeing his other hand, he rubbed both to get the blood flowing again.

Luc couldn't chain her because she might actually shift and break something. Luc dialed Adolf's number. "I need a sedative brought to my room immediately."

Gabriella curled up on the bed, her face flushed, her finger slipping in and out of her pussy. Luc hated to see any female suffer the heat, but he didn't hate it enough to do her himself. He dialed John's number. "Please come to my room ASAP."

Luc pulled the sheet over her to give her some modesty from her father and Adolf.

"You promised," she said.

"I did, but I can't." *Even if I wanted to.* Luc wasn't normally a liar, but there was nothing normal about this situation. He would not be forced into a mating; his beast wouldn't allow it.

Luc moved to the door and opened it, stopping Adolf's knock in midair. Adolf sniffed, causing Luc to narrow his eyes. It was true an unmated male couldn't resist a female in heat, and it was also true a mated male could resist. Luc snatched the syringe from Adolf, pulling the cap off with his teeth as he crossed the room to the bed. He lifted the sheet and plunged the needle into Gabriella's thigh. In three seconds, she was resting peacefully, which was more than Luc could say for himself. Peace was the last thing he felt.

"What's going on?" John asked.

"Gabriella's in full-blown heat. I gave her a sedative to ease her pain. You need to get her out of my room." Luc stood and headed for his closet. He had to get out and find Santana.

"How did she end up in your room?"

Luc stopped and turned to John. "You'll have to ask her about that."

Chapter Twenty-three

Luc leaned against his chair, an empty whiskey bottle on his desk. The amber liquid did nothing to dull the pain in his heart. Who knew being betrayed by your mate could physically affect one so badly?

Adolf was currently trying to get a fix on Arianna. The microchip implanted in her used a global satellite tracking system because here in the mountains, it was difficult to set up a local tracking system. Lucky for Luc, the microchips had been replaced a few months ago, so the chip was new and the signal should be strong. It was just a matter of time before the satellite picked up her signal, but he wasn't sure what he'd do when he found them.

Luc's wolf pressed him to go to her, find out why she left him. Luc the man said it didn't matter, she apparently didn't care about him. Love going one way sucked. He did regret not telling her he loved her. Perhaps that would have made a difference.

Luc heard footsteps outside the door. "Come in."

He was surprised when John walked in.

"What can I do for you, John?"

"Nothing. I just came to apologize for Gabriella's behavior."

Luc sensed the man's embarrassment, but right now Luc didn't give a damn about an apology. He just needed more whiskey.

"She was way out of line. I really don't know what came over her."

"Apology accepted," Luc said, hoping he kept his disdain from his voice.

John's brow rose, and he had yet to move from the place by the door. "That's all you're going to say?"

Probably not. "What more do you want me to say?"

"Well, I expected you to—I don't know—rant and rave maybe?"

Luc took a deep breath, expelling it slowly. He should be ballistic, but he wasn't. Instead he felt like he was having a heart attack. "It's not going to solve anything. I'm just glad Gabriella's okay." *And I'm not going to be a dad.*

"I'm sure the mating heat was affecting Gabriella's mind when she was coerced into doing something so despicable."

Luc snapped his jaw together and reined in his temper. He knew he was in a volatile state. It wouldn't take much to release his fury.

"You must be really angry with your little human. I told you you'd regret having her here."

Luc's eyes became slits. "My little human has a name, and it's Santana. *You* may address her as Ms. Jones."

"Come on," said John. "You can't still be pining for her? She drugged you...twice."

It was apparent to Luc that someone in his employ had a big mouth. Someone who'd betrayed him. Luc wondered who this person was and how far they would go. He'd put Adolf on finding out—right after he found Santana.

"John, I accept your apology, but don't make me regret accepting it."

"I hope you don't think this was Gabriella's idea. She said it was all Santana's idea."

"John, Santana's not here to tell her side of the story. Even if it was Santana's idea, Gabriella didn't have to go along with it. She could have come and told me. Gabriella wasn't that far into the mating heat when she seduced and drugged my men and let Santana drive out of here. So don't come in here and try to make this all Santana's fault. I'll ask Santana when I find her."

"What? You'd believe your little whore over Gabriella?"

Somehow Luc remained seated, but his claws eased out and embedded themselves in the chair arms. His beast wanted to kill. Instead he said, "Gabriella had more to gain than Santana. All Santana wanted was Savage. All Gabriella's *ever* wanted was power." *And apparently Santana didn't want me.* Luc's wolf almost let out a long sorrowful howl.

Luc took a deep breath and focused his anger on John. "The best thing you can do is leave. I'm really not in any mood to hear your bellyaching about Gabriella and certainly won't have you slamming Santana." *At least not until I find out why Santana left.*

John's face fell, and Luc felt some satisfaction that the man hadn't accomplished his mission—to blame everything on Santana. Luc stood and walked to the bar to get another bottle of whiskey. He heard the door open and close and felt his beast relax.

Luc took the bottle and went to his wall safe. He punched in the code and wondered if Santana had somehow managed to get her pendant out. If she had, Adolf would shit bricks. He felt relief when he found the velvet pouch along with the twenty thousand dollars he'd set aside for her. He took the satchel and went back to his desk, the same desk where he'd spread Santana wide and rode her hard.

He flopped down in the chair and emptied the pouch into his hand. He tested the necklace's weight. It was heavy, and Luc felt as if this were his only connection to Santana. He knew she would come back for this—if he didn't find her first. He popped the lid and looked at her baby picture. She had been a cute little thing, which made him wonder what their kids would look like. And heaven forbid they

had a girl. He'd have to kill somebody when the pups started sniffing around his little girl.

Hell, what was he saying? He had to find Santana first. He took a long swallow of whiskey straight from the bottle. Someone rapped on the door.

He hoped it was Adolf with some good news. "Enter."

Don Cantor poked his head around the door. "Is it safe to come in?"

Luc quickly rose and wiped his mouth. "Sure, as long as you don't drug me and tie me down."

Don was the eldest member of the council, and Luc respected him. He'd hated to see him step down. Voting to allow Don's appointment of a non-family-member heir and coming out of the were-closet were the only two things left for the council to decide and vote on. Then all these people would be out of his home.

And that would be a joyous day.

Don smiled. "I promise. Besides, you're not the sex I like to tie down."

Luc gave him a small smile back as he motioned for Don to take a seat. "How was your trip?"

"Boring as usual, but I'm glad to be here. Apparently I've missed all the fun."

"Fun for who?" Luc asked because he sure wasn't having fun.

"I heard you had fun with your guest before she drugged you, stole her pet wolf and one of your wild wolves, and tied you up and left you for Gabriella."

"Bad news travels fast," replied Luc.

"I suspect she's your mate," said Don with a knowing smile.

Luc's heart skipped a beat before it pounded again. "What makes you think that?"

"You're in here drowning in a bottle of whiskey, feeling sorry for yourself as well as being angry with the world."

"Am I that transparent?" Because that was the last thing Luc wanted to be.

Don smiled, the skin around his eyes crinkling. "Only to the trained eye."

Luc could only nod. Since her betrayal, he wasn't ready to admit Santana was his mate. Being mates was a two-way street, and right now Luc thought her lane was closed. He absently picked up her pendant and stared blankly at her picture. If she didn't love him, he wouldn't force her. Somehow he'd muddle through life without her.

Don shot to his feet, toppling over his chair. He leaned over Luc's desk. "Where did you get that?"

Luc noted Don's flushed face and bright eyes. "This belongs to Santana." Don's face paled as he closed his eyes and gripped the desk for support.

Luc quickly stood, rounded the desk, and held Don's arm to steady him. "Are you okay?"

Luc picked up the overturned chair and eased Don back into it. "You want some water?" He wondered if Don was having a heart attack, which was rare for werewolves.

Don looked Luc in the eye. "How about a shot of that whiskey?"

Luc took a sniff and didn't detect any signs of sickness in Don, but he did smell a mixture of surprise and hope. Luc went over to the bar and got a clean glass and poured a small amount before handing it to Don. Don drained the contents, his eyes staring blankly at the pendant.

Luc propped himself against his desk and studied Don. The man looked like he was reliving old memories. "You want to tell me what's going on?"

Don's gaze drifted back to Luc. "Can I hold it for a second?"

"Sure," replied Luc as he picked up the pendant and handed it to him. Don peered at the two pictures and then tapped one of them. "Who is this?"

Luc leaned forward and looked at the one Don had indicated. "That's Santana."

"What's her last name?"

"Jones."

A frown crossed Don's face. "This"—Don pointed to the woman's picture—"is Kris. I never knew her last name."

Luc frowned. "Santana said it was Kristine Marie Sinclair."

"She is a beautiful woman," Don said.

"Was," said Luc, hating to bring the sad news. "Santana said her mother died when she was ten."

"Kris was my true-mate, but I made a stupid mistake. I ignored it, just like you're doing. You see, Kris wasn't a pure-blooded werewolf, but she was mine—for those few weeks."

Possibilities swept through Luc's mind, but he needed more information. "What happened?"

Don's gaze was pensive. "I don't know. I went to see her, and she was gone. I searched for her for days, but it was like she just disappeared."

Luc pointed to the pendant. "How do you know that's Kris?"

Don smiled. "Because I gave Kris this, and if you twist right here"—Don twisted the pendant and the back sprang open—"you can see my crest."

Don offered it to him, and Luc quickly took it. He stared at Don's golden crest emblazoned on the back cover as a range of emotions poured through him. Before Luc could process any of them, Don spoke.

"You know, I regretted not publicly claiming her. I should have done it the day I met her. Biggest mistake of my life. Not a day goes by I don't think about her."

Luc sensed the sorrow pouring off Don. "Why didn't you claim her?"

"I was too hung up on the pure-blood thing. I was dating Maria, Ben's mother. Maria was a pure-blood. Ben was two when his father was killed in an automobile

accident. I met Maria a couple of years after that. And then I met Kris. Maria knew something had changed because she questioned me about it daily.”

Luc searched his mind for any information concerning Don’s life. Luc didn’t remember his parents saying much about Don, but that was twenty-some years ago. “You didn’t marry Maria?”

Don shook his head. “No. We dated for a while longer, and I sort of took on the role as Ben’s dad, but I just couldn’t force myself to marry Maria when my heart belonged to another. In the beginning, I always hoped to find Kris again.” Don chuckled. “One time I saw a woman who looked just like Kris from the back, so I made my way to her and tapped her on the shoulder. I held my breath as the woman turned, but it wasn’t Kris. Over the years, I guess my wolf grew tired of hoping. I was basically impotent when it came to other she-wolves and humans. No one—and I mean *no one*—stirred my blood like Kris.”

Luc’s wolf balked at the word *impotent*. That was something neither Luc nor his wolf had known. Luc had always been overly sexually active, and Santana only amplified his hunger.

“I was young and stupid. I now know choosing anyone besides your true-mate is a mistake. Do you hear what I’m saying, Luc?”

Luc heard him, but he still didn’t know why Santana had left. Luc was back to that two-way-street thing. Could Santana be Don’s daughter? And what reason had Kris had for running away from Don? It also bothered him that Santana was a Jones and not a Cantor or a Sinclair.

“Santana’s name on her birth certificate is Santana X. Jones. Do you know what the *X* is for?”

Don slowly nodded as a smile filled his face. “Xylander. It means ‘forest man.’ It’s Greek, and it came from my mother’s side of the family. It’s my middle name.”

So Santana’s mother hadn’t wanted hers or Don’s name tied to Santana? Why? Was there some threat to Santana? And if Santana was Don and Kris’s daughter, why wasn’t she a werewolf? Two werewolves always made a werewolf.

“You know,” said Don. “I’ve always wanted a daughter.”

“Santana’s not a wolf; I would have known.” Even though Luc did notice that she smelled different than other humans, but that’s what his wolf liked. “I don’t see how she can be your daughter.”

Don’s gaze snapped to Luc before narrowing to slits, his jaw clenched. “I don’t care if she’s a werewolf or not.”

Luc didn’t care either, but werewolves had to secretly get DNA tested because of the anomalies in their DNA structure. Hell, werewolves avoided hospitals at all cost. But without DNA testing, it would be hard to prove Santana was Don’s daughter. Not that it mattered to Luc where Santana was concerned, but he could see the raised eyebrows at such a claim. Don’s eyes were light gray, not blue like Santana’s, and his hair was brown, not blonde. But Santana didn’t look like her mother either.

"She is my daughter, and I can't wait to meet her. Now get your ass in gear and find her." Don paused. "Don't make the same mistake that I did, because you'll regret it the rest of your life."

Suddenly everything was so clear to Luc. He didn't care if Santana was human or wolf. He had to find her so he could find out what had driven her from him. If it was anything he could fix, he'd fix it. If she would have him, he'd claim her the instant he found her, and he'd let the whole world know. He would not make the same mistake as Don.

A firm knock on the door drew Luc's attention. "Enter."

Adolf poked his head inside. "I can come back."

Luc motioned with his hand for Adolf to enter. "I hope you've found Santana."

"Yes and no."

"What does that mean?"

"The satellite picks up Arianna's signals every once in a while. We know she's heading west. It's just a matter of time before the satellite company can keep a constant track on her."

"Good," said Luc. "Load up the men. We're going hunting."

Don stood. "I'm going with you."

Oh hell no. "Sir, I'll bring her home, I promise. She and I have some things to work out"—*before you are thrown into the picture*—"first." He'd hate for Don to see him spank his little girl, because that's what Luc had in mind.

Knowledge touched Don's eyes before he nodded in agreement. "I suppose I can wait a few more days."

"Thank you, sir."

"Luc, there's something else."

Luc turned back to Adolf as foreboding wove across him. "What?"

Adolf pulled a folded piece of paper from his shirt pocket and handed it to Luc. "The maids found this under your bed this morning."

Luc took the paper and realized his own hand shook. His gut rolled into a ball as he opened the paper. As he read the words, he almost cried. Santana had left him to protect him. Luc handed the paper to Don because Don was a part of this now. He had the right to know.

Don read the note and smiled. "Looks to me like she wanted you to live at any cost."

Luc nodded. But she should have come to him with the problem. But then, she didn't know that because he'd never told her how much she meant to him.

The note frightened him. A threat had been made again in his very home, and he had no idea who it was.

"Adolf, do you have anyone you can assign to find out what's going on in my own home? I want to know who sent this."

"I'll assign someone immediately."

Santana may not be safe. He had to go after her. *Now*.

* * *

He watched Luc's men prepare to leave, knowing what they were doing, who they were going after. But he was way ahead of them. It was time to stop playing games.

He flipped open his phone and dialed a number. When someone on the other end answered, he said, "Report."

"She's still traveling west with those wolves of hers."

"Keep following her. I want a report every four hours."

He flipped the phone shut. Lucky for him, she had a fourteen-hour head start. He knew she had to find a place to house the wolves, which meant she was fleeing to some remote wilderness where her seclusion would ensure she could provide them with natural surroundings while she tried to convince the pair to be her pets. That was so stupid, he almost laughed. His plan was simple. When she stopped, he would do what he should have done in the beginning—kill her himself.

Chapter Twenty-four

Seven days later, the sun high in the sky, Santana stepped onto the rickety back porch of her rented hole-in-the-wall cabin outside of Columbia Falls, Montana. Luckily for her, the cabin was on the edge of Flathead National Forest. The view was literally breathtaking. She took a sip of her coffee, which definitely tasted better than she'd ever had—must be the well water. The great-tasting water and the view were the only things going for this place. Built in the early forties, it was small, sparsely furnished, and lacked everything she needed to survive. She was thankful for one thing—she hadn't been born in the forties.

And it was cold here. She pulled her jacket around her. "Should have thought about that before you picked this place," she mumbled to herself as she blew across the cup. The tendrils of warmth felt good on her face, and the mug helped warm her hands.

Of course, there was no Internet service; she had to go into town for that. She had considered looking into satellite Internet, and it cost a small fortune. She added that to the list of things she needed to do. First she had to find a more permanent place to live and then a job. She was considering Florida. Would Savage like the Everglades, or would it be too hot for him?

She stepped from the porch and winced. Two thousand two hundred and some miles in forty-some hours was hell on the body and probably a world record. She'd driven as fast as she could because shoveling wolf shit from a cage where the wolf wanted to bite you wasn't fun. She kept telling herself that Savage was just putting on a show for Arianna. However, they seemed to like her when she fed and watered them.

The house backed up to the tree line. She had paid a month's salary for the fence that circled the little house and part of the trees. Santana crossed to where Savage and Santana were housed in a smaller section of the fenced-in area. She wanted Arianna as close to the forest as possible without actually having her freedom. *Hell, Santana, you really want her and Savage inside on your bed like old times.* She missed Savage and Luc in her bed. In fact, she'd come to loath sleeping alone, which was why she'd ended up on the grungy couch, which was killing her back.

She stopped at the gate, and Arianna greeted her with a low growl. Santana growled back. Savage had placed himself between her and Arianna, and Santana thought that was so sweet. Savage would probably attack her to protect Arianna, and that was okay. Hell, she'd walked away from Luc to save his life. She

understood doing what had to be done, especially if it was because things were out of your control. The key was not having any regrets.

And that was some bullshit.

Santana had many regrets. She regretted not saving Michael. She regretted not telling Luc she loved him sooner, instead of waiting until he was so drugged up, he probably didn't remember she'd even said it. The ache in her heart made her regret ever meeting Luc. She regretted Savage finding his mate.

She regretted being lonely. She'd always tried to shield herself from just this kind of hurt, but losing Luc and Savage, both at the same time, was almost too much. At least she had Savage back—well, sort of. He wasn't totally hers anymore because now she had to share him.

And right now she regretted being born. "You're such a bitch, Santana," she mumbled to herself.

After taking another swallow of her sent-from-heaven coffee, she dumped the rest on the ground. She had a plan today, and damn it, she was going to execute it. She sat the cup on the ground and opened the gate. Arianna moved farther to the back, and Savage actually bared his teeth at Santana. She didn't latch the gate back. If Savage was going to kill her, then she wanted him to at least have the chance to free himself and his mate. There was food in the house they could survive on while they chewed through the fence.

Her heart broke as she stepped forward and Savage stepped back. "I know you don't like me anymore, Savage, but I need you."

Savage cocked his head to the side like he used to do, and a tear slipped down her face. She sat on the ground and wiped the tear. She would not cry. It wasn't Savage's fault.

She reached into her coat pocket and retrieved Savage's favorite cookie. She held her hand out and fought her quivering lip. "It's your favorite," she managed to get out.

Savage looked at her and then the cookie.

"Come on, boy. Just take it. Make *me* feel better. I deserve a little happiness, don't I?"

She wiped another tear as Savage inched forward. She kept quiet, not wanting to give him an excuse to back off. When he was two inches from her, he stopped and plucked the cookie from her hand. When his soft lips and whiskers tickled her hand, she fought back a sob. God, how she missed him. She had never realized how much joy she'd gotten just from feeding him cookies and stroking his fur.

She reached into her pocket for another cookie. Savage quickly snatched it up as well, but instead of wolfing it down, he turned and walked over to Arianna. He placed the cookie on the ground, and Santana had to hold her hand over her mouth to keep from crying out loud and startling Arianna.

Through her tears, Santana watched Arianna sniff the cookie and then take it gently into her mouth. Santana grinned through her tears as Arianna chewed it slowly. She doubted Luc served cookies to his wolves. She took two more cookies from her pocket. Savage ate his and then took Arianna hers. The care Savage had for Arianna was almost more than she could bear.

Santana withdrew the last two cookies and offered one to Savage, which he quickly gobbled up. Savage loved these cookies, and she felt bad she hadn't bought some while she was at Luc's. When Savage reached for the other cookie, Santana snatched it back.

"Sit," she said to Savage, and when he obeyed her, she thought her heart would burst with joy. Santana held the cookie out for Arianna and waited. Santana eased her other hand out to stroke Savage's fur, and Savage rewarded her by thumping his tail.

Arianna eyed the cookie, and Santana kept her mouth closed, not wanting to startle her in any way. Santana could almost see the indecision in Arianna as she looked at the cookie, then Savage, and then her. The taste of the cookie got the best of her. Arianna inched forward, bit by bit. Savage kept a watchful eye on Arianna, Santana, and the cookie.

In a move Santana almost missed, Arianna grabbed the cookie, barely touching Santana's hand in the process. Santana sucked in a huge breath and smiled. Progress was good. Santana stood and wiped the dirt from her backside. She stepped through the gate and left it open, praying they would follow.

In the kitchen she made two bologna sandwiches. One for her and one for them. Grabbing a bottle of water, she made her way through the one-room house and back onto her dilapidated porch. Plopping down on the steps she was sure wouldn't pass a health inspection, she was overjoyed that Savage was at the end of the porch and Arianna was about three feet behind him. She took a big bite of her sandwich, knowing Savage could never resist sharing a meal with her. Savage came and sat down in front of her, his tail wagging.

Santana peeled off an edge and tossed it to Savage. That piece of meat and bread didn't stand a chance in hell of hitting the ground.

"Good boy."

Santana tossed another piece toward Arianna, which landed in the dirt. Santana took another bite as Arianna inched forward. She sniffed once and then plucked it from the ground.

"Nobody can resist bologna, even if it's covered in dirt."

She took another bite and repeated the process, drawing Arianna closer with each throw, and wondered if she piled several sandwiches in her bed, would they'd both sleep with her. Hell, she'd sew a bologna blanket if they'd crawl onto the bed.

When the sandwiches were gone, Arianna was five feet from Santana. Santana was over the moon. Her plan was working. She slowly stood and went into the kitchen, leaving the door open with the hope that Savage would follow her. After

cleaning up the four-by-four kitchen, which took all of two seconds, she stepped back into her six-by-six den.

Santana fell onto the vinyl couch, plopped her feet up on the rickety coffee table, and pressed the On button to the satellite TV, which was the only thing this cabin had going for it. Pulling a thick blanket over herself, she snuggled down against the cold couch and glanced briefly at the door she'd left open. She was a little disappointed not to see a snout, but she knew she had to go slow, not force the issue. She closed her eyes to plan her next move on Savage and his mate to gain their trust.

* * *

He flipped open his phone. "Well?"

"She's holed up in a rented cabin in Montana. You want me to kill her tonight?"

"No," he said. "I've got a chopper waiting to take me there. Give me the GPS coordinates and make sure she stays put."

After listening to his soldier-for-hire rattled off the coordinates, he flipped the phone shut. The little bitch had been running for almost a week. The council meeting was on hold while Luc chased his little whore across the country. He laughed. Luc should have been smart and used a helicopter instead of driving. The way he figured it, he'd get there about two hours before Luc did. Too bad he couldn't kill the bitch with Luc watching. That would have been sweet.

Santana and Luc were the only two things that would prevent him from taking his rightful seat as the head of the council, a right that would no longer be denied him. Santana had to die now. Luc, maybe in another two or three years.

After that, he would be unstoppable.

* * *

Santana opened her eyes as heat raced through her. She sat up and threw the covers off. My God, was she having a hot flash...thirty years too early? She wanted to go outside and take her clothes off, she was so hot, but she also didn't want to disturb Arianna, who lay just outside the door with Savage lying on the inside. Progress. This was progress.

She rolled her neck to work out the kinks. A glance at the TV let her know hockey was on. All she wanted to do was crawl into the TV, strip, and lie on the ice. She stood too quickly, causing both wolves to perk up, Arianna skittishly. "Sorry, guys."

She pulled her heavy jacket off and fanned herself. Her arms tingled, followed by her legs. "Damn, I hope Gabriella didn't give me her virus," she said out loud to her pets, sure they would understand what she was saying.

She went to the kitchen and used the hand pump to fill a glass with water. She held the glass up and looked for anything funky floating in it—like volcanic ash or

toxic waste—but it was clear as a bell. She downed the glass and refilled it, thinking maybe she should dump this glassful on her head.

Another shot of heat zipped through her, this one ending in her womb. Her pussy swelled; her clit burned.

And she was hornier than she'd ever been.

She fought the urge to rub her hand frantically against her clit, anything to ease the need that bordered on pain. What was happening to her? What kind of virus ignited the intense desire to have sex? If this happened at the club, she would have sworn someone had spiked her drink with women's Viagra. She squeezed her legs together to provide relief, but that only made it worse.

She lifted the glass, intending to pour it over her head, when she heard a soft *thud* in the wall by her head. Her mind registered what was happening when one of the three windows in her little slice of heaven shattered. She dropped to her knees as another bullet zinged by and shattered the second window over the sink.

Savage was standing by the door, and she knew she had to get him and Arianna inside because someone could easily pick them off with a rifle if they were outside in the fence. She could turn them loose in the woods, but she didn't know how many shooters there were and if Savage and Arianna could even make it to the woods without getting picked off. Besides, she wasn't sure she could get Savage and Arianna to obey her command to follow her into the woods. She'd never forgive herself if Arianna or Savage got shot. She crawled on all fours to the 1940s fridge that was so old, she had to pull the lever to open it. Keeping her head down, she fumbled around on the fridge racks for the bologna. Another shot pinged the old fridge, and she was glad she'd paid for renters insurance. She found the bologna, shucked the plastic, and tossed one piece onto the floor.

Arianna was standing up by now, so she inched in and swiped the meat. Santana ordered Savage to stay and threw another piece farther inside the door. Arianna inched farther and took the second piece. Santana threw the next piece in front of the couch, and when Arianna moved, Santana crawled to the door and closed it. She threw the remaining pieces to Savage as another shot shattered the coffeepot.

"Damn. They shot one of the best things in this whole place." Crawling to her cot, she made up her mind that she had to get out of here. That was the only way she could keep Savage and Arianna safe. She didn't want anyone rushing the cabin, since there was nowhere to hide in here anyway and she couldn't control Savage and Arianna. She was sure Savage would attack anyone who came through the door, maybe not to save her but to save Arianna. But Santana couldn't risk someone coming through the door and shooting Savage or Arianna. Besides, her gut told her they wanted her.

She pulled out a box from under the cot, flipped open the lid, and grabbed her shoulder holster with the two pistols she'd bought on her way across the country. Apparently someone had followed her, but she still didn't know why. While lying on the floor, she strapped on the holster and got her Mossberg 500 Persuader 8-shot

12-gauge shotgun. She'd paid a fortune for them on the street because she wanted to pay cash and not fill out any forms.

Another bullet assaulted the old cabin, and she knew someone wasn't trying to kill her, *yet*. They were just playing with her. Hell, she was tired of this shit. She had other things to do, like have an orgasm. She wiped the sweat from her brow. She was still burning up, but at least her mind was occupied. Crawling back to the door, she eased it open. Based on the placement of the holes in her little-slice-of-heaven cabin, she knew the shooter was to her left. She pulled one of her pistols, took a deep breath, and in a quick move, slipped through the door and closed it behind her. She sprinted toward the gate, shot the lock, and threw her body against it, sending the gate ricocheting off the fence. She sprinted to the right, heading for the tree line, hoping the bastard followed.

She slipped into the forest at the same moment a bullet hit the tree beside her head. A few yards into the woods, she stopped to listen. The smell of pine calmed her. So did the cool air against her feverish skin. At least she had a chance now. But she had to find her assassin before the sun set.

The hunter had just become the hunted.

* * *

He watched her run from the house and smiled to himself. His plan was working. She was out in the open, away from her pet. And she was in the woods. As a wolf, he owned the woods. Hunting her sent a thrill through his body. Not needing the rifle anymore, he put it on the ground, undressed, and laid his clothes neatly in a pile. He'd be back for them later, when she was dead.

"You did a good job of tracking her," he said to the dead werewolf at his feet.

Dead men couldn't talk, and that was a good thing.

* * *

Luc sighed in relief when the cabin came into view, thankful for his wolf eyes since the damn thing was so small. And there was his truck too, which was almost bigger than the cabin. They were high on a ridge overlooking the valley. It wouldn't be long before he held her in his arms, kissed her, and then spanked her ass for running.

He was bone tired. They'd driven straight through, everyone taking turns to drive. He couldn't wait to shift and ease the stiffness in his back.

His heart thudded to a stop when a rifle shot split the cool evening air. He hoped it was hunters, but knew it wasn't. Two more shots echoed as he told Adolf to floor it. The SUV sped over the dirt road that hadn't seen a box blade or road grader in forever. He grabbed the oh-Jesus bar as the vehicle took two potholes at Mach 1.

More shots rang out, and Luc prayed Santana would stay put. They were above and behind the shooter, and he wanted to be between the shooter and her. Trees blocked his view, but he caught a glimpse of something running toward the woods. "Damn, why can't that woman stay put?"

Adolf looked at him. "I don't know the answer to that. She has the same bad habits as you do."

Luc growled. He'd heard a thousand reasons why he should've stayed at home and let his men handle this. Finally he'd had to tell Adolf to either shut up or get the fuck out of the SUV. Of course, it was easier to make the point when Luc was driving, pulling to the side of the road, and slamming on the brakes.

He ignored Adolf and tried to pull a plan out of his ass. If the shooter was a werewolf—and Luc was betting he was—the man would have a good two or three minute head start on Luc by the time they got down the mountain.

"Do you have a plan, Adolf?"

Adolf hitched his brow. "Let the men in the vehicle behind us try to find the shooter's nest and track him from there. We will drive to where she disappeared and start from there. The third vehicle will start in the middle."

Luc grinned. "That sounds like a fine plan. No wonder I keep you around."

Adolf kept his face stoic as he radioed the plan to the other vehicles. Luc shed his clothes along with his men and prayed Santana would hide from the shooter until he got there.

He frowned. *What are the chances of her doing that?*

Chapter Twenty-five

Santana couldn't concentrate. Her mind was awash with tantalizing images of Luc and all the things she wanted him to do to her. Of course, if she didn't get her ass in gear and her head on straight, Luc wouldn't be doing any of those things to her. She wiped her lip on her shirtsleeve and tried to pull a plan together. Her whole body was shaking. Instead of tracking the guy, her brain recognized she had to let him come to her. She was in no condition to go hunting.

She moved deeper into the woods and toward her attacker's position, searching for a place to wait, hoping she had the fortitude to be patient. Patience wasn't something she'd had before this sickness, and now she literally wanted to jump out of her skin.

Stopping to rest beside a tree, which was absurd for her, she leaned against it for support. Her whole body trembled. She laid the shotgun against the tree and holstered her gun. Wiping the sweat from her face, she wondered when this heat wave had blown in. She could have sworn she was complaining of the cold weather just a bit earlier.

She reached for the shotgun, and a freight train hit her. She careened backward but managed to roll to a crouch. She blinked to clear her head and found herself staring at a snarling wolf. She knew it wasn't Luc. This wolf was much smaller. She grabbed for her handguns, but one was missing. She'd lost it during her tumble. The other handgun cleared her holster. She brought it up, but before she could squeeze the trigger, the wolf lunged, bit her wrist, and twisted.

Santana cried out at the excruciating pain as the gun fell from her damaged wrist. Falling forward onto her knees, she caught herself with her good arm. Blood oozed from the bite marks. She slowly lifted her head and eyed the beast. He growled and paced back and forth.

The wolf stopped pacing and sat. She heard the popping of bones as it shifted into a man. It was just as amazing this time as it had been the last two times she'd witnessed a shift. When the transformation was complete, a man was crouched in front of her. She searched his face, wanting to know if she'd ever met him before. Was this the man who wanted her dead, or just the hired killer? He stood and rolled his neck. His cock jutted out, thick and heavy.

"Who are you?" she asked, ignoring the pain in her wrist and the fire inside her.

The man picked up her pistol and tossed it in the brush. "My name is Ben Amos."

"Nice to meet you, Ben." *Not.* "Why are you trying to kill me?"

"I suppose it's not going to hurt that you know, since you're going to be dead in a few minutes."

Not without a fight, asshole.

"My mother was seeing Don Cantor, a powerful werewolf in his own right. But then Don met your mother and lost all interest in my mother. I went from a sure thing of gaining a powerful father to nothing because of your bitch mother."

"So what does that have to do with me?"

Don's smile was evil and made the hairs on her arm stand at attention. "It has everything to do with you. My mother knew where your mother was and kept tabs on her. It didn't take long before my mother knew your mother was pregnant with you, and that Don was the father. Why my mother didn't have the guts to kill you then, I'll never know. But that's going to be rectified here real soon."

"But I was...away for a few years. How did you find me?"

"My mother paid a man to take pictures of you every year. Then your mother died and you disappeared. She searched for you but never found you. We could only hope you'd turn up in a potter's field. Then one day I visited the little strip club you whore in, and you were stupid enough to use your real name instead of a stage name. I couldn't believe my good fortune. And then I hatched this plan to have you killed on Luc's land. You should have died then."

"I'm not sorry."

"No, I don't suppose you are." Don leaned forward and sniffed. "You're in the beginnings of mating heat."

Heat? I don't even know what that means.

"Tell me, do you have this intense desire to fuck?"

Santana lifted her head. "No."

"You forget, I can smell your lies along with your mating hormones. We call them were-mones."

Damn that were-nose again.

The lunatic in front of her laughed and rubbed his hands together. "Your mother had to go. Do you know what sent her running from Don?"

Santana shook her head as two pains racked her body; the worst seemed to be this virus thing. It was true. She did want to fuck Luc and only Luc, and she had no desire to even touch the naked man in front of her.

"My mother sent a note."

Santana's eyes rounded in surprise. Realization struck her like a bolt of lightning.

"I see you understand. It worked just as well then as it did now."

"I still don't understand. Why do I need to die?"

"Oh come on. You can't be that dense." He blew out an exaggerated breath, like she was the dumbest thing he'd ever seen. "Surely there are some brains to go with that beauty of yours."

Santana could only look at him. Her brain was mush from her throbbing wrist to her libido that was stuck in overdrive.

"You are Don's only heir," he finally said.

Heir? So Don might be her father if she could believe this maniac. Had her mother loved Don? "But how can you be so sure? I'm not a werewolf."

"Actually you are. The mating heat proves that. See, if Luc had mated you, you would have experienced this desire the second he bit you just for that purpose, but you've been running for over a week now, and you're just starting. You're a werewolf in heat."

Her mind was in turmoil from information, pain, and desire, but having werewolf blood would explain a few things. Like the fact that she was never, ever sick, and she did heal fast. The scars on her assets were almost gone, and the blood pouring from her wrist had slowed, but she felt light-headed from blood loss. "But I can't change."

He rubbed his jaw. "Yeah, I have a theory about that. Your mother was so inferior you can't shift, and she didn't try to teach you to shift because you showed no promise to do so."

No, her mother hadn't done that, but perhaps her mother didn't want to teach her. Maybe Santana's mother had been afraid to teach her.

She managed to sit back on her knees, hugged her wrist to her chest, and shoved the past to the back of her mind. Right now she had more pressing issues to deal with. Like a lunatic werewolf. "What does killing me gain you?"

"You're the heir to Don's massive fortune, not to mention his seat on the council. And even though you are not pure-blooded, I'm sure Don could convince the council to appoint you to his council seat, just like he is going to do for me. All of that is rightfully *mine*. Even though he never loved my mother and he never adopted me, I was always there for him."

"Well, as far as I'm concerned, you can have it."

"My God, you are so stupid. I don't know what Luc sees in you. If Don knew of his love child, he'd make sure it all went to you whether you want it or not."

"But that's just it. You don't know if this Don guy is my father. My mother could have found another man."

Ben shook his head. "It doesn't work that way. True-mates are only meant for one another. Don and your whore mother were true-mates. She would have never longed for anyone but Don, and I can tell you, Don has never found another mate. Don was on the verge of marrying my mother because he believed he would never find a true-mate, and then your mother snatched him away."

"Well, you can kill me if you want to, but it seems to be overkill since you don't really know if Don's my father or not."

"And we will never know. I'm going to fuck you and then kill you and then dump you in the icy river. Your beloved Luc is on his way, but all he's going to find—if he finds you at all—is your mutilated body. He'll know you were killed by a wolf, but he won't know who because the river will wash my scent away."

The river. Apparently life did move in a circle. She shoved her maybe-father and her maybe-werewolf status to the back of her mind and tried to figure a way out of this mess. She couldn't let Savage and Arianna starve to death in her cabin. Now she wished she'd left the cabin door open. If the man changed back to a wolf, there was no way she could outrun him, even without a bleeder, but if he wanted to fuck, he'd have to stay in human form...hopefully.

She saw his nostrils flair. "Your mating heat is so tempting, so sweet. Normally you'd shift and have many wolves competing against one another to claim you, but you'll have to settle for just me. Your inability to shift must be a flaw on your bitch mother's side. She wasn't a pure-blood, you know."

"What is a pure-blood?" She had to keep him talking, delay the inevitable, pull a plan out of her ass.

"There are seven ruling families, and all of those families have mated among the seven houses. Our blood hasn't been diluted by humans."

"You're a pure-blood?" she asked as she tried to work out a plan in her befuddled mind.

"Yes," he said, very proud, very vain. "My mother and father both came from one of the seven families, but my father wasn't even close to sitting at the head of the family. And then he died. But when Don didn't marry my mother, that pretty much sealed my fate as far as ruling my family." His lips curled up. "Don is such a pushover. All these years, I've bolstered his ego, agreed with everything that came out of his stupid mouth, and most of what came out was utterly ridiculous. Like the upcoming council vote concerning the werewolf status. Don thinks we should still hide from the humans."

"And you disagree because...?"

"We're better than humans. We don't need to hide; we need to make our presence known."

Based on the man's arrogance, she had to ask. "Are you the one who tried to have Luc killed?"

"Yes. Luc is getting too powerful. He always gets his way. He's definitely voting against our people taking our rightful place above the humans, and he has the influence to convince people to vote with him. Unfortunately I won't be able to kill Luc before the council vote." He shrugged. "But next year Don's vote will be replaced by mine, and if I eliminate Luc, well, there'd be nothing left to stop me." Ben sneered at her. "But don't get me wrong. There are a lot of people who want Luc dead and a more reasonable council chair elected."

Santana noticed his eyes grew wild with excitement, but right now she really didn't give a shit if the werewolves came out of the closet or not. Another spasm of pain rolled through her, and if she hadn't already been on her knees, she would be now. Heat infused her entire body. Wild, all-consuming heat that brought with it the need to fuck. She needed Luc...in more ways than one. She made up her mind she wasn't going down without a fight. She might lose to a wolf, but she wouldn't lose to a man. She'd actually had it up to her ears with arrogant, evil men. Her only regret was Luc. She loved him. Damn it.

"Luc is so naive. He thinks he has loyalty from all his servants, but he doesn't. That's the thing about lowly servants; they'd sell their soul for a dollar. For a little money, I know everything about Luc. I can get to him at any time. Even though Don and I hadn't arrived at Luc's yet for the council meeting, I had one of Luc's lowly help—who's more loyal to me than to Luc—send you that note. I wasn't there, so nothing can be traced back to me."

Fear coursed through her mind. Luc didn't know he had a spy on his payroll, one who could get him killed. Somehow she had to tell him. She had to kill this bastard. Santana was unprepared for Ben's swift movement. He tackled her, and she landed flat on her back, her head recoiling off the ground. She kicked her legs and took a swing with her good arm, but he easily blocked it, his sinister laughter echoing through the trees. His body was lying halfway on her, his legs thrown over hers, and he gripped her throat with one hand and held his other hand up. She was mesmerized as she watched claws form and hair grow. He grinned, and she knew he did so at the surprise on her face. She could live to be a hundred and never get used to that.

"Be still while I cut your clothes off, or I'll kill you now and I'll still fuck you."

The sound of her shirt ripping brought back another night of horror in another dark forest. Then he placed one claw between her breasts and sliced through the lace holding the cups. Cool night air rushed her skin.

"You have the most beautiful breasts I've ever seen." His hand tightened on her throat. "Now get out of those jeans."

Her good hand fumbled with the zipper and finally slid it down. She popped the button and managed to wiggle her pants partway down her hips. He rolled off her, gripped the jeans, and jerked them down to her knees.

"Kick them off," he ordered.

She did, and as she did so all the awful things in her life played like a movie in her mind: her mother drinking herself to death; fighting to survive on the streets; being sexually abused by a madman; Michael's death; her werewolf assassins. And now this. All because her maybe-father, a father she'd always wanted, was a powerful man and this Ben guy wanted what her maybe-father had.

Damn, she couldn't wait to get in the river.

Because then it would be over.

When Ben buried his face in her breasts, she turned her head and thought about Luc. A sob escaped, a sob from the deepest part of her soul. Her life was over. She'd run away from the only good thing in her life, and now she wasn't so sure Luc would ever be safe. Ben was starved for power, even more so than Gabriella and her father, and she had no doubt this madman would kill Luc if necessary. He shoved his leg between hers, prying them open. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine it was Luc doing this, Luc who was easing the burning ache in her womb, that Luc was telling her he loved her, really loved her.

But it didn't work.

She forced in a deep breath, knowing she had to escape this madman to save Luc. She groped for a weapon with her good hand. She curled her fingers over a rock, and with all the strength she could muster, she slammed the rock against Ben's head. The blow forced Ben to move off her. She rolled to her knees and crawled away.

She saw Ben struggle to his feet, blood dripping through the hand he held to the side of his head. The most evil, most vile expression she'd ever seen on a face graced Ben's. "*You bitch*. I'm going to kill you slowly, so slowly you'll beg me to take your life—"

A ferocious growl gave her gooseflesh. Something rushed past her, and cool air brushed her heated skin. She lifted her head to see a black wolf rolling over Ben. Luc!

Luc backed off of Ben. What was he doing? Why wasn't he ripping this asshole's throat out?

"Well," said Ben. "You want to fight like wolves over the bitch in heat? Fine with me, and when I win, I'm going to fuck her long and hard. And then I'm going to kill her."

Bones cracked, his body contorted, hair grew, and sharp teeth emerged.

The two wolves circled each other, fangs bared, the snarling sending chills across her skin. Ben's wolf lunged first, but Luc rose up and met him head-on. They jockeyed for position in a dance that would be graceful if she didn't know they both were intent on killing each other. It reminded her of a dogfight, only on a much scarier scale. She knew she should do something to help Luc, like find her weapon, but the pain and blood loss had zapped her strength.

Luc's wolf was bigger, and he overpowered Ben. Ben landed on his back but managed to right himself. Luc charged, hitting Ben in his side. Ben yelped, and she swore she heard ribs break.

Her eyes rounded as Ben shifted his body back to that of a man and crawled toward the thick underbrush. A scream lodged in her throat when Ben rolled on his back, her gun in his hand. Before Ben could fire, Luc rushed him, his massive jaws clamping on Ben's throat.

Then a bloodcurdling scream scraped down her spine.

A black wolf stood over Ben, blood dripping from his mouth. Relief quickly replaced her fear, and if she hadn't been already on the ground, she would have fallen, her legs too shaky to hold her up. She managed a weak smile as the wolf trotted over to her and nudged her with his nose. Luc shifted.

"Hi," he said. His hand trembled as he brushed the hair out of her eyes.

"Hi," she managed to say.

Chapter Twenty-six

Luc's heart thundered in his ears as he knelt and examined her broken wrist. Powerful jaws had crushed the bones. She'd lost a lot of blood. His beast snarled at the pain she must have experienced. "Listen to me, Santana. You're a werewolf, and you need to shift so your wolf can heal your body."

She shook her head, her eyes glassy with pain. Now that she didn't have to fear for her life, the adrenaline was fast turning to numbness and pain. He needed her with him for a little longer.

"I'm not a true werewolf. I can't change."

"Sure you can, honey. You've just never tried to before. Think of the wolf. She's got to be a cute little thing. Come on, baby; let me see your wolf."

Luc knew his voice shook, hoping she didn't hear the desperation, the fear, the all-consuming fear. He remembered the first time he'd caught her scent. It was sensual and sweet, but there had also been a wildness to her that he hadn't recognized then, but now he knew her wolf was somewhere deep inside her.

"Think of the wolf. Hold that picture in your mind. Come on, baby. You can do it."

Her eyes closed, and a wave of fear raced through him. *God, please let her shift.* He was afraid to convert her. No one knew what a turning bite would do to a person who was already a werewolf, and he was just thankful he hadn't tried to convert her before. The sound of cracking bones brought a moan from her lips, but that sound make his beast howl with joy. Yes, it was somewhat painful, but it was a small price to pay for all the gifts that came with it.

"That's it, baby. The wolf wants to heal."

Her eyes fluttered open. "I'm doing it," she managed to say, her voice weak and pain riddled.

Luc smiled. "Yes, baby. You're shifting. Keep holding the wolf in your mind and let yourself go."

Luc was barely aware his men were moving around him. His next fear was if the little she-wolf could hold on long enough to heal, since this was her first time shifting. Santana was near exhaustion. And she was in heat. His beast growled at the other men, but Luc kept his focus on Santana and her injury. In the wild, a weakened she-wolf in heat would be in danger, but he wasn't going to let anything happen to her.

Luc sat with Santana's wolf an hour before her exhausted wolf couldn't hold her form anymore and shifted back to human form. He felt her pulse; it was steady, though a little weak. He examined her wrist. It looked good, more than good. He gently picked her up and followed his men out of the woods and to the cabin. Savage met him at the door, growling.

"It's okay, Savage. She's fine. She just needs to rest." Luc stepped past Savage. Arianna stood to the side, growling and cowering. Luc laid Santana on the bed and stepped back. Savage quickly moved in and sniffed his mistress. She didn't even stir when Savage placed his wet nose on her face and nudged her.

Luc scratched Savage behind the ears. "Just give her some time, boy." Luc tucked the flimsy covers around Santana and radioed Adolf to find more blankets.

Since he couldn't crawl onto the single cot with Santana, Luc dragged the couch over next to the cot and bumped the seat up against it. He crawled over the back and lay down, the old vinyl crinkling like paper under his weight. Well, at least he could see her, even though he couldn't hold her. She needed to rest, and he needed to be with her.

He thought about pulling Santana on top of him and sleeping that way, but he was afraid the cot and the couch would both collapse under the weight. Instead he brushed a stray hair from her face, pushed the blankets around her some more, and hunkered down to wait.

* * *

"Damn. Why is it so hot in here?" Santana asked as she kicked off the covers. She was naked, and it still felt like fire was racing along her skin.

"Because you're in heat."

Santana turned her head, and her heart skipped a beat. Luc lay on the too-small couch, bent like a pretzel, looking all sexy and sleepy.

"Yeah? That's what that Ben guy said."

Luc's face turned hard, his eyes black as a storm. "Ben is dead. He won't be bothering you again."

"Good." That was a relief. Ben was crazy. "Oh my God. Ben has—had—someone who works for you providing him information."

"I thought so. He didn't tell you who, did he?"

She shook her head. "He just said it was a lowly servant. He seemed very pleased with himself. He said he could get *you* anytime."

"Well, looks like he can't do that now."

Her mind replayed the images of the two wolves fighting, Luc ripping Ben's throat out. No, Ben wouldn't be a problem anymore. "So tell me what's happening to me. Why do I want to jump your bones?"

"Your wolf's in heat, and she wants me."

She smiled at the smug satisfaction on his face. "My wolf?" Santana vaguely remembered something about a wolf. There was pain. And then there was peace. "I changed to a wolf," she said, amazement in her voice. *My God, I'm one of them.*

"Yes, you did. A cute one at that."

She grinned, then sobered. "But why haven't I changed before now?"

Luc sighed. "I don't know. Your mother never taught you, and maybe your wolf wasn't strong enough to overcome the human side of your mind. You're a very strong-willed person, among other things. Stubbornness comes to mind."

Well, that made sense, kinda, sorta, in a roundabout way. Wouldn't this little trick of being able to change into a werewolf have come in handy over the years? It sure would have saved her hide a number of times.

"Where are Savage and Arianna?"

"Once Savage was convinced you'd be okay, I put them outside in the big fence. He was worried about you."

She couldn't help but smile. She just knew everything was going to be all right. Her gaze raked down his body, noting the bulge in his jeans. "You have too many clothes on."

Luc grinned and only took a second to shuck his clothes. He lay back down. "Better?"

She climbed off the cot and on top of him, the couch creaking and groaning in protest, and snuggled down against him. "It is now." His arms snaked around her and pulled her close. God, she loved the way she felt when he held her. He was big, strong, and she felt like she belonged.

"That man said he knew my father, Don."

"Yes, Don Cantor. Don loved your mother, but she left, and he didn't know where to find her."

"She left because of a note Ben's mother sent to her."

"Yeah?" She heard the surprise in his voice before he snuggled her closer against him. "That sounds familiar. I read another note like that." He pulled back and looked at her. "Why didn't you come to me?"

"Because your safety was more important than us."

"No. Look at me, Santana." She lifted her head, and caught his gaze with hers. "Nothing's more important than *us*. You and me. I can't survive without you. I have to be near you all the time."

"Really?" She understood the being-near part. She wanted to spend all her time with Luc. She missed him when he was away, thought of him most of the time, even when she tried to block him from her mind.

"Yes. I love you, Santana, with everything I am. You are my other half, my best half. And you've got to stop putting yourself in danger. If you die, a big part of me will die too. So promise me you'll let me know what's going on. No more running off."

Could she do that? Yeah, she could. "On one condition," she said boldly.

His brows bunched together. "What?"

"You have to hurry up and make love to me."

"I can do that." He leaned up and kissed her, his erection pressing into her belly. Cupping his face with both her hands, she kissed him back, drowning in the liquid heat of his mouth. But she couldn't wait. She had to have him inside her. Santana lifted her rear and positioned her pussy over his hard shaft. She knew she should go slow, but slow wasn't what she needed right now. She straightened and sank down, craving the friction, craving the fullness, fighting against impaling herself on him. His hips lifted, filling her more.

"Oh yes," she said. "This is what I've been wanting."

She forced her eyes open to look at Luc. This man loved her. He didn't care that she was a stripper or that she didn't have any money. Oh wait, she had some money. She thought of the twenty grand she'd won from Luc, sitting in the safe at his compound. Not that it was important. Nothing was as important as having Luc.

She increased her speed, and Luc reached up and pinched both her nipples. A warm sensation started low in her belly, building as hard flesh caressed sensitive tissue. A wild need rose inside her. She was so close, but she needed more. She leaned into Luc. She felt him kiss her faint bite mark before sinking his teeth in. Her orgasm erupted, sending a thousand erotic sensations through every nerve. White light exploded behind her eyes as her body bucked, wanting more, knowing it was too much.

He released her shoulder, and she felt fangs brush her lips. Her tongue touched the points. She had fangs? She leaned down and latched on to Luc's nipple. His "fuck yeah" echoed in her mind as he held her hips in place, pounding into her. The he shuddered, bucked, and exploded, causing her to orgasm again.

When his body stilled, she collapsed on him. "That was incredible."

"Yeah, it was."

"Let me catch my breath," she said. "And we'll go again."

He lifted his head and looked at her.

"What?" she asked. "I'm still...needy."

His head dropped back. "And you will be for a day or two. Maybe we'll go wolf next time."

"Hmm, that sounds different."

"It is. Much more wild."

"Ooo, I like wild."

"Hello, is everything all right in here?"

Santana stopped breathing. Fear skated through her body. Oh my God. Someone was in the cabin.

She peered over the back of the couch. A very distinguished-looking man had poked his head inside the door. His eyes narrowed in on her.

"Are you Santana?"

"Yes, sir," she managed to squeak out.

"You look like my mother, your grandmother."

Luc placed his hand on the couch back and pulled himself up. "Damn it, Don. I thought I told you to wait at the estate."

She felt the blood drain from her face, to be immediately followed by burning heat. If she was mortified before, she was doubly so now. The dad she'd never known had just caught her making out!

Don shrugged. "You did, but I couldn't wait."

"We'll be out in a minute."

"I'll be outside waiting. Luc, don't make me wait any longer to meet my daughter."

Santana saw the sternness on the man's face before he turned and walked away. Was he mad at her or Luc or both?

Luc lay down and pulled Santana to him. "I'm going to kill your dad."

"Can I at least meet him first...with some clothes on?"

Epilogue

Six years later

Luc watched the thirty-some kids play in the pool, overseen by four lifeguards, a pile of parents, and even more bodyguards. The twins' birthday. Who would have thought he'd have twins. He was blessed with Sybil and Sable. They were five today. God, they were wonderful, so full of life and mischief, just like their mother.

Luc had tripled the security staff. Each of his girls had two bodyguards when they went anywhere, and that included school. Luc wanted to hire tutors, but Santana wanted them to have everything she'd never had, and that included going to school, but the only way Luc would allow any of them to leave the estate was with armed guards. Of course, Willie, who now insisted on being called Will—W.T. by his friends—was going to school too, but with only one bodyguard. Will insisted he could take care of himself, and he probably could since he was stronger, taller, and bigger than all the other kids his age.

Santana and Luc had adopted Will right after they found out the twins were on the way. Will was their big brother, and he took that responsibility seriously. When the girls were babies, Will would often be found asleep on the floor beside their cribs. He watched them like a hawk, sometimes forsaking his own growing up to ensure theirs.

The twins were into dance, gymnastics, piano, Girl Scouts, and several more things Luc couldn't keep straight. Willie was into baseball, football, and basketball. Next week the girls and Santana were going camping with the Girl Scouts. Luc had already handpicked the men who would stay out of sight, patrolling the campsite, except for the six bodyguards actually assigned to them. Luc hated all the security, but he wouldn't risk their lives. It was a good thing werewolves didn't lose their hair; otherwise Adolf would be bald, trying as he did to provide security for the five of them.

Like all these people here today. A thorough background check had been made on every guest; photo recognition had been implemented to make sure no one slipped in who hadn't been invited. Hell, Adolf probably knew more about these people than the people did about themselves. And after everyone left, a security check would be executed, looking for anything left behind, like listening devices.

Luc regretted he had to raise his kids like this, but according to dead-Ben by way of Santana, there was still a threat. Perhaps more so than ever, since two

council chairs were a mated pair. That had never happened before, but with Santana the only heir, Don's seat had become Santana's, and that pissed off a lot of people. Even though most of those who'd been pissed off had voted to allow a non-pure-blood to hold a seat. But that was a good thing and long overdue. Don was still berating himself for not seeing the depraved man that Ben had become.

Luc would never forget that day when he'd showed Ben's body to Don. Don had been in shock that the man he'd groomed to take his council seat would stoop to concealing his daughter all those years and then trying to kill her. But Don and Santana had grown close, in spite of the fact that she had shocked the shit out of him when she had finally gotten enough nerve to tell him about her life on the street. Of course, Don never missed the chance to tell Santana how wonderful her mother was, and now Santana understood that her mother had grieved herself to death over Don.

Luc sensed his mate before an arm snaked around his middle. He pulled her to his side and kissed the top of her head. "Nice party."

"Yes, it is. The girls have so many friends."

Luc's heart hitched. Santana hadn't had many friends growing up, and that was very important to her. Savage and Arianna lived in the forest on the estate, and Arianna had learned to accept Santana as a friend, especially when bribed with cookies or bologna. They'd had three sets of pups, which Santana had managed to somewhat domesticate.

"Well, if they have any more friends, I'll have to hire more security."

She looked askance at him. "I don't even want to know about security for this party."

"Trust me, you don't."

"Maybe we should have invited some of Will's friends."

Luc followed Santana's gaze to where Will leaned against the fence and stood watch by the pool. He knew it wouldn't make any difference whether Will had friends there or not. Will would only be a few feet away from the girls. Will adored them, and they loved him back. In fact, come to think of it, Will got more possessive over them every day. Luc frowned, but another idea diverted him from following that line of thought.

"Where's my wonderful father-in-law?" Luc asked, not really wanting to know.

"He should be here any minute with the girls' gifts."

"Do I need to clear out the west lawn so he can put them there?"

Santana laughed. "I doubt the west lawn would be big enough. I hope he didn't bring any more toys. They have too many already."

"Speaking of toys, several new toys were delivered today."

"Oh really? Like what?"

"I'm not telling, but after the kids go to bed tonight, meet me in the playroom."

"And if I don't?"

"I'll come and get you, shackle you to the spanking bench, and paddle that pretty ass of yours."

Luc had to grin. Santana always disobeyed him to get punished. It had taken him a while, but she'd come to love the playroom. She trusted him with her pleasure, knew he put her needs above his own. She'd try anything—once—and if she didn't like it, she'd let him know. She wasn't a true submissive, but that was okay because total domination of Santana wasn't what he wanted.

Luc saw his son walk toward him with a serious look on his face, too serious for a twelve-year-old. "You can't let Grandpa Don give them their birthday presents."

"Why not?" asked Santana.

"I saw him pull into the driveway, pulling a horse trailer."

Luc blanched. His babies weren't ready to learn to ride yet.

"I hope he brought them ponies," said Santana in that optimistic voice of hers.

Luc didn't buy that for one second. Don had probably bought two of the best horses money could buy.

"If they're not ponies, you have to make him take them back," said Will.

Santana looped her arm around Will, and they all waited as the horse trailer stopped. Don bailed out, and two wet munchkins ran to him. He snatched them up and kissed them both.

"I have a surprise for my favorite girls," said Don.

"Let us see," they both said in unison.

Don moved to stand with Luc, Santana, and Will and waited while two Shetland ponies were led from the back of the trailer, both with matching pink bows. The girls started squealing as only little girls could do.

"Those ponies are twins, just like my best girls are."

Everyone moved over to the two white ponies. "They're beautiful," said Santana as she reached out and stroked one.

Don let the girls down, and they cautiously approached the ponies. Luc had already taught them to move slowly around animals, especially when the animal didn't know them.

Don turned to Luc and said quietly, "I've injected them with my blood, so they should be used to the wild smell in us."

Sable and Sybil raced back to Will, each taking one of his hands. "Can you take us riding?" they asked in unison.

"Sure. I'll walk you around," he replied.

The girls squealed again.

"But you have to not make so much noise. They're not used to you yet."

Will placed them on the ponies, took the reins, and led them around.

* * *

Later that afternoon, Will leaned against the side of the barn and watched the girls brush their ponies with the help of two of Don's horse handlers. It pissed him off that the girls were left with two strangers, because he didn't give a damn if they were trusted by Don or not. He sure as hell didn't trust them.

Will couldn't explain it, couldn't put it into words, or even rationalize what was in his mind, but those girls were somehow...his.

And one day, he meant to claim them.

THE END

Loose Id Titles by Kitty DuCane

Dominating Victoria

Santana's Heat

Zellia's Blade

Kitty DuCane

Kitty lives in NC with her wonderful husband of 28 years, a yellow Lab, and a pile of cats, all strays—well they're not stays now. She has two children in college and is taking full advantage of the empty nest: no more ball games or golf matches, just time to read the hot stuff and write the hot stuff.

Check out the latest on her Web site at <http://www.kittyducane.com>.