

Beautiful Trouble Publishing

JANET ECKFORD

Time for You
and
Time for Me

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For the fans of this series, thank you for believing.

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CAVEAT

This work of erotica contains adult language and sexually explicit scenes, which are smoking hot. This book is intended only for adults, as it is defined by the laws of the country in which the purchase is made. Keep this book out of the hands of under-aged readers.

Chapter One

He knew she was close. Others had difficulty tracking her, but he'd become honed to her very existence. There were times he felt they were connected on a molecular level. She was his Alpha, and even if she thought she could escape and disappear from others, she would never be rid of him. Crawling low on his belly, he peered through the bushes on the forest floor and let his senses guide him.

“Leland Jacobs, you might as well come out. I know you're there. Stalking me isn't necessary.”

Freezing, he tried to lower his very heartbeat. He'd said he wouldn't come after her, and even though he hadn't promised, he felt a bit guilty now he'd been caught.

“Leland, get your ass out here now!” Dev shouted in his direction.

Crawling out of his hiding place, keeping his belly low to the ground, Leland tried really hard not to whine. With a sigh, Dev crouched down on her haunches and held out her hands. “Come here, you.”

Trotting over, he nuzzled his face in Dev's hands. He felt tension he hadn't even known he was holding leave his body. Dev was much more than his Alpha—she was his rock, and having her upset was taking its

toll on him. Leland wanted to be stronger for her, but he couldn't even think where to begin.

"I'm not mad, but I do need some space, love," she whispered into his fur.

Whining, he pushed his muzzle into her hands. Leland wanted to make it better. He wanted...he just wanted Dev back. The last six months at Loup Lodge had been beyond miserable. Harper being...gone was...

"Are you going to shift or do you just want me to keep scratching your belly?" Dev asked with humor in her voice.

If he could blush in his wolf form, he was sure he would have been a deep red. In his haste to track Dev, Leland had forgotten to bring a change of clothes. Although nudity was a part of shifter culture, sitting in the forest naked chatting with Dev was not his idea of a good time.

"Forgot your clothes, didn't you?" she asked, running her fingers through his fur. With another whine, he pushed his head into her chest to signal yes. When she ruffled his fur and stood, he looked at her expectantly.

"Oh well, never mind then—just come on." She turned and headed farther into the forest.

As he trotted at her side, Leland wished this little trip could have been under better circumstances. Since Garrick's mate Fae came back without Harper, the

whole Pack had been in a state of limbo. The amount of blame and self-loathing going around was suffocating. Duke blamed himself for rushing the mission, but then Garrick said it was his brother who'd shot Harper, so it was his fault, while Fae locked herself away because she couldn't face the Pack. The weight of Harper's loss was being carried by everyone in their words and actions—well, everyone except Dev.

Leland always thought of her as a hard egg to crack, but from day one she had been so pragmatic about the situation it almost scared him. She was the one who got everyone out after the plan fell apart. She was the one who got everyone to come back to Loupe Lodge to regroup, and she was the one who organized the extensive surveillance team to search for Garrick's brother Garth when he went underground. Dev was their rock, but Leland was concerned because even stone could break.

Looking over at her as they made their impromptu hike, Leland felt his heart swell with love for her. For the last twenty years Dev had been his everything. The fact that she was the one to kill his father and avenge his mother's death wasn't the main factor in his attachment to her. She brought a feeling of balance to his life, and her reaction to Harper's...Harper being gone pushed it out of order. Leland didn't expect her to break down, but he did

expect more from her than what she was displaying. It was the lack of emotions that had him the most worried.

“Could you think a little quieter, please?” Dev reached down to scratch him behind his ears. Huffing was as close to a chuckle as he could make in his wolf form. She may not have had the gift of mind reading, but that didn’t stop him from marveling at her ability to always know his thoughts.

“Love, you are so stressed out I don’t need words to know what you’re thinking,” she said, sitting down on a fallen tree trunk. Staring off into the distance, she looked as if she was trying to see something that wasn’t there. “I know everyone is worried about me. Harper is...was...oh hell.” Taking a shaky breath, she looked over at Leland, and his heart stopped. He had never seen so much raw pain on Dev’s face before. Moving even closer to her, he placed his head in her lap.

“I can’t think of her being gone right now. I have to make this right because if I break down I don’t think I’ll be able to get back up.”

The gentle strokes of her hands in his fur soothed some of the pain he felt. When he’d discovered Dev was the one to finally end the nightmares in his life, he’d made a vow to always protect her. Duke, her mate and his Alpha, had

stopped being suspicious of his attentions long ago. Leland's feelings weren't sexual in nature, but he knew he would never have a mate. Dev was his everything, and his inability to spare her the pain she was experiencing was tearing him apart.

They sat just absorbing the silence of the forest until the sun began to set. As they headed back to Loup Lodge, he tried to think of ways to make things better. Death wasn't enough for Garth Conall; Leland wanted to rend his flesh from his bones with his bare hands.

"Leland, we do this by the book. We have to do this right for Harper and all the other children taken. But when the time comes, Garth is mine," Dev said with a determined tone.

Huffing, he knew there was no point in arguing. He would follow Dev's orders and just make sure to keep her out of danger at the same time. Her mate had to make concessions, but Leland wasn't held back by the same rules.

"Love, I know what you're thinking, so stop. Remember, as well as you think you know me, I know you better."

Huffing again, Leland responded with a short, sharp bark. When Dev chuckled, he felt a sense of pride. Even if the humor was at his expense, he was just glad there finally was some. Coming closer to

Loupe Lodge, he could see Duke standing looking into the forest, waiting for their arrival. Making eye contact with Leland briefly, the younger shifter could see the pain and uncertainty in his Alpha's eyes.

Dev and Duke didn't have any pups together and had always thought of the Kirk children as their own. Duke was doing his best to keep it together, but Leland could tell the loss of Harper and Dev's reaction was starting to take a toll on him.

"Did you have a nice hike?" Duke asked, searching Dev's face for something only he could see.

"It would have been nicer without my own watch dog," she replied, nudging Leland with her hip.

"Yeah, well, when he doesn't follow your directions he doesn't have to worry about sleeping in a guest room." Duke chuckled, reaching to pull Dev into an embrace.

Now that she was back and safe Leland didn't need to hang around. It wasn't that he was jealous, it was just he...well, he knew he would never have what they had, and he was okay with it, but...well, he just *was*. Letting out a sharp bark, he headed toward the house and his room.

Dev had a doggy door installed years ago, and at the time all of the shifters in the house were slightly offended—until they realized just how convenient it was. Squeezing through the little flap, he made his way

to the stairs and sprinted up to his room. Once inside he shifted, took a quick shower, and put on fresh clothes. He knew the planning stage of what they needed to do to end Garth's sick experimentations was over. Tonight they were going to take action.

Walking out of his room, he smiled at the smells of dinner wafting through the house. This was one of the glass-half-full moments that he tried to enjoy. While others grappled with waiting and trying to fill the hours of the day with activity that kept them from the darker aspects of mourning, Dev and Fae cooked.

Standing in the doorway of the kitchen, he watched as the two women buzzed around the spacious room. There was a measure and precision to their movements that was actually mesmerizing. He'd watched chefs on television move about their kitchens, but nothing could compare to what Dev and Fae created. It looked like a well-choreographed dance, or even a perfectly timed sparring match.

"Are you going to stand there staring or actually help?" Fae asked without heat in her tone.

"Just be glad he actually shifted back to human, or he'd be begging for scraps at our feet," Dev commented as she stirred batter.

"He doesn't need to shift for that," Fae replied, nudging Dev with her hip.

It had been determined the two women were not related, but there was still something so similar about them. It wasn't in their physical attributes, but more in the way they just *were*. Granted they were both around the same height, with brown skin kissed by the sun and curly hair that crackled with life and vibrancy. Leland liked that Dev had allowed her usually cropped hair to grow out into a gray halo of soft curls.

Walking into the room, he made his way to the kitchen island and surveyed what food he could snatch.

"I don't need to beg when I know you'll just give it to me." He never joked with anyone else the way he joked with Dev and Fae.

Letting out hearty laughs, they looked at each other, shrugged their shoulders, and continued making dinner. With a smile, he popped a piece of chopped carrot in his mouth and continued to peruse the island for other food he could snack on.

"If you're going to stand here, at least do something helpful. Wash your hands and start peeling potatoes," Fae said, gesturing toward the sink and shoving him away from the island.

Stealing another piece of chopped carrot, he followed her directions. He hadn't realized they'd fallen into a silent pattern of preparing the evening meal until the rest of the Pack started filing in. They had a formal dining room, but everyone enjoyed eating

at the large kitchen table instead. The warmth and smells of the room complimented the feeling of intimacy they all created when assembled together. Since Harper hadn't come back from their last mission, it seemed they craved that connection even more.

"Why am I not surprised to find you in here?" Garrick said, addressing him as he made his way over to his mate. Leland watched as the Alpha embraced Fae, nuzzling against her neck. It was a testament to how controlled both Garrick and Duke were that they could stay in the same area with each other and not have to make extravagant gestures of dominance. It made Leland proud to be a part of a collective of shifters who could work together for the greater good. His father, an Alpha in his own mind, would have never been able to work and live in an environment like this. It was another example of just how different he was from the old bastard, and he relished it.

"Don't tease him because you're too chauvinistic to actually help out in the kitchen," Fae said, swatting him on his butt before she pulled away from him and started dishing food onto a serving platter.

"Why should I when I have you to do it? You say chauvinistic, I say practical," Garrick replied, giving Fae a quick kiss on the back of her neck before taking the serving platter from her hand and heading toward

the table where other food was already placed. Leland was used to the teasing nature of Dev and Duke over the years, but it still surprised him that a shifter as stuffy as Garrick had mellowed so much with his mate.

“Don’t let him get to you. He’s just jealous that I’ve got a backup plan in case he forgets how great I am,” Fae teased in a stage whisper, winking at Leland.

Smiling, he continued to help with the food preparation. He knew Fae was hopelessly in love with her mate and had no intentions of leaving him. Looking up, he saw Garrick was staring intently at him, but Leland wasn’t worried. Garrick had stopped growling at him weeks ago, and aside from a fierce glare, he was starting to come to terms with the nature of Leland and Fae’s relationship. In twenty years he’d probably come to ignore Fae’s baiting comments altogether, just as Duke had come to ignore Dev’s.

Once everyone was seated dinner was a festive event, or as festive as they could be with Harper gone. Conversations flew across the table just as quickly as food made its way around. Absorbing the noises around him, Leland focused on eating.

“Leland, when are you going to get a mate?” Mina Kirk asked from across the table.

“Why would he need a mate when he has us?” Dev shouted from the other end of the table, nudging Fae next to her.

“Even Baby has to grow up some day,” Jett Kirk quipped before digging back into his steak.

Leland could feel a blush warming his skin. Mina had made it her mission to have the original members of Duke’s Pack mated and with pups. The McDonald brothers, Hunter and Gabriel, were her first victims. While still a preconscious teen she’d set one up with her math teacher and the other with her riding coach. It had been a domino effect, since then with Darian getting mated to the sister of a friend she met at camp and Avery being matched with her boss at the summer job she’d had before college.

It wasn’t as if Leland had an aversion to the idea of mating; he just knew there wasn’t that someone out there for him. He had his life, and he was happy with the way it was.

“Mina, if you haven’t gotten Leland to bend, don’t try and make him break,” Duke said from the head of the table.

“Did you get that off a fortune cookie?” Dev asked with a smirk.

“No, but I’m sure it should be on one,” he replied with a twinkle in his eye.

Looking up at his Alpha, Leland gave him silent thanks for diffusing the situation with Mina. When Duke nodded an acknowledgement, Leland could only think how lucky he was to have his Pack. Even though

Mina would probably keep pestering him until she was mated and had pups of her own, Leland wouldn't have it any other way. This was his life, and he couldn't be happier.

Chapter Two

“How’s our prisoner doing?”

Morgaine tried not to flinch as Garth Conall came up behind her. “She’s doing okay but still seems a bit weak,” she answered, trying to tap down the anxiety she felt having him so close.

“You really are a miracle worker. When I shot her I would have sworn she was dead,” Garth said, running the tips of his fingers along her arms. Years of practice had taught Morgaine not to cringe at unwanted touches. Her survival depended on the men who used her body believing she wanted them as much as they wanted her. A hard lesson to learn, but one she’d mastered over the years.

“I thought she was too, but I can’t take all the credit. Dr. Hayworth is the real magic worker.”

Moving slightly away from him, she finished placing food on the tray for Harper, or the prisoner, as Garth liked to refer to her. After the young shifter and the other woman broke into Garth’s Los Feliz home and got caught, Morgaine started to feel as if her life was moving toward something other than the drudgery of her day-to-day existence. The feeling made her more confident in her decision to use every bit of her gift to keep the young shifter alive.

“Yes, well, if it hadn’t been for your quick thinking she would definitely be dead,” he said thoughtfully.

Morgaine was aware of the suspicion in his voice. He didn’t know about her gift, and she had no intention of him finding out. Garth was the worst kind of monster, and she knew he would use her until death was a welcome alternative.

“I guess I just acted on instinct,” she replied, keeping her voice light. Turning around to face him, she smiled the smile they all expected from her. She was the perfect woman and the perfect companion. If her keeper and teacher Michelle could have stamped “Stepford” on her body to authenticate just how perfect she was, she probably would have.

“Well, I am eternally grateful to those quick instincts and reflexes of yours,” Garth murmured, pulling her into his arms and kissing her roughly on the lips.

Returning his kiss was also instinctual to her at this point in her life. Morgaine’s gift helped her to sustain life, and even if hers was soul crushing at times, she valued it none the less and did everything in her power to preserve it until she was free. It was this mindset that had kept her sane since she and David were taken all those years ago.

“I better let you go before I can’t stop.” As he ran his hands up and down her arms, Morgaine kept her practiced smile on even though Garth’s attempt at suave sexual banter made her want to vomit. His desire to create the illusion they were actually a couple was sad and desperate. Instead of fearing him all of the time, she mostly pitied him.

“Yes, that would be for the best. Don’t want all the work we’ve put in keeping Harper alive to get ruined.” Giving him a light peck on the cheek, she turned and gathered the tray with food.

Exiting the kitchen, she could feel Garth watching her as she made her way out. Each day she hoped she could keep the act up one day, minute, second more because she needed to get herself and Harper out. Turning the corner, she made her way to the basement door of the house Garth had brought them to after his brother discovered his secret. They were tucked away in some remote area in Vermont. Morgaine hadn’t been allowed to leave the grounds and could only walk briefly in the enclosed backyard when she needed fresh air. As the snow began to fall harder and harder each day, her inclination to push the boundaries became less and less prevalent.

At the door she gave the guard a meek smile. Garth’s genetically altered humans creeped her out, and she did everything in her power to stay off their

radar. Giving her a leering smile, he paused briefly to give her a onceover before he opened the door. Making sure to sidestep his hand reaching to brush against her ass, she entered the room.

As she surveyed the room, she noticed that all of the little niceties she'd put in had been removed. Once again it was a sterile gray space devoid of any color or personality. She knew it had to be Dr. Hayworth having another of his temper tantrums. Morgaine had convinced Garth that making Harper's room a little more hospitable may get her to come out of the catatonic state she was in. Dr. Hayworth, or Dennis as he insisted she call him, hated when she was able to influence any of his mad scientist experiments.

The man was completely twisted, and she knew he was just itching to get her on his examination table. When Morgaine and her brother David were taken, Dr. Hayworth was initially disappointed she wasn't a shifter. At six Morgaine didn't even know what a shifter was. All she knew was Mommy and Daddy were gone, and they wouldn't let her see her brother.

The good doctor eventually told her they were never coming back and that they weren't even her real parents. At the time she felt as if her world was crumbling around her. She could remember crying for hours on her bed in the little room where they kept her. Morgaine only got to see David once before Dr.

Hayworth told her he would never be coming back either. As an adult, she knew they used her poor brother up until his soul couldn't bear the pain of this existence any longer.

The day after his announcement she was moved to a new facility where Michelle, her nanny, teacher, and keeper, was there to greet her. It seemed a man named Melville Belial had taken an interest in her. Belial was a collector of valuable things, and he'd noticed she could one day be a very valuable asset. Unfortunately for him, he'd died before he could profit from his acquisition.

His loss was not immediately felt by Morgaine. She continued to live sheltered from the rest of the world, except for those rare occasions when Michelle took her out to practice the lessons she was being taught. Morgaine never knew who her new silent benefactor was, but Dr. Hayworth was always a consistent presence lurking in the shadows of her childhood. He would periodically request blood samples and run tests on her in hopes that his creepy intuition was correct. Morgaine was always so grateful that whatever she possessed didn't show up in his data.

She still didn't know how she did what she did, but looking at Harper, she was never as happy as she was now to have her special abilities. The first time she

used her gift was when one of the gentlemen Michelle had her lunching with had a heart attack. She was barely sixteen at the time, and it was her first trial as arm candy for the highest bidder her keepers had set up.

She could remember reaching instinctively for him, a slight tingle in her hands. Staring into his eyes, she felt as if she was *really* seeing him. It was the most disturbing image she had ever encountered, filled with such wrongness that she struggled to put distance between her and him. Clutching her hand, he tried to keep them connected, and panic rose up inside her when she realized the light in his eyes was getting brighter the longer they maintained contact. A wave of nausea overwhelmed her as his breathing steadied and his heart once again pumped at a normal pace and rhythm.

Before she could process the experience any further, his bodyguard shoved her out of the way. The entire episode had taken seconds. As the larger man checked his employer's vitals, Morgaine clutched her legs to her chest and slowly rocked herself back and forth. At the time she didn't know exactly what she had done, but she knew it was something that was going to change her life forever.

It wasn't until she was eighteen and had inadvertently made her way to a wing of the house

where Dr. Death was conducting his experiments that she discovered what her power could do. The young shifter Morgaine found that day was so pure and full of light as she lay dying in the hospital bed, it broke her heart. Walking over, she placed her hands on the shifter and held back tears as the young female pleaded silently for her release.

Morgaine didn't know exactly what to do, but she knew she had to do something. Thinking about her own brother and the pain he must have experienced, she wished the young female wouldn't have to endure any more suffering. When she locked eyes with the shifter, she was able to see the sparkle of life that in better circumstances would have blossomed to a blinding flame. Working on instinct, she began to pull and tug until the life force appeared to seep into her very hands. Her fingers tingled as she held on to what was the very essence of the young shifter. It was cold and hot at the same time and unlike anything she had ever felt before. Tempted to play with the sensation some more, she was brought back to reality when she noticed the young shifter below her hands was no longer breathing. Startled, she released the sensation and fled from the room. Dr. Hayworth could never quite prove she had anything to do with the young shifter's death, but he'd watched her even closer from that day.

“Good afternoon, Harper. I made something particularly yummy for you,” she said now, placing the tray of food on the nightstand, by the bed.

Situating herself in the chair that was also beside the bed, she picked up the bowl of soup. Careful of all of the gadgets hooked up to Harper, Morgaine used a switch to adjust Harper’s bed until she was in an upright position. Once at eye level, Morgaine gave her a reassuring smile. There was only the barest flicker of recognition in her eyes before Morgaine saw her shut down again.

When she’d initially brought Harper back she’d been racked with guilt. The shifter was the closest to crossing over of anyone Morgaine had encountered, and when she used her gift to bring her back, she was afraid she may have done something wrong. It didn’t help that she felt as if she was being watched by Garth. With the arrival of Dr. Hayworth, she became even more anxious at the possibility of getting caught.

Spooning soup into Harper’s mouth, Morgaine schooled her features to avoid alerting the guards monitoring them to her subterfuge. Harper was not only okay but very good at playing possum. The shifter was in fact doing a great job of sustaining what their keepers thought was a state of catatonia. Morgaine only became aware of it when holding Harper’s hand in those early days after she was shot.

Thinking she had failed and Harper was somehow trapped in her body, needing to be released but unable to leave, Morgaine began to call up her gift as she held Harper's hand by her bedside. She felt a slight pressure on her hand but ignored it. Instead, she focused on making sure she could give Harper the peace she believed she needed.

As the magic that existed within her began to swell, she felt a stronger pressure on her hand. Thinking it was Harper's body responding to losing its life essence, she pushed on with the process. Then suddenly the pressure became intense, and as she looked into Harper's blank stare, she could see it sharpen with awareness. Pulling her hand free, she felt her heart speed up with hope that Harper was okay.

She leaned over, staring into the intense gaze of the young shifter, and stifled a cry of excitement when Harper began to blink rapidly at her and then winked one eye. Still hoping Harper was aware of her surroundings, but not wanting to become devastated if she wasn't, she mimicked Harper's behavior. When Harper followed Morgaine's display with a slow blink and a wink, she knew it wasn't a fluke—she was really there. Aware they were being watched, she shifted her body and mouthed instructions of communication to Harper. One blink meant yes and two blinks meant no; not particularly elaborate, but useful.

Since then, when not closely monitored they'd communicated regularly. Morgaine was aware that Harper was getting impatient with their situation, and while Dr. Hayworth was getting impatient about Harper's supposed medical condition. She lived with a constant fear he would start to do more than take blood samples, and all the work she and Harper had put into escaping would vanish.

Morgaine was also concerned Dr. Evil was starting to doubt Harper's catatonic state. There was no medical reason for why she hadn't regained full consciousness, and he always kept a watchful eye on what Morgaine did with "his" patient. It was a dangerous game they'd played, but it was a risk they both were willing to take.

Finished spooning Harper her soup, Morgaine had to hold in a giggle when she winked at her. Not that they'd ever had a real conversation, but Morgaine could tell the shifter had a sense of humor that was infectious. It was something in the way her eyes sparkled with a bit of mischievousness. Morgaine never wanted to see that spark of life diminished, and it pushed her to take risks she'd never dreamed of in the past.

The door opening behind her caused her to pause briefly. When she felt as if the skin on the back of her neck was trying to crawl under the collar of her

shirt, she knew Dr. Evil was watching her. Coming to stand next to her, he began to check Harper's vitals. The excessive brushing of his body against hers made her want to vomit. In an uncharacteristic act of defiance, she refused to move as usual. Yep, she was getting really risky, but it felt so good.

"How is the patient doing today?" he asked while checking Harper's reflexes.

"She ate all of her soup, but there still wasn't any response." It was always a balance of making Harper seem healthy but not too healthy. Morgaine needed Dr. Hayworth to stay interested in the possibility to test her against his enhanced humans.

It was the final step in his experiments that Dr. Hayworth hadn't been able to complete. Adept at snatching defenseless children, the team had been unable to take an adult shifter, male or female. The loners were so fierce they'd fight until the death, and those attached to a Pack drew too much attention. Dr. Hayworth was particularly salivating at the thought of getting Harper in a cage and seeing what his creature features could do.

Morgaine always found it interesting that Garth had no Pack of shifters of his own who could help in the experiments. It was completely out of the question that Garth himself would sully his paws with fighting, particularly when a well-placed bullet would do the

job. He was the absolute worst kind of male; he wanted all the fame and glory without the sacrifice.

“I’m going to have to do more aggressive treatment then. Our timetable is getting shorter by the day.”

She could feel his eyes on her. Looking up, she kept her expression blank and guileless. Morgaine knew the statement was meant to get a reaction out of her, and she wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. Bastard.

In his fifties, Dr. Hayworth was about six feet tall with the bland appearance of one who spent the majority of his life in a lab. She always found it interesting that his face lacked any discernable features—neither particularly light nor dark in complexion, he made her think of a non-person. Besides his diabolical behavior, it was this aspect of him that made her most fearful. His ability to just blend had her anxious because when she finally escaped, he would always be out there lurking. That was why before she left he would have to die, preferably by her own hands, but at this point she couldn’t be picky.

Chapter Three

Leland sat at his easel contemplating what exactly he wanted to paint. It'd been two weeks since he'd followed Dev into the forest, and as difficult as he found it, he'd respected her request and stopped hovering. It was hard, but he knew that he wasn't helping her and was starting to damage their relationship. Instead he tried to transfer his attention to Fae, but she quickly put the kibosh on that.

"I already have a lap dog, so scat!" she shouted over her shoulder before she took off for a run.

Deciding he would use the time productively, he finished up some of the illustrations his publishers were waiting for. His career as an illustrator of children's books was still a bit of a Pack joke, but he didn't care. The money helped him feel like he wasn't living off Duke's charity, and it allowed him to pursue his passion. The interesting thing was he hadn't realized it *was* his passion until the Kirk children came into his life. The warm feelings of reminiscing about how excited Jett, Harper, and Mina got over his drawings were quickly chilled by the frost of Harper's loss.

Taking a deep breath, Leland fought to push down the feelings of sorrow bubbling up in his chest.

This wasn't how he'd planned to spend his day. Putting his brush down, he placed the palette of watercolors he was using on the table next to him. He had experienced losing someone close to him before and couldn't understand why he was struggling with this. What he did know was he wanted to rip Garth Conall into tiny little pieces with his bare teeth, and that still wouldn't be enough.

Lost in his reverie, Leland didn't scent the other shifter until Garrick's second Simon was almost at his back. It was just another aspect of his current state of mind he didn't like.

"Wow, that's really good," Simon exclaimed with appreciation.

Turning to look at the other male, Leland shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. He knew his stuff was good, but it still embarrassed him when others mentioned it.

"When I was told you did drawings for kids' books, I was a bit surprised, but now that I've seen it I have to say you have real talent." Simon moved and sat on a stool next to Leland's work area.

Ever since Garrick and his Pack had taken up residence at Loup Lodge, Leland found himself in the company of the other male quite a bit. He'd ask Leland what it was like in Duke's Pack and how he joined. If the conversation didn't always come around to

Harper, Leland may have thought Simon was looking to make a change. What he had come to realize was Simon was quietly mourning the loss of the young female. Thinking about Harper's unwritten future made him feel sadder than he had before.

In the months since she was lost, he'd come to enjoy the company of the Conall Pack second. Pragmatic in nature, Simon had a dry humor that would have matched Harper's quirky sense of humor perfectly.

"How long had you been interested in Harper?" Leland asked the question before he'd had time to think of the appropriateness of it.

Startling, Simon seemed to freeze as he looked out the large bay window of Leland's studio. The silence that formed after his question was so heavy Leland worried he would have to fill it with words of apology before it weighted them both down.

"I saw her two years ago at a gun expo in Orange County," Simon sighed out before Leland could retract what he thought was an intrusive question.

He remained silent as he watched Simon traveling back to that moment in his memory. From the quirk of his lips he could tell it was a typical Harper encounter. "She was just so...just so different. I'd never met another female like her before." Simon

turned and smiled at Leland, and the expression on his face was just so bittersweet it took his breath away.

“We’ve kept in touch through email, but it wasn’t until we planned to raid Garth’s home that I’d actually seen her again. I thought once this was over we’d...we’d have a chance to...” Looking down at his hands, Simon took a deep breath.

Leland didn’t know what to do or say. After Fae came back without Harper, he’d had more contact with the other shifters than he’d had in a long time. He was never quite a loner, but in his life he only really needed Dev. Now that she needed space, he was forced to integrate more. What was particularly interesting was how members of his Pack and Garrick’s sought him out to just talk or vent.

“God, I didn’t mean to come here and do this, but whenever I get around you I just...you’re a good guy, Leland.” Simon’s whispered words were filled with a false bravado that couldn’t hide his obvious pain.

Before Leland could reassure him that it was okay, both males sat at attention at the sound of someone running toward the room. When Jett burst through the door, the emotions of excitement and anxiety rolling off him made Leland’s wolf try and push to the surface.

“We’ve found where that bastard is hiding. Duke said to hurry up and get down to the war room.” Jett turned on his heels and ran out, probably to inform other members of the Packs.

If it had been any other situation, Leland may have laughed at the other male’s behavior. He was pretty confident Duke hadn’t started calling the library the war room, and the younger shifter was taking the situation to a level Leland didn’t think it needed to reach. They were just going to get in there, rescue the woman who’d aided Fae, and wipe Garth and his altered humans off the face of the Earth...okay, maybe it was at that level.

Looking over at Simon, Leland gave him a sinister smile and got up to find out what information Darian West, the technologies specialist of Duke’s Pack, must have found. He didn’t need to turn around to know Simon was following closely on his heels. After Simon’s confession, Leland understood the shifter was just as interested in stopping Garth as Leland and his Pack were.

For the first time in a long time, Leland felt like there was purpose to the Pack’s existence. He knew this wouldn’t bring Harper back, but it was action, and that was something he was used to. Rounding a corner, he saw several members of both Packs filing

into the library. Though the room was pretty large, Leland wondered how they would all fit.

It was amazing to see how Duke's Pack had grown from a group of six males into twenty strong. It wasn't as big as most Packs—Garrick only had a fraction of his people at the Lodge—but it spoke to what Duke and Dev were trying to create. Entering the room, he smiled at his Pack members and the visiting shifters. Spotting Duke and Dev at the head of the large oak table in the middle of the room, Leland headed over to them.

Standing to Dev's side at her back, he surveyed the room. Even though he scoffed when Jett called the library a war room, with all the shifters gathered, there was a feeling of anticipation crackling in the air. Every one of them wanted retribution, and now it seemed it was so close.

As more people filed in, some sat while others stood. Garrick soon walked in followed by Fae. The fierce look on the Alpha's face illustrated just how serious he was about stopping his brother. It was no secret amongst shifters that there had always been tension between the two males, but Garth's current behavior was simply unforgivable. As much as Leland and members of Duke's Pack wanted to personally take Garth out, it was going to be Garrick's

responsibility—a painful responsibility, but a necessary one for the survival of all shifters.

Once Garrick and Fae made their way to the head of the table, a hush fell over the room. Every face in the group was turned expectantly to the Alpha who had kept their Packs going through this time of uncertainty. Not wanting what Garth was doing to explode into a national crisis amongst shifters, Garrick used his power as a council member, with the help of Duke, to keep everything in house. Now after all their waiting, it appeared they would finally get results.

“We have called you all here today to inform you we have located Garth and the humans he calls his Pack.” Turning toward Avery, his second, Duke signaled for him to switch on the projector in the room as he discussed the situation.

The display showed the plans of Garth’s compound. Duke began explaining where it was located and the general layout of the house and the surrounding area. It was definitely a case of hiding in plain sight. With his estate nestled amongst farms in the upper regions of Vermont, Leland was sure Garth had the privacy he needed to play Frankenstein. His stomach rolled at the thought of what was happening to children there. Although no disappearances had been reported recently, that didn’t mean there weren’t children suffering at that very moment.

“We are only sending in a small team to rescue the woman Fae identified during her previous raid, any children at the compound, and to eliminate Garth and any of his cohorts,” Garrick said, picking up after Duke finished describing the grounds. “We will need people in the surrounding areas as backup and in case Garth decides to take evasive action. We will not need all of your help but instead are requesting volunteers. The team is going to make sure nothing is left of Garth and his Pack.”

The finality of Garrick’s words sent a shiver of anticipation down Leland’s spine. It was going to happen; they were finally going to end this. It didn’t mean Harper would come back, but they wouldn’t have the shadow of Garth and his experiments hanging over them. Leland tuned out the rest of the debriefing, as it did not pertain to the small group going in first to rescue the mystery woman and the children.

As shifters came forward and the team was assembled, Duke finished up some final business and dismissed the group. Only the core members of both Packs stayed. Without so many shifters in the room, those remaining were able to sit at the large table. Still at Dev’s side, Leland waited patiently for the heart of the plan to unfold. Looking at the expressions on Duke and Garrick’s faces, Leland grew anxious; he had a

feeling he wasn't going to like what he was about to hear.

"Fae and I will go in and rescue the woman and any other prisoners." Before Dev could finish her statement, there was an outcry from the table. Looking around, he noticed the male shifters not mated to the two women were horrified. Their mates didn't look much better; in fact they both appeared to be biting their tongues. Raising her hand, Dev signaled for the group to be quiet.

"This is not up for debate. You all know we have the necessary skills to get in together and get out. We will not be questioned about our decision." The finality of her tone indicated the conversation was closed. "As I was saying, we will go in first and get out as many survivors of the experiments as we can. Second team will be Duke, Garrick, Simon, Leland, and the McDonald brothers. They are responsible for doing cleanup. Avery will take some of you to gather evidence that can eventually lead back to the Foster's Pharmaceutical Group, and Darian will be leading the other members of the team on the grounds. This must be tight and precise. We lose no one."

Leland felt himself sit straighter after Dev's directive. Looking around, he noticed he wasn't the only one affected by her words. Like the rest of them, he struggled with the idea of Fae and Dev going in

first, but this was what they needed to do to make the situation right. He calmed his wolf with the knowledge that he would be close behind. As Dev said, they wouldn't lose anyone, because if losing Harper had caused so much pain, he didn't know how the Packs would react if they lost anyone else.

Chapter Four

Morgaine feigned sleep as Garth silently watched her in the early morning light before he got up from his bed. She was always careful to not refer to it as that when speaking to him. He liked to believe that this was *their* bed and *their* room. Now more than ever she had to keep the delusion of them as a real couple going. Dr. Hayworth was a man with a mission, and his mission was to get his filthy claws into Harper. Playing nice with Garth was the only weapon she had to use against him.

With a great deal of cajoling and pleading to Garth, Morgaine had been able to keep Dr. Hayworth at bay, but she knew it wouldn't be that much longer before even her charm wouldn't be enough. Garth wanted power more than he wanted her affection, and eventually he would give Dr. Death what he needed for his twisted experiments. She just hoped her plan to get her and Harper out would work sooner rather than later.

Hearing the bathroom door open and the sound of running water, Morgaine gave a sigh of relief. She sat up and winced in pain. Garth had been particularly rough last night, and at one point she'd feared he was even going to Mark her. The idea sent chills down her

body. She never wanted to carry the Mark of a monster. The only worse possibility she could think of was Dr. Hayworth finding some way to finally have her. Rape was never his MO, but she often feared he'd finally dispense of Garth before she was free. Whereas she tolerated Garth for survival, she would gladly fight to the death if Dr. Hayworth ever tried to touch her.

Keeping her ears honed to the sounds of Garth in the shower, Morgaine swung her legs over the side of the bed. She slid off, then pulled on the robe she kept on a chair near the bed. Walking to the window, she looked out at the old farm the Victorian house sat on. With the snow blanketing the area, there was something beautiful and peaceful about the view. Totally different from what was happening inside.

Hearing the water stop, Morgaine mentally, emotionally, and physically prepared herself to deal with Garth. His behavior was becoming even more erratic, and she had to make sure she played her role to perfection. When he walked from the bathroom and wrapped his arms around her, she resisted the urge to stiffen.

"I think this time we may have done it," he said, nuzzling her neck.

"Really?" she replied with the appropriate amount of hopefulness.

“Definitely, and if not I’ll have Dennis check you out. I know we just started, but I want to make sure there isn’t anything that can make it difficult for you to conceive.”

Patting her stomach, he pulled away and walked toward his closet. She turned and smiled at him indulgently. Morgaine valued all life, but she would see her uterus removed before she bore Garth’s child. Harsh, but it was how she felt. Standing with her back to the window, she continued to watch him as he dressed.

For all his handsomeness, Garth was rotten to his very core. His blond hair and blue-eyed looks of an angel housed the soul of such evil it was amazing what existed on the inside never leaked out. He cared for no one, and even his newest obsession with having children was only an extension of his greed and selfishness. Morgaine was very aware that even if she harbored the smallest iota of affection for him, he would have her disposed of if she didn’t give him what he wanted.

“Like what you see?” he said with a cocky grin, walking forward to envelop her in his arms now that he was fully dressed.

“Words couldn’t describe it,” she replied.

“God, I love the way you smell,” he said, nuzzling her neck and scenting her.

“Um, and what do I smell like?” she asked coyly.

“Me, of course.” Swatting her a bit roughly on her butt, he went back to his dresser to pick up the paperwork he’d left there last night.

Giggling as expected, Morgaine walked toward the bathroom. “Shall I make lunch for us, or will you have yours with Dr. Hayworth?”

“Morgaine, you know he wants you to call him Dennis,” he sighed, looking up at her. The startled expression on his face let her know she hadn’t controlled her features quickly enough at the mention of Dr. Evil.

Bowing her head, she hoped Garth wouldn’t make much of her slip. This was a precarious game she played, and she was too far along to lose. Walking up to her, he wrapped her in his arms and murmured softly in her ear, “I know how you feel, my love, but he has his uses, and when he outwears his welcome I will personally get rid of him.” Lifting her chin, he kissed her softly on the lips and then let her go.

Watching him leave the room, she knew he thought he was comforting her, but the reality was he only reinforced how disposable they all were to him. She had her uses, and when she no longer did, Garth would be the one to pull the trigger.

Not letting the thought weigh her down, she walked into the bathroom hoping to wash away the

smell he loved so much. She would have to make sure to drink the tea Michelle taught her to use to prevent pregnancy. It was one of the smarter things the woman had taught her during their time together. Thankfully the ingredients were so basic she never had to worry about Garth and his medical watchdog being suspicious.

Finishing up, she stepped out of the shower and began her after-bath ritual. Though initially resentful at the fact that all she did to keep her body soft and supple was for another's pleasure, Morgaine had learned over the years to see this as something for herself. As she massaged her arms and legs, she meditated and centered herself for all she would have to do. Once she was done pampering her body, she walked back into Garth's room and quickly dressed.

The snow looked so inviting as she peered out the window, even more so because she hadn't been outside in a while. Making sure to put on extra layers, she made her way to the kitchen. While she ate her breakfast, she thought about all that had happened since they'd fled Garth's Los Angeles home. They hadn't taken any of his staff, and now they mostly relied on Dr. Hayworth's altered humans as staff. She'd made a point to keep the kitchen as a place for herself. It suited Garth's image of her as the dutiful

little female, and he didn't object to it becoming her domain.

Sipping her special tea and looking out the window of the breakfast nook, she almost missed the little black ball of fur darting through the snow. She put her mug down, concentrated on the area where she last saw the black shape, and let out a little gasp of surprise when a kitten popped up out of a particularly deep pile of snow. Jumping up from the table she quickly put on her snow boots and jacket. She opened the door but was stopped by a deep male voice.

"Going out, ma'am?"

Morgaine had forgotten she was so closely watched even in her sanctuary. It was actually unlike her to ever forget her condition as a prisoner, but with her planning to escape she'd let herself get lax in her vigilance. Stupid and very dangerous.

"I think I saw a little kitten," she said anxiously.

Peering out the open door, Drone Number One surveyed the area. She could see him squinting, no doubt using the enhanced senses the drugs Dr. Hayworth had developed provided him. Moving forward, he concentrated on an area out in the yard. As he stepped out farther, the most plaintive little cry rang out in the air.

"Oh, the poor baby." Pushing past the muscled man, Morgaine ran toward the sound. Sitting in the

snow was the cutest little black kitten she'd ever seen. Its fur looked like soft velvet against the white snow, and it had the most enchanting dark green eyes. Picking it up, she almost shouted in alarm when a burst of electricity shot up her arm. She caught her reaction instinctively as she held the kitten away from her body and looked at it carefully.

"Now how did you make it all the way out here by yourself?" Morgaine was afraid to hope. It couldn't have been this simple. This couldn't be the woman she saw that day at Garth's place, the day Harper was shot. Snuggling the kitten to her body, she resisted the urge to cry.

Letting out a sharp little cry, the kitten began to wiggle against Morgaine's chest. Worried that she may be smothering, it she cradled the warm little bundle in her hands. Looking into its eyes, she tried to ascertain if there was an intelligence that went beyond the keen intellect of the feline.

"I wonder where it came from?"

She'd once again forgotten she wasn't alone. Looking at the guard, she felt her spirits sink. This one wasn't stupid. The way he looked around the yard let her know he was still actively tracking the area with his heightened senses.

"Oh, the poor baby probably wandered over from one of the farms nearby." Looking back at the

kitten, she noticed it nodded its head subtly toward a thickly forested area at the edge of the property.

“I wonder if there might be more little ones.” Pouting, she used the charm she’d been conditioned to learn from an early age and watched as the behemoth looked between her and the kitten. He may have been sharper than the rest of her usual keepers, but he was still a man. She saw when his resolve crumbled and the light of lust ignited in his eyes. If he thought doing this for her would give him brownie points he could redeem to get into her panties, she’d let him keep thinking that. In their efforts to use her, she learned to be better at getting what she wanted from men.

“Can’t we just look around, just in case? *Please.*” It was the “Please” that got him to change his mind—innocence laced with a seductive edge. She’d stopped being sickened by how men thought with their dicks years ago—mostly because the little head followed directions much better than the big head.

“Okay, but we don’t go any farther than the parameter sensors. I still don’t know how the little runt made it this far in without tripping the sensors.” Reaching over to pat the kitten’s head, he smiled when she purred in appreciation at his touch. It seemed Morgaine wasn’t the only one who knew it was often better to purr than to hiss.

Leading the guard in the direction the kitten indicated, Morgaine felt as if an electrical current was traveling along her skin. As she scanned the area, she knew someone was out there; she just couldn't see where. Trying not to broadcast her anxiety, she looked over at the guard. The kitten wiggled in her arms where she'd been sheltered as a signal she wanted to be put down.

Bending over, Morgaine gently placed her on the ground and watched as she pranced off farther into the forested area. When she looked back at the guard, his look of concentration told her he was thinking. She couldn't have that.

"What's your name? I don't think I've worked with you before." Saying "I don't think you've been my jailer" before probably wouldn't have gotten her what she wanted. The use of polite euphemisms was another integral part of her education.

Distracted from his observation, he turned and looked back at her. His slow appraisal of her body let her know just where his concentration was now. Morgaine never worried about sexual violence from Garth's guards while he was in charge, but the possibility was still lurking under the surface. They were not soldiers held to a code of honor, nor were they Pack, connected by the greater good of all. They were sociopaths who cared only about themselves and

adhered to Garth's rules because of the power he promised and delivered.

"Carter, ma'am." Even though the words implied respect, the tone of his voice and body language let her know it was so far from that.

The tingling was picking up again, and she knew whoever was out there was getting closer. The kitten had returned and was twining itself between Carter's legs. This was her moment, the time she needed to act. Smiling at him, she placed her hands upon his chest. When he relaxed at her touch, she knew she had him. They never thought she was going to harm them—so foolish.

"Carter, you've been a very bad boy." The excitement in his eyes let her know he was completely focused on her.

"Oh, have I?" Bringing his arms up, he pulled her into his body. He was so eager, so sure of himself. Once again the little head was in control.

"Yes, you have. Do you know what happens to bad boys?" She practically purred the words out.

"No, what happens?" he whispered against her lips.

Working her way under the layers of clothing he wore, she placed her hands against his warm skin. In her excitement to get outside to what she thought was a helpless animal, she'd forgotten her gloves. Now, as

her hands roamed against his heated flesh, she was grateful for her forgetfulness. Looking into his eyes, she smiled the smile she'd been taught to use to lure men. It was the smile women used to topple empires and conquer the hearts of men.

"They get punished." There was a brief flare of lust in his eyes before he realized this wasn't about seduction, it was about death.

Morgaine had used her meditation over the years to hone her gift to this single purpose. When she realized that she could save life, rebirth it back into the world, she knew she would also be able to take it. Helping that sad, broken little shifter that day gave her the chance to test her idea. Now, as she watched her gift pull Carter's soul from his body and release it back into the universe, she knew that she possessed so much more.

Crumpling to the ground, his body was now just an empty husk. Morgaine buzzed with the after effects of using her gift. Everything around her seemed that much sharper and crisper...until it wasn't. The last thing she saw before she faded into the blackness creeping at the edges of her consciousness was the sweet little kitten transforming into the woman from months ago. Smiling, she knew it would all get better now. She was finally going to be free.

Chapter Five

Leland crouched in the cold snow waiting for the signal from Dev. He'd followed the closest because even with his strong desire to keep her and Fae safe, he was far more objective than their mates.

"I feel as if I should be jealous of how attached you are to my mate, but if she'll at least let you watch her back, I can't complain too much," Garrick had grumbled as they suited up for their trek toward the house. They were going in human form because it would help keep their scent as minimal as possible.

"You'll get over it, Garrick. He's basically their pet and gets a pass when it comes to his behavior," Duke said, slapping Leland good-naturedly on his back.

Leland didn't care about the ribbing because it meant he still got to work point. Now, as he waited in the snow, he felt his patience wearing thin. Just as he was about to shift and go investigate, he saw the little sparkle of light that let him know he could move forward. With his senses scanning the area, he moved cautiously toward Dev. For his size, Leland knew he had the ability to be stealthy when it came to tracking. His years of abuse at the hands of his father had taught him how to be invisible while in the room with

others. He'd learned early that he never wanted to be prey again.

Rounding a tree, he could see the house coming into view. He stayed to the shadows as he wove a path through the forested area. Darian had designed outerwear that minimized heat signatures, and the whole team currently wore them, but Leland was still conscious of his movements.

As he got closer, he could see Dev hiding in the shadows of a large tree. Her position kept her hidden but also gave her a good view of the surrounding area. Stepping carefully, he noticed a nude man was lying at her feet. Initially he thought he was unconscious, but as he came nearer, he realized the man was dead. Not far from Dev stood a petite woman and Fae. Using her gift, she'd taken on the identity of the dead man; her ability both fascinated and freaked him out.

Looking at the dead man, he realized there were no visible signs of injury. He looked at Dev with a questioning quirk of his eyebrow. When she nodded toward the petite woman at Fae's side, he looked in her direction. Making eye contact with her, Leland felt as if he had been punched in the stomach. He'd taken a step back before he'd realized it. Her slow appraisal of him made him duck his head and blush. He'd never been affected like that before, and he didn't know if he

liked it or was frightened by it. His wolf just sat back cautiously observing the situation.

“Leland, this is Morgaine. She’s the woman who helped Fae and Harper last time,” Dev said, moving closer to him. Her presence calmed his erratic emotions. When she gently placed her hand on his arm, he felt as if he had the ability to look up at the other woman without embarrassing himself.

“We have to move out. If there are no other captives, Duke and his team will want to move in.” His words came out a lot rougher than he’d planned, but he was feeling very disconcerted.

“We can’t leave without Harper.”

It wasn’t just the musical sound of Morgaine’s voice that caused everyone to come to attention at her words but the name she used. Turning to look at Dev, Leland could see emotions of hope and anguish flutter across her face. This was too good to be true.

“Harper...” Dev’s voice broke before she could finish her sentence.

“You came to get her, right? We were trying to plan an escape, but it has been so hard. They’ve really started to watch us recently. Actually, I think we’ve been out here too long,” she said, anxiously looking back at the house.

Leland couldn’t help staring at her. She had to be about the same age as Harper, or maybe a little

younger, but there was something about her that made her seem older. Her resemblance to Fae and Dev was uncanny, but there was still something uniquely different about her. Turning back around, she caught him staring and he dropped his gaze, confident he was blushing again.

He didn't know why he was so drawn to her, but he needed to focus. Leland had never been controlled by sexual urges, and he wasn't going to start now. If Harper was truly alive, they needed to get in and get her ASAP. Glancing back up, he looked over to Dev for direction. He tried to ignore the feeling Morgaine was watching him as he stood there, but he was finding it hard to do.

"Morgaine, you have to get us in," Dev said, looking intently at the other woman.

The familiarity of Dev taking charge was what Leland needed to focus on, versus what one tiny woman was doing to him. Now if he could just get his wolf to cooperate and stop trying to move him closer to Morgaine, to see if her brick-brown skin was as soft as it looked, everything would be okay.

"With Fae in her disguise, I don't see a problem getting her back in, but you and him would be a problem."

The way she said "him" made Leland look at her. Making eye contact, he felt as if all the air around him

was being sucked into a vacuum. He didn't like what was happening to him; he didn't like it at all.

"Don't worry about me. I've got my own gifts. As for Leland, we'll have him stay out here until we get Harper out," Dev informed Morgaine using a brisk tone.

Leland wasn't happy with the decision, but unlike his peers who were often strangled by their protective tendencies, he realized not every plan was going to be one he liked. Nodding his head in the affirmative, he waited for more direction.

"Did you radio Duke about your new location?" Fae asked in the rough tone of her new body's voice.

"No, I was going to wait and see what Dev needed first," he replied.

"Good job, Leland. Bloodthirsty Alpha's would just get in the way," Dev chortled with a crooked smile.

Leland smiled back at Dev, knowing she wouldn't have her Alpha any other way. They fit each other perfectly in the same way Fae and Garrick fit neatly together. He didn't know what made him look up at Morgaine at that moment, but when he caught her gaze, he felt for the first time as if he was missing something or someone, that perfect fit.

Morgaine still wasn't clear about what was happening. After she came to from her blackout, Dev was leaning over her, checking to make sure she was okay, while Fae in her newest disguise had stripped Carter's body and was putting his clothes on. Looking back at Dev, she had the feeling that she *knew* her. Something connected them, even though it couldn't be seen or explained.

They quickly filled her in on everything that was happening, but it wasn't until the shifter named Leland appeared that she was able to mention Harper. Though he stood protectively next to Dev, she didn't think they were mates. The intimacy they seemed to share wasn't sexual in nature, but it appeared strong just the same. What she found odd was the way there seemed to be a connection between him and Fae also. When she reached over and stroked his arm affectionately, Leland didn't flinch, even though Fae was in her newest disguise.

What she found particularly interesting was the shy way he kept sneaking peeks at her. Older than her, he still had the handsome looks of a male in his prime and stood about six four with the tone, muscled body of someone who got his physique with actual labor rather than a gym machine. He was covered from head to toe in military camouflage that made his large frame seem even more imposing, but the crimson

color staining his golden complexion every time he made eye contact with her softened what would have been a hard look.

“If we’re going, we have to do it now. Delaying any longer will cause another guard to come out and investigate and possibly alert Garth.” She didn’t try to hide the anxiety in her voice as she addressed them. Garth may try to make her feel like she was the mistress of the house, but she understood exactly who was in charge.

Before she could voice another warning, Dev seemed to disappear right before her. The experience startled her mostly because of the tingling sensation that ran along her skin. It was equal parts strange and familiar. Unfortunately, she didn’t have much time to process it before Fae signaled them to head out. Turning briefly to look at Leland, she caught a quick glimpse of him before he seemed to fade into the surrounding area. Morgaine was definitely glad these people were on her team.

Walking through the snow, they’d almost gotten to the back door when it was slung violently open. Garth stood on the threshold, watching their approach suspiciously. Knowing she only had seconds to rectify the situation, she ran the last several yards and threw herself at him. She called up fake tears and began to sob on his chest.

“What happened?” he asked, sounding startled by her display.

“There was a little kitten that wondered into the yard, and I wanted to see if there might have been more, and then it ran away and he wouldn’t let me follow and now the little kitten is going to die.” She sobbed out her words, making sure to hiccup for effect.

“Sir, it wandered beyond the sensors,” Fae said, playing the role of the diligent guard.

“But it’s just a baby,” she whispered softly, looking up at Garth with teary eyes.

For a moment there she was afraid he didn’t buy the act, but then he pulled her deeper into his embrace and gently stroked her head.

“It’s okay, darling. If it made it this far, it will probably get back to its home. At the very least it’ll make its way back here if it gets hungry,” he cooed in a soothing voice.

Sniffling, she buried her hands under his shirt. Though he flinched briefly at the feel of her cold hands, he held her tighter. This was what made her deceptions work. Garth needed to be wanted, needed to feel like he was in charge because he didn’t have what it took for people to follow him willingly. Knowing she would never have to fake what she

should give to someone of her own accord once she was free, she nuzzled closer to him.

“But it was so small and helpless,” she murmured in a tiny voice with a small sigh on the end.

“Sir, I couldn’t break protocol,” Fae said flatly in her new voice.

“I heard you the first time. Shut up before you upset her more,” Garth replied tersely.

Taking that as her cue, she pulled back and looked at him with wide eyes. “I’m sorry I’m such a bother.”

If she’d thought Garth was capable of having a heart, she may have been affected by the look he gave her. It appeared to be filled with so much love and affection that anyone would have thought him the perfect lover, the perfect mate.

“You’re never a bother, Morgaine. To prove it, I’m going to make sure we get you two kittens the next time we go into town for supplies. How would you like that?”

“Oh, Garth, you’re the best.” Standing on her toes, she kissed him softly on the mouth. This was the last time she’d ever have to share her body with someone who wasn’t worthy of her, and the realization made her swell with happiness. The feeling must have traveled through her kiss, because when she pulled back, Garth had a look of amazement on his face.

“I should have gotten you some kittens sooner. Maybe I’ll throw in a puppy for good measure.” He chuckled, lifting her chin and kissing her hungrily.

Letting him lead and dominate what should be an exchange of equals, she smiled coyly when he pulled back and looked at her. She was so close now that she couldn’t risk anything this late in the game.

“You’d better go check on your patient before I get carried away,” he sneered.

Smiling back up at him, she headed toward Harper’s room. She tried not to jump when Garth stopped Fae from following her.

“Next time clear any decisions regarding Morgaine with me first. I don’t like her upset, and those who cause it don’t usually last that long here.”

Turning around, she gave him a look she hoped expressed adoration. From the way he preened at her attention, she knew she’d done something right.

“Yes, sir,” Fae replied, sounding chastised.

Making their way out of the kitchen, they headed toward the back of the house where the basement door was. Controlling her face so it didn’t register her anxious feelings, Morgaine pushed the door open. Harper was exactly where she’d left her the previous night. As each day went on, she worried she’d come to the room to find it empty and learn Harper was in little pieces on Dr. Hayworth’s examining table.

Ushering Fae in, she quickly closed the door. She didn't know how they were going to get out of this undetected, but she was going to do everything in her power to make sure it happened. Walking to Harper's bedside, she tapped their secret code on her wrists. Those watching wouldn't notice a change in Harper's body, but Morgaine did.

"There will be time, there will be time to prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet; there will be time to murder and create, and time for all the works and days of hands that lift and drop a question on your plates, time for you and time for me." Morgaine whispered the line from a T.S. Eliot poem, hoping Harper would understand that their time had come. It was another way for them to communicate that Morgaine had found effective in not drawing too much attention. With a flicker of her eyelids, Harper's gaze focused on Morgaine.

Tears sprang to Morgaine's eyes from the well of loneliness and despair she'd kept hidden through the years. She was no longer alone, and she would be free, they would be free. "Harper?" Dev's voice echoed in the now silent room. The name dripped from her lips as if it was weighted with a thousand longings and the effect of speaking it exhausted the strength of her tongue.

Looking up, she realized Dev had worked her magic and had somehow reappeared right at Morgaine's side. She couldn't help the surge of anxiety rising up in her. They could not reveal themselves now. They had to get out. Like the quail that panics in the brush during the hunt, Morgaine wanted to fly up and away to safety.

"Dev?" Harper croaked in a hoarse voice gone rusty from lack of use.

The older woman moved so quickly Morgaine was practically knocked over from her momentum. Stepping back, she watched as Dev crushed Harper's body to her. The emotion between them was so palpable, Morgaine felt as if she could contain it in a jar to display in a museum. The description would read, *Love*.

Chapter Six

Leland once again waited patiently on the very edges of the property. When he saw Garth open the door of the house, he suppressed a desire to storm to the rescue. That was not the plan, and he knew more than any other they had to follow the plan. It was just the longer he had to wait for the signal, the more his mind wandered to Morgaine.

It was a curious feeling. He would have been relieved if he could blame it on her beauty, but there was something more. When he looked into her obsidian-colored eyes, he felt as if he was staring into a black hole where both death and creation fought an endless battle. Instead of agitating his wolf, the feeling seemed to soothe him.

Leland usually had very little need for females beyond sexual fulfillment. He wasn't a monk, but he'd never wanted a deeper connection. The females of his Pack, particularly Dev, held a special place in his life, but the intimacy he shared with them was different from what he would be required to give to a mate.

He knew some thought he feared a mate and cubs because of his childhood. They thought he was concerned he may become his father, but that was bullshit. His father chose to be the bastard he was, and

Leland had made the choice to never be like that, ever. He was his own person, and nothing was going to change that.

What made him shy away from the commitment of binding himself so closely to another was something he couldn't describe and hadn't really thought of until now. Morgaine was making him and his wolf feel as if there was something missing, and neither of them knew what to do with it. It was pointless, though, because he was far too old for her. The youngest of the original Pack brothers, Leland was almost pushing forty. He didn't know how Morgaine got in her situation, but he was pretty sure she didn't want some old shifter chasing after her.

Readjusting his body slightly, he stilled when he saw a flash of light from a window in the house. Waiting to make sure it was Dev's signal, he quickly sent a message to Duke's team over his comm device. He crouched low, feeling the anticipation of the hunt, of finally having closure on an experience that left everyone feeling so out of control.

Keeping his senses honed, Leland moved forward cautiously but quickly sprang into action at the sound of a scream and gunshot. They didn't know how many altered humans were in the house or around the grounds, but he couldn't leave the three women in there alone any longer. When he pushed

through the door, he found it strange no one was there to prevent his entrance. Trying to quiet his frantic nerves, he opened his senses. The first thing he recognized was the unique fragrance that Morgaine wore. Following the trail cautiously, he came to a door toward the back of the house. Still wondering where all the humans were, he silently pushed the door open and realized it opened to a basement.

He could hear someone moaning in pain and voices shouting, but the acoustics in the room made it difficult to make out what they were saying. Cautiously making his way down the stairs, he paused when he was able to get a good view of what was happening. Garth was lying on the ground in a pool of his own blood while an older man stood next to him with a gun aimed at Dev, Fae, Morgaine and Harper. Flexing his muscles in preparation to spring, he was stopped by the man's voice.

"I know you're standing there. If you try to attack, I'm going to shoot one of these ladies, and trust me, you won't get to me before I've killed the one I choose."

Leland was stunned. The only way the man would have known he was there was if he was a shifter. The only shifters he scented were Garth and Harper, and from the way his moaning was becoming weaker and weaker, Garth was of no threat. Looking at Dev,

Leland noticed she nodded slightly without taking her eyes off the man with the gun.

With no other option but to wait, he continued down the stairs slowly. They'd gotten this far, and he could only pray they'd see it all the way to the end.

Morgaine knew she should have been more sedate, should have tried to beguile Dr. Hayworth with charm. But when it came down to it, she couldn't keep the look of pure hatred from registering on her face. If possible, she would have eviscerated the monster disguised as a man with her bare hands. The thought of how close they had gotten made her practically vibrate in anger. She could almost taste her freedom before Dr. Hayworth and Garth silently made their way into Harper's room.

"I told you she was up to something. You've always been foolish when it comes to women," Dr. Hayworth said snidely.

The look of utter shock on Garth's face prevented Morgaine from giving any explanation. She knew they were busted, and trying to plead otherwise would only serve to humiliate her. Instead she met Garth's gaze with all of the true feelings she had for him on her face.

“Morgaine, what are you doing?” Looking over at Fae, who was still disguised as Carter, his face contorted into such rage and hatred she truly feared what he could do to her for the first time.

“Has he promised to take you away from me?”

Morgaine was stunned by the sheer narcissism of his question. Confronted with a possible mutiny, all he could focus on was her *leaving* him. When Dr. Hayworth pulled out a gun and shot Garth in the back, she screamed out in alarm. It was so unexpected but somehow fitting, considering Garth was going to stab the other man in the back eventually.

“Like I said, completely foolish and of no use to me anymore,” Dr. Hayworth stated, barely sparing Garth a glance.

“I don’t know how you’ve done this, my dear, but bravo. I’m going to have to make sure I keep a closer eye on you in the future. Now please introduce me to your friends. I’m already well acquainted with Harper.” He leered at her. “So nice to see you’ve made such a speedy recovery, my dear.”

Grinding her teeth, Morgaine wanted to leap at him and rip the gun from his hands. The mocking look he gave her let her know he knew exactly what she was thinking.

“Come, my dear, you’ve been so cautious—don’t throw it all away now.”

“For someone who prides himself on not being foolish, there is no bigger fool than you if you think I will go with you willingly.” Disdain practically dripped from her words when his well-placed mask slipped a bit.

“There are ways to make you cooperate,” he sneered with a threatening edge.

She was prevented from responding when Dr. Evil noticed Leland on the stairs. “I know you’re standing there. If you try to attack, I’m going to shoot one of these ladies, and trust me, you won’t get to me before I’ve killed the one I choose.”

Her anger was starting to choke her. It was like a great black ball rising up inside her, and she didn’t think she had the capacity to control it. If he thought she’d willingly submit to becoming his sex slave, he was mistaken. In that moment, she didn’t care if she made it out, but she’d gone too far to let everyone go out like this.

Morgaine envisioned herself charging him. All she needed was to get her hands on him and it would all be over, even if he killed her in the process. She wasn’t a martyr and she wasn’t desperate, but she was tired. Tired of this life, tired of the indecision, the fear that kept her from acting, and as he stood there staring with his pompous air and his complete belief in

his ability to control her, Morgaine just wanted it to stop.

“Are you going to attack me, sweet little Morgaine? I’m sure if looks could kill I’d be dead now with the way your eyes are flaying me,” he remarked with his characteristic smirk.

“Are you going to twist your mustache and laugh maniacally next?” Harper asked dryly.

“Of all the times to recapture the use of your voice properly, is now it?” Dev sighed, sounding frustrated.

“What? You haven’t had to listen to his B-movie plot of world domination for months. I was convinced I really was going to be catatonic if I had to hear him drone on and on,” Harper replied with a shrug of her shoulder.

“Enough!” Dr. Hayworth shouted, pointing his gun at Harper.

“Yes, you’re right enough,” Dev said firmly.

Using her gift, she faded away just as Leland moved with supernatural speed toward Dr. Hayworth. Unfortunately, the doctor seemed to have reflexes just as quick. He fired at Leland, and Morgaine watched in horror as the shifter crumpled to the floor. Not really thinking about what would happen next, she leapt at Dr. Hayworth just as Fae and a newly reappeared Dev restrained him. Touching him skin-to-skin, she began

to pull his soul from his body. She didn't bother using any quips or snappy one-liners about his imminent demise. Morgaine was beyond that. Nor did she drag the process out, savoring his struggle to keep himself firmly seated in this reality. She was no sadist. No, she was now the hand of retribution, and as Fae and Dev held his struggling body, together they were Death.

Chapter Seven

Leland had been on bed rest for two weeks since he was shot trying to take out that lunatic doctor. What should have been a simple gunshot wound got infected because of the enhancements the mad scientist Dr. Hayworth made to the bullet. For the first forty-eight hours it had been touch and go, but Leland couldn't really remember any of it. The shifter doctor Edward Grant, the Eastern Region Alpha, had procured for them said he'd never seen anything like it and hoped he never would again.

Now that most of his infection had passed, Leland was anxious to get back home. Edward had invited the members of the rescue team to stay at his mansion in upstate New York while Leland recuperated. He'd protested initially but was only shut down by Dev, Fae, and strangely enough, Morgaine. Much to his chagrin, she'd appointed herself his nursemaid and hovered over him constantly.

Leland was finding it hard to keep his distance and feelings for her in check while she spent so much time around him. In the early days of his illness, he'd felt so sick he didn't really care, but now that he was starting to get his strength back he really needed her

to stop fussing over him. Her attention was making him long for things he couldn't have.

"Oh good, you're up. I brought your favorite soup. Bruce said we should start introducing solids into your diet, so I made sure the pieces of beef in the soup are pretty hearty." Pushing his door open while she balanced the tray she was carrying, Morgaine chatted merrily.

Leland immediately squashed the feelings of happiness that began to bubble up inside him from her presence. Sitting up a little straighter in his bed, he made room on his lap for the food. He still felt pretty weak, but if he didn't show signs of improvement soon they'd never let him out. Leland's wolf was losing his patience with being in the room each day.

"Oh, be careful. I could have helped you," Morgaine said, placing the tray down quickly on the table next to his bed. Turning to him, she began to fluff the pillow behind his back. As she straightened the sheet in his lap, Leland reached out and grasped her wrists.

"Thank you." His voice was still a bit hoarse as he spoke. Moving her hands away, he tried not to concentrate on how great her skin felt or how good she smelled and how much he wanted to kiss the startled expression off her face.

Looking away, he waited for her to place the tray on his lap. The tray was a result of him snapping yesterday that he could feed himself; before that she'd spoon-fed him all his meals. As his body began to rejuvenate, he knew he wouldn't be able to continue having her do something so intimate for him.

Once the tray was seated in his lap, he started the slow process of trying to feed himself. Murmuring in appreciation, he tried not to focus on her staring at him so intently. Once he became aware of his surroundings after the initial illness, he'd found she watched him so carefully, it was as if she was pulling him apart and trying to put him back together. When his energy began to wane, he put the spoon down and rested back on his pillows.

"Here, I can do that." She moved to take the bowl from him.

"I can do it," he replied indignantly.

"Why are you so stubborn?" she asked, sounding frustrated.

"Why are you so obstinate? I told you I could do it." Meeting her flashing gaze with his own, he felt the tension building around them.

"You would starve if I wasn't, that's why."

"I said I can do it. I'm just getting full." He was lying, of course, but he couldn't take having her so

close any more without touching her. It was more torturous than being confined to his bed.

This wasn't like Leland, this cantankerous behavior. He was more prone to just fading into the background than making a fuss, but making a fuss was what he'd done since he'd woken up. He and his wolf felt disconnected and just wanted to get back to Loupe Lodge and their quiet little studio. Back to his forest and the sound of his own thoughts. He missed trailing Dev and the silence of just being they experienced when together.

Instead he was confined to a room that would put five-star hotels to shame with a delectable female waiting on him hand and foot. Torture, pure torture.

"I'm just trying to be helpful," she said with a quiver in her voice.

Leland paused, looking at her with squinted eyes. That was another thing that grated about Morgaine: when she didn't get her way, she went all soft and teary. He'd seen what she was capable of, and he knew she could suck the very life out of him. Why she liked to pretend she was a helpless damsel, he couldn't figure out. He continued to stare at her until she sighed in frustration.

"Fine, I give up. You want to sit here and starve, then sit here and starve. I'm through trying to be nice to you."

Now that was more like the woman he'd seen in that basement prison. The fire flashing in her eyes and the flare of her nostrils made her look like a force to be reckoned with. It made his wolf stand at attention, ready to snap and snarl at her, but not because he thought she was a threat. Strangely, watching her get riled up turned him on. He'd just added it to the list of other things that made it imperative he stay away from her.

Sitting impassively in his bed, he watched as she stared at him as if he had three heads. When she leaned over and snatched the tray of food from his lap, she almost spilled its contents on him. "Well, since you're full, I'll just take this." There was a gleam in her eyes that seemed to dare him to say otherwise.

Locking gazes with her for the briefest of moments, he crossed his arms over his chest and turned his head to look out the large bay window of his room. He concentrated on the snow falling outside as he heard Morgaine growl in frustration and turn to stomp out of the room. He sensed it when she stopped at the door before exiting.

"I have only been kind to you, Leland, and you continue to throw it in my face. This is the last time I'm going to let you treat me like this. I mean it—I'm not coming back." She spoke with such precision and calmness, it sent a chill down Leland's spine.

He just hoped, for his personal sanity, that this time she meant it.

Morgaine was so angry she wanted to throw the whole tray of food she was carrying against the nearest wall. Stomping off, she walked down the massive staircase of Edward Grant's home and made her way to the kitchen. Once there, she placed the tray down on the kitchen counter with more force than was probably necessary. She really did want to smash something. Actually, she wanted to smash Leland's face, to be specific.

When she confessed to Dev that Leland was not as warm and affectionate as she'd described him, Dev assured her it must be because he'd been really sick.

"Oh," she'd said, "they all turn into big babies when they're sick. I'm sure Leland is no different than any other male."

Thinking the older woman must be right, Morgaine had upped her charm. She'd pulled out every trick she'd been taught to cajole men through Michelle's teachings, and each one only made Leland even more surely and withdrawn. Well, today was the final straw. She'd only been trying to help the

stubborn bastard because he'd been injured while rescuing her, Dev, Fae and Harper.

As she thought of the other women who had changed her life, her anger ebbed a little. She felt as if she'd found a missing piece of herself. Initially, when Morgaine saw how the women's Packs embraced their return, she'd felt a bit isolated and alone. They had everything Dr. Hayworth had taken from her family. Fortunately, her fears were set to rest when both Packs and women welcomed her so fully.

They'd even tried to find her parents, or the people she thought of as her parents. True loners, they'd had no connections beyond Morgaine and her brother. She had no Pack of her own to return to and was invited to join either Fae's or Dev's. Though she liked Fae and the idea of living in Los Angeles again, she just couldn't leave Harper. They'd forged such a strong connection that it would seem odd not to be around her almost every day. Her decision, of course, had absolutely nothing to do with a certain stubborn shifter who was so close to getting his food poisoned.

"Hey, what did that plate ever do to you?"

Morgaine was brought out of her homicidal reverie at the sound of Harper's brother Jett's voice. Turning from the sink where she'd been rinsing out dishes, she smiled. She liked Jett and his quirky sense

of humor that was in some ways like his sisters'. It didn't hurt that the young shifter was very handsome.

A few years older than her, he had a tall frame comprised of lean muscles. His naturally olive skin was browned by the sun even in the winter weather. He had the most adorable curly hair that seemed to always flop in his brilliant blue eyes, and he was a complete rascal. She couldn't help liking him.

"I'm just having one of those days." She sighed, rinsing her hands.

"Let me guess—Leland." He smirked with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Oh no, not sweet, lovable Leland, just the shyest and quietest shifter in the world." Morgaine could feel her temper starting to boil as she thought about that ungrateful, overgrown sheep dog.

Chuckling, Jett took an apple from a bowl on the counter and bit into it. Smiling as he chewed, he just shook his head. It actually made her feel good she was so validated. Whenever she even hinted Leland's behavior was a little off, she was met with ardent disbelief.

"I think you should just let Dev and Duke hire him a nurse. You shouldn't have to put up with his behavior," he said before he took another bite of his apple.

“No.” Morgaine was actually a little startled by her own forceful response.

“I mean, I don’t mind. It’s the least I can do.”

She tried not to fidget under the scrutinizing stare Jett was giving her. She really did want to show them all how grateful she was, and now that she was a part of Duke and Dev’s Pack, it only seemed right that Pack took care of Pack. It really was the right thing to do.

“Morgaine, you’re Pack now. You don’t have to prove anything to anyone. Everyone’s just really glad to have you, seriously.”

The genuine concern in his voice made her want to tear up. She could only give him a shy smile because if she spoke, the dam on the emotions she’d kept bottled up over the years would burst. Morgaine had cried over the years, but they were never her tears; they were always tears for others—tears to make someone feel powerful or wanted. Tears to make others think they’d affected her when they’d never even scratched the surface of who she was. Standing in the opulent kitchen of another Alpha, watching Jett look at her with such unmasked kindness, she wanted to weep for all she had lost and gained.

As if sensing where she was at, Jett closed the distance between them and enveloped her in a tight hug. It was just what she needed, but she hadn’t

known it. The way he stroked her back softly as he murmured calming words in her ear made her think of her brother David. He always knew how to make her feel better when she got sad. Squeezing Jett, she let some of her tears leak out and savored the comfort he brought with his touch.

He was right. She didn't have to prove anything or be the perfect woman. She'd spent the majority of her life catering to what others wanted. She had a chance to really live, and Morgaine was going to take it. That overgrown baby masquerading as a male could ignore her kindness all he wanted; she was through, and she really meant it this time.

Chapter Eight

It'd been almost a month since her final blow-up with Leland, and Morgaine had kept to her word, sort of. She'd stopped nursing him personally, but she just couldn't seem to let go of all the responsibility. He was Pack, and she still felt an obligation to help no matter how surly he was. If she didn't get so angry, she'd almost laugh that a male his age was such a big baby. It was only with a promise of going outside today from Bruce, the shifter doctor, that he was being slightly more cooperative.

Once outside, Leland shifted and took off for the thickly forested area around the property. She cried out in alarm before she could even stop herself.

"Don't worry, Morgaine, he'll be safe." Jett chuckled, trying to reassure her.

"Aren't you going to follow? He just started getting better." If she hadn't been so anxious, she might have paused at the pleading sound in her voice. Stepping out in the snow, she unconsciously moved in the direction Leland had taken off to. When Bruce gently placed a hand on her arm to stop her, she realized she didn't even have a jacket on.

"Jett will go follow him to make sure he's all right."

The calming tone of the doctor's voice helped her anxiety a bit, but it wasn't until Jett shifted and trotted off after Leland that she felt okay about going back into the house.

Harper came down and kept her company as she baked cookies. Listening to Harper's constant commentary, she felt as if her sides were going to split from laughing. Harper had a way of seeing the world that was funny because of its frank honesty and inherent oddity. Taking a third batch of oatmeal raison cookies from the oven, Morgaine stilled as she heard the back door open.

"Yum, cookies. You're going to spoil us, Morgaine," Jett called out joyfully, walking over to the counter where fresh-baked cookies sat on a plate.

She could feel Leland in the room even though he hadn't said a word. He filled the space with his presence, and she felt as if there wasn't enough oxygen for her to breathe. Turning with a smile on her face, she froze when she saw him. He was dripping wet. It didn't look like he'd just played in the snow; it was more like he'd dunked himself in the nearest lake. A ball of anger welled up inside her when she realized how careless he was being with his health after all they'd done for him. When he made his way through the kitchen without even acknowledging her, Morgaine snapped.

“What have you been doing?” she growled.

Pausing, Leland gave her his trademark blank stare that made her want to pull his hair out. He looked at her for another heartbeat and began to exit the room.

“I’m talking to you, Leland.”

When he turned and growled at her, she jumped in surprise. Gone was the dispassionate stare, and in its place was an almost feral expression. Yet instead of backing down in fear, she was driven by some unseen force and stepped forward instead with her hands on her hips.

“Don’t you growl at me, you oversized baby. You’re soaking wet, and if you think I’m going to let you out to just get sick all over again, you’re mistaken, buddy.” If she hadn’t been vibrating with anger and frustration, she might have noticed the knowing looks Jett and Harper gave each other.

“Let?” Leland growled between clenched teeth.

“Um, maybe we should go see if someone needs our help with something, Harper.” Jett cleared his throat.

“Why? They’re finally going to do something interesting.”

“Harper,” Jett warned and snatched his sister up.

“Um, I guess we’ll see you guys later.”

Morgaine was so focused on Leland she didn't even acknowledge their leaving. This was going to end now. She'd had enough of Leland's behavior, and she was really going to give him a piece of her mind.

"Yes, *let*. Who do you think has been crucial to making sure you get well? You are an ungrateful, spoiled baby who's been coddled too much. Leland gets whatever Leland wants, but not anymore. I'm..."

Morgaine was stopped in mid rant when Leland rushed from the other side of the kitchen and pinned her against a counter. The movement was so sudden she could only stare at him in amazement.

"Listen, little girl, I never asked you to make me your pet project. Therefore, I don't answer to you. I am a male and not the baby you keep mentioning. A very adult male, and I don't need to be bothered by some little girl who wants to play nurse."

Leland's brown eyes seemed to glow a bright golden color that defied the regular laws of nature. His body felt tense against her, and his muscles bunched under his skin. If she hadn't been so stung by his words, she would have worried that he was emitting so much heat from his body, he might be feverish.

Just the idea of worrying about him pushed her feelings of shock and hurt to the back so that anger swarmed her. Here he was basically throwing everything she'd done for him in her face, and she was

worried he might be sick. Maybe she did need to see a therapist, because only someone who was fucked up would care what an asshole like him wanted.

“I’m not a little girl, and I’m not playing nurse. I was just trying to help your sorry ass.” Crossing her arms over her chest, she glared at him.

“I keep telling you I don’t need or want your help, and you keep ignoring me. Now if that isn’t the behavior of a little girl, than what is it?” he replied, sizing her up.

“It’s the behavior of someone who cares about you, dumbass.” Poking him in the chest, she froze when he grabbed her hand and pulled her body close to his. If she’d thought he was a little feverish before, now they were pressed so close he felt like he was on fire. Except it wasn’t unpleasant. Morgaine felt warmth travel from the top of her head down to the very soles of her feet. It seemed to seep into every pore in her body and soothe her in her angered state. She couldn’t help pushing even closer to him, and when a rumbling came from his chest, she felt it in the very recesses of her body.

She had never felt this way before. Looking into Leland’s eyes, she saw a mixture of amazement and fear. The latter puzzled her, and with her free hand she gently brushed back a tendril of curly brown hair gone limp from moisture. Closing his eyes, Leland nuzzled

the palm of her hand. When his soft, firm lips brushed against her skin, she moaned.

Snapping his eyes open, Leland pushed away from her. The absence of his body, of his warmth, made her shiver as if a bucket of ice water had been tossed on her. Wrapping her arms around herself, she watched as he let out short, choppy breaths and clenched his hands at his sides.

“I never asked you to care,” he said with a gravelly tone before he turned and walked out of the room.

“That’s the point—you don’t have to ask,” she whispered as he left.

Leland tried to pretend he didn’t hear Morgaine’s statement as he stormed to his room. He’d been here too long, and now that Grant’s Pack doctor had given him the green light, he was getting the hell out of this place. The time he’d run with Jett in the surrounding territory of the property hadn’t calmed his nerves enough. Even though Leland didn’t see Morgaine as much as before, it seemed the strange feelings he had for her were intensifying.

He felt as if he knew where she was at any given time in the house. Earlier, as he ran aimlessly in the

snow, the unique scent she alone possessed had haunted him. Only when he'd shifted and dunked himself in the freezing waters of a pond on the property was he finally able to find some peace. Unfortunately, it all got spoiled when he got into the kitchen. Leland was barely holding it together before she started ranting, and once she talked to him like he was a child, he snapped.

He just wanted her to know he wasn't like those boys masquerading as men she'd grown up around. He just wanted...he just wanted to touch her. Scrubbing his hand against his face, Leland took the stairs two at a time. Once inside his room, he stripped out of his wet clothes and rushed to his shower.

Standing under the hot water, he felt these feelings couldn't be natural; they were just too untamed and wild. The memory of her fingertips against his skin and the soft pressure of her full, firm breasts made him quake with frustration. Taking his granite-hard erection in his hands, he stroked himself.

Leland needed to find release before he did something stupid, like dragging her into his room and making sure everyone knew she was his. Pumping furiously, he realized just how stupid it was to even fantasize about her soft brown skin pressed against his. Or the sounds of pleasure she would make when he entered her. Feeling his body tighten with the need

to release, to come with an explosion of pent-up sexual need, Leland focused on all the stupid, stupid things he wanted to do to Morgaine until his body burst into a thousand little pieces of pleasure.

Working to control his labored breathing, Leland began to put himself back together one piece at a time. Once he finally felt more in control, he finished with his shower. Stepping out, he toweled off and walked into his room—and froze when he saw Dev sitting on his bed. Great. He didn't want to think about what he'd done to provoke the look she currently had on her face, but it was probably something stupid.

Chapter Nine

Dressing quickly, Leland could feel Dev's eyes boring holes into him. His face warmed at the memory of his shower, and he knew he was turning the brightest shade of red. He seriously hoped she hadn't heard him jacking off.

"So making Morgaine cry really gets you off."

Okay, maybe she had heard him. Leland sat down and put his socks and shoes on. Concentrating on tying the laces on his beaten-up hiking boots, he tried to fade into the background.

"When Morgaine told me you were being a bit surly, I said you were just out of sorts because of your illness. My Leland would never purposely be mean to anyone." The deceptively calm tone of her voice made him flinch as if he'd been struck.

He sat silently looking down at his hands, waiting for her next rebuke. Sighing, Dev got up from the bed and walked over to him. She stood in front of him and waited until he looked up at her. The look of deep affection in her eyes made his heart skip a beat.

"Leland, what's going on? This isn't like you. You're a little shy, maybe a bit withdrawn, but never mean or cruel. She's sobbing in her room because of something you said to her." She ran her hand through

his damp hair as she talked. Leaning into her hand, he tried to think of the words to say.

“I didn’t mean to make her cry. She just won’t leave me alone.” Leland sounded petulant to his own ears, and he wasn’t surprised when Dev not so softly yanked his hair.

“Ow,” he cried out.

“Serves you right,” she scolded, smacking him on the back of the head. “Pack doesn’t leave Pack alone. We help each other, take care of each other—you know that.”

“Well, I’ve had enough of her help,” he shouted as he stood and pushed past Dev.

“Okay, you must still be feeling the effects of the poison, because you did not just shout at me,” Dev stated, staring at him.

Riding the crest of his frustration, he stared back at her indignantly, holding her gaze until she raised one eyebrow in a questioning manner. He closed his eyes, his whole body shaking with his need to shift and run until he was exhausted. He needed to get home, he needed his studio, and he needed peace.

“Leland, love, talk to me. What’s going on?” The concern in Dev’s voice almost broke him.

She was usually his anchor. The person his soul was always soothed by, but now...now there was another, and it wasn’t the same. He didn’t want to curl

at her feet and doze as she absently stroked his fur. He didn't want to go on long hikes and absorb the serenity of nature. His soul cried out for his mate, a girl too young for him, too abused, so beautiful that it made his body hurt not to touch her. So he pushed and pushed, hoping to find his peace, to find his center that had been askew since she came into his life.

"Oh, Leland." Dev sighed, pulling him in for a hug. "You've found your mate."

It was awhile before Leland could compose himself after Dev's statement. It was one thing to keep the secret tucked away in the darkest corners of his mind, but it was another thing to have it voiced out in the open. Pulling from her embrace, he walked over to the window and stared out.

"We should probably get home. This isn't the environment for you to be in while you're going through the mating process," Dev stated matter-of-factly.

Startled, Leland turned and looked at her. He definitely wanted to get home, but that wasn't really the reason. "I'm not mating anyone, Dev."

"Well, not here, that's for sure. I should have realized you'd be out of sorts since you're not in your own territory." She was doing that thing where she talked and only heard what she wanted to hear. It used

to be funny—when he wasn't the one she was doing it to.

"It doesn't matter where I am. I'm not mating with anyone, especially Morgaine," he said emphatically.

"Why especially not with Morgaine?" She gave him a sharp look.

"I'm not interested in her," he lied.

"Really? Because with the noises you were making in the shower, I thought a part of you was interested," she commented with a dry tone, giving him a knowing look.

Leland felt as if his face was on fire. Dev had no problem saying what she thought, and in the past he'd really appreciated it, but now he just wanted to crawl in a hole. "That was different," he practically stuttered.

The smirk she gave him let him know just how different she thought it was.

"I'm too old for her, and she's suffered a lot. God, Dev, she was basically a sex slave." He didn't bother hiding the anguish in his voice.

When he thought about what was done to Morgaine, he got sick. She'd never told him directly, but Jett had let some things drop. He'd seemed to talk about Morgaine every time they were together over the last couple of weeks. With horrified realization, Leland finally understood why.

“Jett likes her anyway. He talks about her all the time,” he admitted, squelching the little flare of jealousy that surged in him.

“First, you’re not too old for her. As for what happened to her, those are her demons, and what better way to conquer them than with the love and support of her mate?” She paused as if thinking. “And Jett, what about him?” He saw her falter in her attempt to formulate a retort. He knew she would never do anything to hurt the young male she considered her son.

“I think you want to make Jett like her. But even if he does, she still gets to choose, Leland—and I think she’s chosen you,” she whispered with such kindness and sincerity it made him hope.

“Well, I don’t choose her.” He squashed that bit of hope and decided he had to be practical. He was too old and complicated. She needed someone who could help her, not hinder her, and Leland just wasn’t that person. Jett was the male for her, and he was going to make sure it happened, because he knew he’d never get his peace or reach his center until she was so far out of his reach there couldn’t even be a little bit of hope.

Morgaine was crying into her pillow and didn't hear the tentative knock on her door. Languishing in her gloom, she startled a little when she heard Harper's voice.

"This is why I'm going to avoid the whole mating thing as much as possible."

"Harper, you said you would be helpful," Jett sighed with an exacerbad tone.

"I am being helpful, but I can't help making some observations," she replied indignantly.

"Yes, well, do they have to be out loud?"

Turning over, she sniffled and looked at her two first true friends. She'd had her brother David as a little girl, but Harper and Jett were the first people she'd ever thought of as her *friends*. Smiling, she propped herself up on her pillows and patted a space on her bed. Smiling back, they both walked over and plopped down. The concern on their faces made her tear up even more.

"I don't know why I let him get to me. He's always been so awful." Blowing into her tissue, she didn't really worry about the polite etiquette Michelle had drilled into her.

"He's really a great guy the rest of the time," Jett said, patting her knee.

"I know, and that's what really hurts. I've seen how he laughs and jokes with everyone else, even

though he's pretty shy, but with me, no. You'd think I was a leper." Actually, the more she thought about just how rude he was, the angrier she got.

"You're his mate and he doesn't know what to do about it, that's why," Harper stated, pushing her glasses up her nose.

"Harper, must you?" Jett sighed in a manner she was starting to associate with talking to Harper.

"Well, it's the truth," she replied.

Morgaine looked at them both, feeling confused. Mate? She wasn't Leland's mate. That was just so...

"Morgaine, are you listening to me?" Jett asked, interrupting her thoughts.

"What? I'm sorry, but that's just so... I mean, I can't be his mate." Twisting the edges of the blanket she'd rested in her lap, Morgaine giggled nervously. When the siblings gave each other knowing looks, it made her feel indignant.

"I think I'd be able to identify my life partner, and Leland is most definitely not him." Smoothing a crease in her pants, she tried not to fidget as they both stared at her. "He doesn't even like being in the same room as me. I mean, really." Listening to the words coming out of her mouth, she didn't know who she was trying to convince more, them or herself. "But it can't be," she went on. "All we do is fight. He's never said one nice thing to me."

“It’s sexual tension,” Harper commented dryly.

“Harper,” Jett snapped.

It was all so ridiculous, and the only thing she could do was laugh. Once she started thinking about it, she just laughed some more. She was totally a head case. She had a crush on a male almost twice her age who was cold and distant. If that didn’t scream Daddy issues, she didn’t know what would. After she’d settled down, she looked at Jett and Harper and immediately started crying.

“God, this is so fucked up,” she sniffled, putting the pillow over her head.

Chapter Ten

Morgaine took a deep breath and enjoyed the coming of spring. It'd been several months since they'd been at Loup Lodge, and she was starting to feel like she was getting the hang of her freedom. It was awkward in the beginning, trying to figure out what she would make of her life, but with Dev and Harper's support she felt she was moving in a direction that would make her happy.

The only blemish on her new independence was her feelings for Leland. Honestly a great deal of her issues centered on a bruised ego. She'd never had to work for male attention in the past. There was no false confidence in admitting she was beautiful and intelligent, possessing a special kind of charm that drew people to her. It was those qualities that made her a valued commodity to her keepers, but when it came to Leland she may have been made of stone for all the attention he gave her.

She'd kept herself busy adjusting to her new life, trying to keep her mind off his behavior, but there were times when she'd see him interacting with Pack members and she'd soak in how different he could be. She'd seen a therapist since returning, and it was

during one of their initial sessions that she was able to identify just how fucked up this whole thing was.

The female shifter was the only person she'd ever told all the details of her life to, and it felt great. Karen didn't make her feel weird or shamed by her experience, and most importantly, she helped Morgaine really understand it wasn't her fault. She thought she'd developed a thick enough shell over the years to prevent those thoughts from sneaking in, but it wasn't until she really pulled apart the pieces of her life that she saw she'd held on to stuff she didn't need to carry. It was during one of those sessions, while pulling apart the fabric of who she was, that Leland seemed to seep into the conversation.

"I just don't understand why he doesn't like me?" She'd sighed, looking down at her hands, absently twisting the tissue she'd been using.

"Is it important that he likes you?" Karen asked in an inquisitive tone.

Morgaine had come to appreciate how the older Asian female didn't use some syrupy tone or fake sympathy while talking to her. It made her feel less like a lab rat and more like she was in control of what she was sharing. What stumped her, though, was unlike previous questions asked, she didn't have a ready answer for this one.

“You’ve never thought about that, have you?” The knowing smile Karen gave her made her blush a little. She’d always been amazed at how her therapist could just cut straight to the heart of the matter.

“Well, no, I just don’t see why he can’t like me. I mean I’m not asking him to love me, but couldn’t he just like me?” she pleaded, looking up at Karen with tears in her eyes.

“Morgaine, he doesn’t have to do anything, but I think you know that already.” Karen nodded her head.

Closing her eyes, Morgaine let the tears that had gathered in her eyes fall. She’d never not been liked, and it hurt to think when she actually finally cared about someone, that someone didn’t care about her. That session had been her hardest to date because she didn’t find an answer that would appease her. Each day that she began to rework the fabric of her life into the vision she had for herself, she kept reaching a snag—Leland. She couldn’t describe the pull that kept guiding her to him, but it tugged and she followed.

Feeling the crisp spring air blow against her face as she sat by the lake on Dev and Duke’s property, she resisted the urge to cry. She’d gained so much inner strength, and this test would not break her. Morgaine knew this connection she felt for Leland wasn’t a result of the trauma she’d experienced as a child. This was about the two of them, and if she could just get

that stubborn bastard to acknowledge what they had, life would be so much better.

She saw how he'd sneak looks at her when he thought she wouldn't notice. Even though he continued to ignore her in public, he'd done little acts of kindness for her when he thought she wouldn't know. He'd helped Jett surprise her with a piano a few weeks ago, and he made sure the coffee she liked to drink was always in the kitchen. When she started taking walks in the forest around the house, he'd gotten a few of the Pack members together to clear a path for her.

Each time she'd tried to thank him, he'd find a way to avoid her or just stare blankly at her. That had become the focus of most of her sessions with Karen: just how obstinate Leland was. Yes, he was older, but she wasn't a baby, and yes, she'd had traumatic experiences with men. But that didn't mean she could never love one man with all her heart, so much so that she felt she would explode from the lack of having him.

Pushing her recently cut hair behind her ear, she stared out at the water. She took a deep breath and tried to let the serenity of the moment calm her nerves. Mostly because she knew if she stayed too agitated, Leland might slink back off to that studio he holed himself up in. She could feel him watching her

in the shadows of the forested area, probably resting under some bush.

Today, though, she wasn't in the mood to pretend she didn't know he was following her, watching over her as he'd done once she'd started to venture farther into the woods. Standing up, she placed her hands on her hips and turned to survey the trees and bushes surrounding her. It was this behavior of his that wouldn't let her hope die, let her affections transfer to another. She knew he cared, and today was the day she would drag it out of him.

"Leland Jacobs, I know you're hiding somewhere out there, and you'd better bring your furry ass here or I'm going to come looking for you," she shouted, disturbing the quiet serenity of the area.

Leland didn't know what to do. Morgaine looked like a vengeful goddess standing at the edge of the lake with her hands on her hips and a scowl on her face, her newly cut shoulder-length hair whipping about from the breeze. He was actually stunned that she knew he was out there watching her. He'd been following her for weeks, making sure she was okay as she wandered around the Pack's territory.

It was the least he could do, considering everyone didn't want to acknowledge the type of danger she was in wandering about by herself. Leland thought he had an ally in Duke until his Alpha's mate laughed in both their faces. Dev just didn't know how fragile Morgaine was, and even though he'd committed himself to keeping space between them, that didn't mean he wanted to see a member of his Pack harmed.

Crouching low on his belly, he froze when he saw her moving toward his direction. Slowing his breathing, he watched her through his transformed eyes and tried not to whine as the smell of her anger hit him. Jett must have told her about him following her, because there was no way she'd sensed him out there. He'd been particularly careful when he tracked her.

"I know where you are, Leland, and you know why I know. You're just too stubborn to admit it," she said, stalking toward him.

Slowly backing up, Leland tried not to rustle the leaves he'd been lying on while he watched her. He'd actually come to enjoy the walks she took because they allowed him time to soak in her presence away from the prying eyes of his Pack members. Leland had admitted to himself that he was attracted to Morgaine, but he knew she could never be his mate. Instead she

was Pack, and it was his obligation to keep a Pack member from being hurt.

Liar.

Leland almost growled at the sound of his inner voice calling bullshit. Okay, maybe he did have feelings for Morgaine that went beyond Pack loyalty, but it could never be anything more than what it was now.

“I can see you, Leland, so you might as well come out,” she called, having moved closer to where he’d been hiding.

Leland could only watch, feeling trapped as she ebbed closer to him. Forgetting about being quiet, he backed quickly away from the bush he’d been hiding under and turned tail and ran. It wasn’t the most dignified exit, but he simply panicked. The feel of air rushing past him as he sprinted calmed his nerves a bit. The foliage of the forest grew thinner as he approached the house, until he could see his salvation in the distance. Slowing down a bit, he leapt to clear a fallen log and ran toward the back of the house.

He slipped through the doggie door Dev had installed, then padded through the kitchen and up the stairs to his room. Shifting quickly, Leland opened his door and stepped inside his room, sighing in relief. He still felt out of sorts, though, so he walked quickly to his bathroom and started his shower. When he

stepped under the hot water, some of the tension from his encounter with Morgaine finally leaked from his body.

Why did she have to go and spoil everything by calling out to him? As his heart continued to race, he knew he could no longer deny his feelings. This was getting out of control, and he would have to leave. Fae had mentioned before she returned to Los Angeles that he could visit anytime that he wanted. Maybe that was what he needed—a larger city with larger distractions. He was practically isolated up here at Loupe Lodge, and it only made things worse.

Resting his head against the cool tile, Leland took another deep breath and growled out in frustration. He could still smell her; it was as if her scent was imbedded in his sensory glands. Clenching and unclenching his fist, he felt as if he wanted to smash something. Leland's wolf was prowling under the very surface of his skin and biting at the bit to be let free. A shudder of fear traveled through him at the thought of what could happen if he didn't control himself.

Turning the water off, he grabbed a towel and began to dry off. The hard run and hot shower wasn't helping; he would have to pack tonight and just leave. He'd have to leave a note for Dev and Duke rather than saying goodbye in person, because if they saw

him they'd start digging into what was wrong, and he couldn't have that. Hell, he didn't really understand what was wrong himself. Even if he did admit his feelings to Morgaine, the way he was reacting couldn't be normal. He shouldn't feel so out of control.

Walking into his room, he rubbed the towel furiously on his head and froze. He felt as if tiny currents of electricity were traveling along his skin, and the possible source of that feeling made him pause. When he took in a breath, he could smell her, and it wasn't his imagination this time—she was actually in the room. The realization that she was in his space made his body harden with need.

Pulling the towel slowly from his head, he stared in shock at Morgaine sitting on his bed. He wrapped the towel around his hips and tried to will his erection down. Her slow perusal of his body caused his face to burn with embarrassment and excitement.

"What are you doing in my room?" he growled out.

"I came to finish our conversation," she replied calmly.

Bewildered, he stared back at her while she lifted her chin in a defiant manner.

"We weren't having a conversation."

"Exactly." The slight tightening of her mouth and arch of her eyebrow set off warning bells in his

head. Feeling exposed with only a towel on, he moved toward his dresser but froze when she leapt off the bed.

“Oh no you don’t. You stay right where you are until we finish, and if you think of shifting, so help me I’ll lock you in a cage, Leland Jacobs, until you stop being so damn stubborn.” He knew he should be concerned about the way her tiny frame vibrated with anger, but he couldn’t help being fascinated by this side of her.

“Are you laughing at me?” she asked indignantly.

“No.” His denial was minimized by the humor lacing his tone.

“You think this is funny?” She moved so quickly toward him, Leland stumbled back before he realized this was his space and he didn’t need to be intimidated. Pulling up to his full height, he crossed his arms over his chest and stared at her blankly. It was a technique he’d perfected over the years when he wanted someone to back off. Leland wasn’t prone to overt signs of aggression and had learned that silence often worked more effectively when he wanted someone to leave him alone.

“Have you been to therapy, Leland?”

The question was so out of left field that he faltered in maintaining his stoic expression. What the hell was this woman doing, and why was she doing it

in his room? he thought, trying to maintain eye contact and not look at how her generous breasts heaved with each angry breath.

“For the sake of my argument I’m going to assume no. Well, I’ve been going for several weeks now, and you know what, Leland—” She paused, looking at him,. Realizing he wasn’t going to answer, she continued after snorting in disgust, “I’ve learned that I’m tired of people dictating my life. After my brother and I were taken, everything was decided for me. What to eat, what to wear, when to go to sleep, when to wake up, and even who to fuck.”

Leland felt his wolf shift in agitation inside him at the mention of the last part. He still wished he’d been able to rip Garth apart into tiny pieces, very slowly. The thought of some other male forcing himself on her made every protective instinct he had flare up.

“Leland,” she whispered, dropping her gaze and reaching out to touch him.

He felt as if his heart was breaking and he didn’t know how to put it back together.

“Leland, I’m tired of people dictating what I do, and that includes you,” she whispered, looking up at him.

“Me? I don’t dictate to you. I barely speak to you,” he said incredulously.

“Exactly—you ignore me the majority of the time, but you stalk me as your wolf. You’ve controlled this non-relationship of ours, and in the beginning I was okay with it, but not anymore. I’m in control now, Leland.”

Pausing, she looked up at him with an aura of fierceness he’d never observed in her before. Shocked by the change in her nature, he could only stare wide-eyed.

“We are going to see what happens if we explore this attraction between us. Pack enough clothes for a weekend trip, because you’re going to drive me down to Santa Barbara on your motorcycle and we’re going to spend the weekend at a hotel downtown. I want to go wine tasting and walk along the beach.”

Opening his mouth to protest, he was quickly silenced by her raised hand.

“This is not negotiable, Leland. You have one hour to be ready.”

Storming past him, she walked out of his room, slamming the door behind her. He could only stare in amazement. She couldn’t be serious, and even if she was, it wasn’t like he had to listen to her. She wasn’t the boss of him. Walking over to his dresser, he pulled out underwear, socks, a worn t-shirt and a pair of jeans and dressed. He sat on his bed to pull on his boots and just stayed there once he was done. He

didn't have to do anything she said. Leland knew what was best for the both of them, and the best option was for him to leave home and go on an extended visit to some place far from Morgaine.

Sighing, he cradled his head in his hands and tried to block out her scent in his room. He couldn't help replaying her impassioned speech over and over again. Was he like all those other people? Growling, he didn't understand why it had to be so hard and why she had to come into his life. Everything had been perfect, ordered, and the way he liked it.

Liar.

Chuckling, Leland lay back on his bed and realized that little voice that knew him so well was calling him on his bullshit again. He'd come to the fork in the road, and the idea of taking the road less traveled was scaring the shit out of him. He was so afraid of fucking this up, not making it right for her. God, maybe he did need therapy, because he was becoming a total nutcase.

Chapter Eleven

Morgaine felt as if she was going to break apart, she was shaking so hard. It must have been all of the adrenaline running through her system. As she scurried to her room so she could have a proper breakdown without anyone seeing, she couldn't believe what she'd just done. She'd just wanted to get some things straight with Leland, not practically kidnap him or strongly coerce him into taking her away for the weekend. She closed her door and ran to her bed, collapsing onto the soft duvet and taking deep breaths of air.

Reaching blindly for her cell phone on her nightstand, she pressed speed dial. She lay on her back and waited for Harper to pick up the phone so she could babble about how she may have screwed everything up.

"Hello," Harper answered, sounding out of breath.

"Did I wake you up?" Morgaine bit her lip, hoping she hadn't intruded. Harper had recently gone down to L.A. to help Fae with a new surveillance technology she was developing. Morgaine knew she'd been under a lot of pressure and was now regretting calling her.

“Um...no...I’m just hanging out.”

Morgaine had always thought of Harper as a little strange, but the sound of her voice put her on high alert.

“Are you okay, Harper?” Morgaine tried to listen for any strange background noises.

“Um...yeah, I’m fine. What’s up?” Harper sounded as if she was now inside a bathroom.

“Where are you?” Morgaine was quickly forgetting about her problems with Leland as she tried to assess what was going on with her best friend.

She knew that even though Dr. Hayword and Garth were dead, their little operation hadn’t completely folded. Someone had been funding them, and though Morgaine chose to remove herself from the investigation while she healed, she knew that those she cared about were still involved. Harper’s strange—well, stranger than usual—behavior was really freaking her out.

“Dude, chill. I just had some fantastic sex with Simon, and I don’t want to wake him up before I have to sneak out,” she said, sounding as if she was putting clothes on as she talked.

Sighing, Morgaine rolled her eyes at something that was so Harper. She knew her friend had hooked up with the other shifter after going to work with Fae, but she doubted Harper really understood that Simon

wasn't going to let her be so cavalier about their relationship much longer.

"Shit, hold on a second," Harper said before she muffled the phone.

Morgaine could barely hear a male voice in the background that she assumed was Simon's, and from the tone she could tell he was pissed. Regretting she'd even called, she was trying to think of ways to get Harper's attention so she could hang up when the young shifter got back on the phone.

"Okay, so what's up?" she asked, sounding nonchalant.

"Um, maybe this was a bad time," Morgaine replied.

"Dude, chill. I'll just blow him later."

"TMI, Harper. TMI!" Morgaine squealed into the phone.

As out there as Harper was, this was exactly why Morgaine needed to talk to her. Even if she didn't know how to help her with her situation, she would make her laugh herself sick.

"I confronted Leland," she whispered into the phone.

There was brief silence on the other end of the line that let her know Harper was taking in what she'd said. Harper and Jett were the only two who really understood how anxious she'd been about her feelings

toward Leland and his complete rejection of her. Though they'd both been encouraging, trying to convince her he would eventually get over himself, Morgaine still felt like it was never going to happen.

That probably explained why she'd just snapped today when she was on her usual walk in the forest. She was so tired of waiting for him to do something that she was going to burst. She knew he had reservations, but when she really started examining them, she didn't see what the big deal was. Yes, she'd gone through some hard stuff, but she'd committed herself to not letting it define her and she was tired of him still doing it. She wasn't some wilting violet who needed to be coddled and handled with kid gloves. She knew they had something special, a connection that couldn't be explained, and today she could no longer wait for him to admit it.

When she'd stormed into his room she was all righteous anger, but now in her room with the phone cradled against her ear, she felt doubt creeping back inside. She needed that reinforcement that only a best friend could give, that little pep talk that would help guide her in getting Leland to see they were meant to be together.

"Did you fuck him?" Harper asked, deadpan.

"Oh Harper," she sighed.

“What? I’m just thinking that it’s about damn time. I don’t know how anyone can live in that place with the amount of sexual tension you two are putting out.” She sniffed as if she’d been offended.

Chuckling, Morgaine just shook her head. Okay, maybe pearls of wisdom weren’t something she’d get from Harper, but it was still good to talk to her.

“I told him he had to take me to Santa Barbara for the weekend and we’d finally see what was between us,” she said hesitantly.

“And then you plan to fuck him?”

“Harper,” she sighed.

“I’m just saying.”

Falling back on her bed, Morgaine laughed until all her nerves had gone away.

After she’d stopped laughing, Morgaine had told Harper everything that had happened, and like a true best friend, she’d handled it. Now, riding on the back of Leland’s bike while he made his way down the coast, she almost wanted to pinch herself to make sure she wasn’t dreaming. When she’d finished packing and gone to wait in the front of the lodge, she almost didn’t believe he would show up. With her ears still ringing from Harper’s pep talk, she was prepared to march

right back into the house and drag him out by his hair if he didn't.

To her surprise, he'd come around from the back, coasting his bike up to where she stood. Her heart was beating so hard she was convinced it would burst right out of her chest. The shy look he gave her before he took her small bag and placed it in his side satchel made her tingle all over. Or it could have been him decked out in his riding gear that caused her reaction. When he threw his legs over his bike and straddled it, she thought she was going to melt into a sexually induced puddle.

Morgaine had never had these types of feelings before. Sex had always been a chore she had to complete or a requirement of keeping herself alive. She'd of course seen beautiful men in movies and ads, but she'd never felt as if her entire body was alive with the need to be touched. With that same shy smile, he'd waved her over and instructed her on how to sit on the bike. Scooting close to him and wrapping her arms around his waist, she'd felt as if she'd died and gone to heaven.

Resting her cheek on his strong back, she'd closed her eyes and just enjoyed the ride. Initially Leland had been tense when she'd gotten close to him, but as time on the road stretched out, he'd relaxed more and more. Now halfway through their ride, he'd

even rested his hand on top of hers when they'd hit some traffic. She loved the feel of his calloused fingers caressing the top of her hand. It was just the lightest of touches, but it caused that tingling feeling to ignite into a steady burn throughout her body.

Rubbing her cheek against his leather-clad back, she inhaled the scent of him. The vibration of the bike below her was only heightening her sexual arousal. Morgaine startled a little at the realization that she was getting sexually aroused just sitting on the back of Leland's bike and snuggling up closer to him. She couldn't wait to see what would happen when she finally got to have him to herself in their hotel suite.

Harper told her she'd make sure they'd stay in style and just to check her phone for directions once they got into the city. Morgaine had only requested she picked somewhere that wouldn't offer Leland any distractions to keep them apart. She wanted him all to herself and was going to go broke before she went home.

Turning, she watched as life flew by. Leland had stayed pretty far inland as they made their way down, but now had veered so they could take PCH the rest of the way down to Santa Barbara. She'd often heard Dev talk about going on a good ride, and now that she was on her first she couldn't agree more. When an exit sign

for Solvang came up, she squeezed Leland and asked him to take it.

They only had a little under an hour before they got into Santa Barbara, and she needed to check her phone. It wouldn't hurt to make a quick pit stop and go to the bathroom too. Pulling off the road, Leland appeared to know where he was going. She let out a little gasp of surprise when they pulled into the downtown area. She'd heard that Solvang was modeled after a Danish village, but seeing it in person made her smile.

"Why don't we eat here before we get into Santa Barbara?" Leland said, having parked the bike.

Getting off, she looked at the restaurant and smiled at the exterior that looked like it been imported from Denmark. She took her helmet off and handed it over to Leland before she readjusted the ponytail she'd worn for the ride. Smiling at him, she noticed he watched her intently before storing their gear away on his bike. Seeing as he hadn't scowled, she felt like they were actually making progress.

Once they were inside the restaurant, she asked the hostess for a table for two. She couldn't miss the way the young woman openly ogled Leland. Feeling particularly possessive, she looped her arm with his and followed her. Leland tensed up the same way he did when she touched him on the bike but relaxed a

little as they wound their way through the restaurant to their seats.

Once at their table, she smiled politely at the hostess and turned to look at Leland. "I'm going to freshen up in the restroom before we eat. Can you just order me a glass of red wine, please?" She leaned over and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek.

She headed to the restroom and tried not to touch her lips even though they felt like they were on fire. If she had that reaction to him with such a chaste kiss, she couldn't imagine what it would be like when she finally got to explore his mouth. The thought of really kissing Leland almost made her lose her step. Hurrying into the bathroom, she walked over to the sink and splashed cold water on her face. She took a deep breath and looked at herself in the mirror.

Her face appeared flushed even with her dark complexion, and her eyes were dilated. She felt as if she was going to burst from the inside out, and they hadn't even begun to do anything. Smiling wickedly into the mirror, she couldn't wait to finally start.

Chapter Twelve

Leland didn't know how he'd made it this far, but the little kiss Morgaine had given him before she went off to the bathroom had almost killed him. He could still feel the texture of her lips as they brushed against his skin and smell her unique scent. Actually, that'd been burned into him, along with the feel of her body pressed against his on the ride. He was trying to be a gentleman when it came to her, but she was making it really hard.

After he'd had a little pity party in his room earlier that day, he'd decided he was going to follow Morgaine's directive, if only to show her they had nothing in common. He was old enough to acknowledge that he was a bit infatuated with her, and she probably had feelings for him because he was there when she was rescued, but it couldn't go any further than that. She needed to experience life, and being tied to him wouldn't allow her to do that. He'd told Duke they should have made her go back to Los Angeles so she'd be exposed to more people. When Harper went down there to help Fae, he was sure Morgaine would follow, but she'd stayed and nobody made her go. It wasn't good for her to be so isolated, and it didn't help with the little crush she thought she

had on him. Now, staring at the menu, he ignored the little voice in his head that was calling bullshit and instead focused on what wine to order.

“What can I get you?” a husky voice said, interrupting his reverie.

Startled, he looked up and saw an attractive waitress decked out in some type of barmaid costume smiling down at him. Her long honey-blond hair was tousled around her head, and her lush breasts were pushed up as in invitation. Scowling, Leland realized she did nothing for him—nothing at all.

“What red wine would you recommend?” he asked.

“Well, what do you have a taste for?” she replied, leaning toward him.

The new position gave him a great view of her cleavage. Instead of being turned on, Leland looked away, blushing and searching for Morgaine. Scooting back in the booth, he suddenly felt extremely guilty—and he hadn’t done anything.

“Um...I...” he stuttered.

“Did you order my wine yet, babe?” Morgaine seemed to materialize out of nowhere. Smiling as she sat down next to him at the booth, she turned and gave the waitress a hard stare.

He could only stare in shock as the waitress took a step back as if she’d been scalded. Leland didn’t

want to think too closely on how his wolf preened from Morgaine's possessive behavior. But there was definitely something exciting about the fact that she was so openly claiming him. If he got worked up over something like that, he shuddered at the thought of how he'd react to more...extreme behavior.

"I was just asking for suggestions," he replied, clearing his throat when she turned that hard look on him. Trying not to squirm, he kept eye contact with her and let out a silent sigh when she smiled and turned back to the waitress. Leland didn't really pay attention to the rest of their exchange—he was too busy trying to control his baser desires. Having her pressed against his body in the booth was making it very hard for him to think; hell, it was just making him very hard. This was not what he'd planned. He thought they'd have their trip and realize they had only some slight chemistry, not the inferno that was building within him.

"Do you know what you want to order?" Morgaine asked, interrupting his thoughts.

"Um..." Leland looked down at his menu, but the words seemed to blur as he tried to read. His heart was beating so fast he was sure he was going to have a heart attack.

"Relax," Morgaine whispered in his ear.

The single word acted as a cool breeze to soothe his frazzled nerves. He was still painfully aware of her next to him, but her softly whispered command helped him to focus on what he needed to do. Which was mainly resist the temptation to throw her on top of the table and claim her as his mate.

Closing his eyes, he took a shaky breath at the thought of making Morgaine his, twining the two of them so closely together they'd never have cause to part. Leland had witnessed shifters taking mates, and he'd seen the bad side of it, but since joining Duke's Pack he'd also seen just how good it could be. Glancing up from his menu, he was awed by the look of understanding in her eyes.

"Don't worry, I'll order for you," she said with a smile.

Nodding his head, he watched as she picked out their meal. Leland felt as if there was a war going on within him. His brain, that logical part that was methodical with decisions, checking out every angle to make sure his world was perfectly ordered and well maintained, was screaming for him to pull away. To tell her he was sorry, but this wasn't going to work, and he needed to leave now before something happened that they would both regret. He should call a car service to have her driven wherever she wanted to go, and he should hop on his bike and put as much

distance as possible between them until this feeling, this unnatural desire that was pushing him to make her his, faded away.

That brain of his, which had helped him survive the cruelties and horror of his childhood, was giving him the advice that had served him so well in the past. Unfortunately, his body and his wolf had now risen to the forefront of his consciousness and were screaming that they wanted more. They didn't want to just survive anymore. Solitary nights and pleasure in the arms of a stranger weren't what they needed to thrive. They called bullshit, and his brain just didn't know how to compute. So they were at an impasse. When the food finally came, Leland numbly went through the motions of eating, nodding at all the appropriate parts in the constant stream of conversation Morgaine worked so hard to engage him in. But his mind was somewhere else.

Back on his bike and the open road, Leland still found himself at an impasse as to what to do with Morgaine. They'd eaten their food and headed out of the restaurant, and his brain screamed for him to end it now before it became too complicated, while his body and wolf cried out this was their chance to have

what they'd never dared to dream of. Disoriented and confused, he looked to Morgaine for guidance. As if sensing his indecision, she led them to his bike and began to take out their riding gear. Putting on her helmet, she climbed onto his bike and waited patiently for him to follow.

She was all calmness and serenity, but in her eyes he saw an edge, a challenge that he'd never been presented with before. He followed her onto his bike, started the engine and pulled out to see where the rest of this journey would take them. Inside the restaurant, she'd told him Harper had reserved a room for them at the Bacara Resort and Spa in Goleta, a city located in southern Santa Barbara County. The hotel sat right on the beach overlooking the Pacific Ocean and had quite the spectacular reputation.

Following the signs for the hotel, he realized they were almost there. Not prone to butterflies in his stomach, Leland now felt as if he were housing a migration of the Monarch butterflies that were prevalent in the area. When he eased the bike around a final curve and the hotel came into sight, he had to admit he was wowed. He drove up to the circular courtyard, impressed by the Mediterranean style of the buildings, and pulled off to the side to power off the bike.

“Mr. Jacobs and Ms. Emrys? We have been expecting you,” a man dressed in an expensive-looking suit said where he stood at the curb.

Leland couldn't help smirking at how formal the man appeared. Considering Harper had made the reservations for them, he could only guess what she'd said to have the hotel staff buzzing around them.

Taking off her helmet, Morgaine offered her hand to the man and smiled. Her gesture caused him to relax a little, which only made Leland chuckle. Good Lord, knowing Harper, she'd probably told them they were visiting royalty. It was moments like this that he really appreciated having the little minx back.

Leland looked on silently as the man introduced himself as the hotel manager and gave them his spiel about the hotel and its amenities. Leading them inside, he quickly got them checked in and guided them back out to the golf cart that would take them to their room. The resort was a lot bigger than Leland had originally anticipated. Pulling up to one of the buildings modeled to look like a villa, he could hear the crash of waves not too far off in the distance.

“As I told your assistant Ms. Kirk, unfortunately our penthouse and residence accommodations were currently booked, but I assured her you would enjoy the Sea Haven.” He anxiously gestured toward the door before opening the room for them.

Leland half listened as Morgaine assured the manager that they would be very pleased with their accommodations and thanked him for working under such short notice. Yep, Harper must have given them a country or at least a small principality. Chuckling, he admired the Spanish tile floors and urban loft design. He noticed a complementary basket on the dining-room table, then headed out to the balcony while Morgaine continued to assure the manager there was nothing else they would need.

Opening the sliding-glass door, he looked out on the darkened ocean. The sun had set some time ago, and with the moon shining on the crashing waves, the view made him pause. Taking in a deep breath, he let the smell of salt and sand wash over him. He had a strong desire to shift and leap down to play in the water. Standing looking out at the view, he realized it had been awhile since he'd been on a vacation. If he really thought about it, he hadn't had a trip that was purely for fun in a long time. Turning around at the sound of Morgaine stepping out on the balcony, he felt the battle of wills begin anew inside of him at the thought of just what type of pleasure he could engage in.

Morgaine had been in many beautiful places over the years, but being here with Leland was the first time she could say she was actually enjoying a new place. After she'd assured the manager that they were very satisfied with their accommodations, she headed out to the balcony where Leland stood looking out over the ocean. She'd noticed he'd been struggling with something since the restaurant.

Actually, she knew he'd been struggling a lot longer than that, but at the restaurant she could see that a larger battle was taking place inside of him. She hoped her behavior with the waitress wasn't the thing that tipped him over. Well, no, actually she hoped it tipped him over in favor of them being together, because after she saw the waitress' blatant interest in Leland, she knew she wouldn't be able to see him with another woman.

Morgaine knew that if he continued to be stubborn and deny what they could mean to each other, what they already meant to each other, she'd have to go far away. Not just to another city, but so far away that she wouldn't have to live with the pain of not having him.

She'd talked about jealousy with her therapist, Karen, and how a foundation of trust and honesty didn't allow for a place of jealousy in a relationship. But what Morgaine felt for Leland was so much more

complex than anything she'd ever discussed in therapy, and when she thought of him as hers, she wanted to brand herself into the very recesses of his soul. It was irrational and primitive, but looking at his muscled back as he leaned against the railing of the balcony, she couldn't apologize for her feelings. She'd never force him to stay with her like the men of her life and done to her in the past, but before this weekend was over, she'd make sure she'd done some strong persuading.

"Beautiful view, isn't it?" she said, walking up to his side.

"Yes, it is," he responded flatly.

Sighing, she turned to walk away and was stopped by his hand on her wrist. Looking up at him, she gasped at the golden amber color of his usually brown eyes. There was such wildness about him that her rational brain told her she should be frightened, but the primitive part of her brain urged her to close the space that separated them and press her body to his.

"What is this?" he growled out.

She knew he wasn't talking about the room or the view. He wasn't talking about the trip they'd taken to get here. He was asking her to tell him that this was the two of them, together, and that it would all be better, greater than they'd ever known. She wanted to

tell him all that, but because he still questioned it, she knew he wouldn't be satisfied with her answer. She didn't want questions anymore. Hell, she didn't even know all the answers, but she knew one thing: she and Leland had to try and see where this went.

"You know the answer, Leland. You just have to stop questioning," she whispered back.

"We can't..."

"Why, Leland, why? And please don't give me that age bullshit or the fact that I had a shitty life. I'm not a child, and I'm not what happened to me. Be a man, Leland, and either tell me you don't want me, that you could never see us together, or take the fucking leap with me and see where we land. I'm patient, Leland—lord knows I've learned to be nothing but patient—but I can't wait forever," she shouted as tears ran down her face.

Trying to break his hold, she stared at him in shock when he pulled her into an embrace. His action made the tears fall even heavier. "I'm sorry," he whispered, stroking her hair.

"I don't want you to be sorry, Leland," she murmured back.

"I just don't know what to do. I've never had to...I mean I've never felt...I just..." He stumbled over his words even as he pulled her closer to him.

“You don’t have to do anything, Leland, except try,” she answered him.

“What if I don’t know how?” he asked softly.

“Then I’ll help you,” she replied, wrapping her arms around him and nestling further into his embrace.

Chapter Thirteen

A weekend had become three weeks, and Morgaine hadn't known such pleasure in her life until those moments spent with Leland. They weren't weeks of fairytale endings and nights spent in passion; instead they were weeks of one person learning the little intricacies of another. The foibles and flaws, the parts of ourselves we keep locked away because exposing them to the light of day only seems to make them grow stronger in nature. Morgaine felt as if they'd experienced an emotional boot camp where the time and labor of caring would make the tenuous bond between them stronger. Leland was honest when he said he didn't know how, but he'd shown her that he was willing to try.

Morgaine was happy, but what she really wanted in her heart of hearts was to stop the talking, the shy smiles and soft gestures, and feel the heat of Leland's body pressed against hers. The suite had two bedrooms, each with its own large bed that was made to feel larger because Morgaine slept in hers alone. Leland was still cautious when it came to that final step, the leap off the vast cliff of life that would have them paired so completely with each other.

He'd held her hand as they walked the beach their third night; on the fifth, he'd snuggled her close on a blanket as they watched the waves roll in. Into the second week, he'd laughed as she baked a cake in the suite's kitchen and got more flour on her face than in the bowl. The feel of his calloused thumb rubbing a smudge away lit the wick of desire that waited ever so patiently to burst to life.

Leland the gentleman finally kissed her that night but it was such a soft, chaste example of what they could really create together, and her body ached with a desire for more. She filled her eyes with the passion that burned so brightly between them, and he stared. Awe and shock filled his gaze, but he didn't move, didn't claim what she offered so sweetly to him, and Morgaine was frustrated.

She knew they couldn't hide away forever, and she wasn't leaving this place until she had a promise through word or action that this time spent together wouldn't be forgotten. That the real world wouldn't bring its insecurities and judgments and take away all that they'd gained. Leland had found a spot so deeply entrenched in the very soul of her being that letting go was not an option. Morgaine had gained so much and had so much more to reach, and as she slipped on the lacy undergarments that she'd purchased during a

brief shopping trip in town, she promised herself that it was going to happen tonight.

Taking out the simple black dress she'd bought along with the lingerie, she finished getting dressed. The retro style of the dress had a fitted bodice with a v-neck and capped sleeves that extended to a pencil skirt. She put on the sapphire-blue shoes she'd bought along with her new ensemble and looked at herself in the mirror. With her hair in a neat chignon and makeup to accentuate her eyes and mouth, she felt particularly sophisticated. She'd chosen the look to illustrate to Leland that she was very much a woman—and definitely woman enough to be his mate.

Grabbing her small clutch before she walked out of her room, she nearly tripped over herself at the sight of Leland. This was going to be their last night, and they'd decided to eat at one of the hotel's restaurants. She'd chosen to dress up but hadn't really stipulated the same for Leland. Now, looking at him in a suit that appeared tailored for his body, she froze. Leland in jeans and t-shirts was beyond attractive, but Leland in a gorgeous suit was breathtaking.

He'd gotten his curly mane of brown hair cut earlier in the day, and it now fell slick and tamed on his head. The crisp white color of his shirt provided a great contrast to his golden complexion grown darker with their time in the sun. His six-four muscular frame

was enhanced rather than hampered by the lines of his jacket and pants. All Morgaine could do was stare and hope she wasn't drooling.

"You look lovely," he said shyly, beginning to walk toward her but stopping quickly.

She'd noticed that he did that a lot. He'd go to reach for her but pull back quickly as if second guessing his actions. Even those moments when he held her hand or pulled her in for a snuggle, she could tell he'd thought it out ad nauseam. It was only when she'd made the move to reach for him or close a distance between them that anything had ever happened. Well, tonight she wasn't going to make it easy for him.

"Thank you. You look quite handsome yourself." She smiled, continuing to stand in the same spot.

"Well, I guess we'd better go if we want to make our reservations." The hesitant tone of his voice made her sigh in frustration.

"You still want to go, right?" he asked, looking confused.

"Yes, of course, but isn't there something you want to do first?" she replied.

"Um... Oh, I forgot to get you flowers."

The complete look of dejection on Leland's face caused her to spring into action. Walking over to him,

she wrapped her arms around his waist and tilted her face up toward his.

“I meant a kiss, Leland—I thought you’d like to give me a kiss,” she whispered.

Leland felt completely out of his element. He’d committed himself to trying for the last three weeks, and each day seemed to get a little easier but at the same time was still difficult for him. He’d had women in the past, but this was different. He wanted Morgaine to know that he respected her and he wasn’t just trying to get her in bed, or on the couch, or the kitchen counter. When he’d finally decided he was going to move forward, he knew he wanted this to be special.

That’s why he was taking it slow. Leland didn’t want to be like those other men in her life who took without ever giving anything in return. He didn’t want to be like his father. Morgaine was by now so firmly etched in his very being that he didn’t know how he would take another breath without knowing she was there by his side. It was scary and humbling at the same time. He’d seen Duke fall, as well as other members of his Pack, and it wasn’t until he’d noticed

there was no footing left beneath him that he could truly appreciate their experiences.

Tonight he'd planned to take her to dinner and express just how much he cared for her, then talk with her about when she felt comfortable taking their relationship to the next level. As much as he burned with the need to bury himself inside of her and brand her with his mark, he was going to give her the chance to determine how far and fast they went. He was feeling very confident in his decision—until she walked out of her room.

She was just too beautiful for words, and that stoically rational part of his brain that he'd been able to silence over the last several weeks came rushing back to the forefront. She was far too sophisticated for him, and she needed someone who could give her the life she deserved. When she asked him if there was anything else he wanted to do, he realized he'd made a major faux pas. Of course she needed flowers or some other trinket that illustrated just how special she was.

He was ready to call the whole thing off and admit defeat right up until the moment she wrapped her arms around him and asked for a kiss. Staring down into her sparkling eyes, he was completely stunned. "Am I going to have to help you with this too?" she asked playfully.

Blinking, his brain told him to give her the speech. Tell her how much he valued her, that he would never do anything to hurt her, and he was willing to give her the time and space she needed to determine where she wanted their relationship to go sexually. His brain was giving him all of these directions, but as his body and wolf looked down into the soft liquid brown of her eyes, claiming her before someone else came along became his only directive.

Cupping the back of her neck with his hand, he gently placed his mouth upon hers. He marveled at the soft texture of her lips before he pressed down harder. With a soft sigh, she opened to him, and it was all the invitation he needed to go further. Slipping his tongue into her mouth, he marveled at how she tasted of spring and sunshine. As he deepened the kiss, he pulled her softly feminine body into the hard planes of his body and lost himself further to her.

Clutching at the front of his jacket, she purred her satisfaction and met him stroke for stroke. When she nipped at his bottom lip, he felt his body grow hard with the need to be inside of her. Growling into her mouth, he cupped her full bottom in his hands and lifted her so their pelvises were pressed tightly against each other.

It was her shudder that made him stop. This wasn't how he'd planned it, and he needed to pull back

to make sure she was okay, that she didn't think him an animal ruled by his baser desires. He didn't want to be like those others who had come before. Leland wanted this to be special.

"Why are you stopping?" she gasped, trying to pull him back down to her mouth.

Shocked, he extracted himself from her hold. Pushing her back gently, he looked at her eyes clouded with lust and her lips swollen from his kisses. It was taking everything in his power not to throw her to the ground and finish what they'd started.

"I think we should talk about what just happened," he said in short, choppy breaths.

"You're joking, right?" She looked at him incredulously.

"Why would I be joking?" he asked, feeling confused.

"Oh my God, he wants to talk. I can't believe he wants to *talk*," she said, throwing her hands in the air and pacing in front of him.

Leland couldn't understand why she was getting so upset. He was doing the right thing, the gentlemanly thing, by stopping what they were doing before it got out of control.

"I bet you think you're being a gentleman," she stated, giving him a steely stare.

"Well...yes," he replied, starting to feel nervous.

Taking a deep breath, she smoothed down the front of her dress and looked up at him. He stared back, wondering what he'd done wrong. She seemed really upset, and he couldn't think of what to say to make it better. He'd put a lot of thought into tonight, and he didn't want to see it all go down the drain. Leland was still trying to think of what he needed to do and was just about to ask Morgaine what she wanted when she launched herself at him, knocking them both to the floor.

Chapter Fourteen

Desperate times called for desperate measures, and Morgaine was feeling very desperate. She watched as Leland did that overthinking thing of his. Probably plotting out what he needed to say to let her know he was different from all the men in her past. What frustrated her was that she'd thought she'd already shown him and told him just what she thought of him. As she stood there, looking at him struggle to find what he thought were the right words, she just acted.

Tackling him to the ground wasn't how she'd planned her seduction. However, it looked like she was going to have to go big tonight. She'd thought they were finally getting somewhere with that kiss they'd shared, but it looked like Leland didn't just need to be told what to do; he needed some pictures drawn while she was at it.

Breaking their fall with his body, Leland looked as if he was about to protest, but Morgaine was ready for that. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she crushed her mouth to his. She kissed him with all the repressed passion she'd housed, then moaned in satisfaction when he started to kiss her back. Pressing her body tightly to his, she buried her fingers deeply in his hair as she nibbled on his lips.

“Morgaine,” Leland said breathlessly as he pulled back from her.

“No more talking,” she stated, reclaiming his mouth.

Rolling her on her back, Leland tried to pull back from her, but she wrapped her legs around his waist, keeping him from getting away. “Morgaine,” he shouted, extracting her hands from his hair and pulling them above her head.

Panting, she looked up into brown eyes that had gone a golden amber color, and she smirked. She could tell he was on the edge, and if he’d just stop being so stubborn, they’d both get what they wanted. Feeling like a cat in heat, she tightened her legs around him and rubbed her body against his.

“What are you doing?” he asked through clenched teeth.

“If you have to ask, I must not be doing it that well,” she replied with a cheeky grin.

“I...this is...what are you doing?” he roared again, pushing his body into hers to keep her from moving around.

Giggling, Morgaine gave him a contrite look that was laced with heat. There was something really cute about him being absolutely bewildered. Well, from the growing bulge against her stomach, one part of him definitely *wasn’t* bewildered.

“Don’t,” he warned, gripping her wrist tighter.

“Make me,” she teased, arching into his body.

“Morgaine.”

“Leland.”

Morgaine was completely fascinated by Leland’s behavior. Having never participated in foreplay before, she wondered if this was what they were engaging in. If so, she was really enjoying herself. The way Leland ran his gaze over her face, stopping periodically to look at her mouth, had her aching for his lips. Even his grip on her wrists was making her hot. Instead of feeling caged in, she was riding a crest of anticipation, waiting eagerly to see what he would do to her, do with her.

“Okay, if I let you go will you behave?” he asked hesitantly.

“No,” she whispered back, lifting her mouth to his.

“Morgaine.”

“Leland.”

As he scowled down at her, Morgaine noticed that Leland’s lips were starting to twitch. Smiling up at him, she made kissing noises. Suddenly she felt incredibly silly, another first in her sexual experience.

“Cut it out,” he growled, leaning forward until their lips were mere inches apart.

“Make me,” she responded, waiting for him to close the space between them.

Morgaine hadn’t realized she was holding her breath until Leland pressed his lips to hers. There was a tentative quality to his touch that made her want to crawl into his very skin, to feel the texture of him from the inside. It wasn’t filled with the same passionate intensity of their previous kiss, but it still felt like so much more. Sighing, she relaxed her body and enjoyed the experience.

“More,” she breathed out huskily when he pulled away.

“More?” he asked, searching her eyes for something she couldn’t decipher.

“Yes, please,” she responded.

Letting go of her wrist, he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her more intently. He brought a hand up to her face and gently rubbed his thumb against her jaw as he kissed her. Morgaine felt as if she was floating, and the weight of Leland’s lips was the only thing keeping her grounded. It was a curious sensation, like nothing she’d ever experienced before, and she clutched at him, wanting to make sure it never stopped.

“I’m guessing we’re not going to dinner,” he whispered against her lips, nibbling at the corners of her mouth.

She felt the sensation of his teeth and tongue all the way to her toes. Her body was practically humming, and the crescendo of the chorus was coming from between her thighs. “No,” she sighed into his mouth.

Kissing him with all the pent-up passion of one who had never been kissed properly, touched properly, loved properly, she sighed with completion. In the past, this was the point that she began to float away from herself, becoming so light that she had the sensation of leaving her body. She’d felt pleasure before even when in that separated state from herself, and it was only while working with her therapist Karen that she’d realized it didn’t mean she wanted it.

Now, though, as Leland’s hands roved over her body, she craved so much more. She wanted to feel him inside of her, giving her the pleasure she’d always been denied, the connection between mind and body.

“Wait, we have to wait,” he said breathlessly, pulling away from her.

“No,” she stated, trying to pull him down for another kiss.

“Morgaine...I don’t...I didn’t think...” He faltered in his speech, blushing as he looked down at her.

She looked at him with awe because she’d never had anyone care. Her body was a vessel men used at their disposal, and though they’d kept her healthy, it

was only for their continual usage of her. Smiling, she watched as he pinked in embarrassment, and it made her want him even more.

“I have some in my purse,” she murmured against his lips.

He was watching her now, and it felt as if he was trying to reach into the very recesses of her mind to figure out who she was. She saw when he’d found an answer to appease his question, and the slight pink that flushed his cheeks receded. The embarrassment in his eyes was replaced with a hunger that made her anxiously wait to be consumed.

“Not here—let me take you to bed so we can do this properly,” he said before giving her a gentle kiss.

Morgaine returned it in kind and felt her heart swell at the little nicety he was offering. In the past, she’d had cruelty wrapped in niceties and niceties laced with cruelty, but never a genuine concern for her needs. Stroking his face, she absorbed the little details that made it uniquely his. It was the little freckles across the bridge of his nose that she would use first to recreate his visage in her imagination. The little dots of pigment that spoke of sun and innocent pursuits of youth, balanced with the sorrow that always lurked at the edges of his gaze.

Leland was a good man, and as such would take her to the bed and love her in the tame and controlled

way of one who wants to protect what they find precious. She didn't want tame and controlled; she wanted to feel passion for the first time in her life. Morgaine no longer wanted to be something delicate and precious, put upon a pedestal to be worshipped and adored. She knew she was flawed, and she wanted someone to handle her with the care of true partnership, of equals.

Looking into his eyes, she tried to convey what words failed to explain. This was their fork in the road, and if she let him "take her," he would never truly have her. Leland needed to know that she could handle him, handle his beast, both man and animal, because she was his mate, not his commodity. She was done being a little doll locked away in a gilded cage, and that meant tonight and many nights in the future, they would let their passion lead them to have each other anywhere it was convenient.

"No bed, Leland. I want you here and now," she whispered, not ashamed that the great seductress was leaving and the woman with little grace and awkward need was in her place. She bared herself to him in hopes that he would do the same.

"No bed," he stated with a finality that had her body clenching with need.

Smiling, she nodded at the look of understanding in his eyes. Pulling him down, she

kissed him with her thanks upon her lips and tongue, and he returned it in kind. It was sweet and then it became spicy, hot in its intent to ignite the fire that wanted to burn between them. Hands grabbed and ripped until there was nothing but skin against skin. With teeth and tongue on flesh, they sampled the new delicacy of being together.

He was so heavy above her, and unlike in the past when she'd quietly floated away, pressed down by someone else's desire, she welcomed his weight. Marveled at the way her hips cradled him just so. Oh God, she thought as he licked a trail of fire down her body to her moist center. Oh God, she thought as sensations built inside of her until she felt as if she could burst.

"Oh God," she screamed as pleasure like none other washed over her body.

And when she thought it couldn't get any better he was there again, hot and heavy inside of her, moving to a rhythm that was of their own creation.

"Oh Leland," she moaned, finding that she couldn't keep it all bottled up inside.

Flipping them, he positioned her so she sat firmly on top of him, and for the first time she reveled in a position that usually made her feel so powerless. Garth used it as a way to play at reversing dominance, even though she knew she never had any real power.

But as she stared down at Leland and the look of pure rapture on his face, she was truly engaged for the first time in an act that should be about mutual pleasure.

It was all so much to take in after years of blocking out the subtle nuances of sex. The feel of his calloused hands guiding her to ride him at a pace that had her body quaking from the need for release. The cool, smooth texture of the tiled floors under her knees was a pleasurable contrast to the heat coursing through her body. The trickle of sweat pooling at the base of her spine as a result of her exertion was exhilarating because it was all hers. These were the things she'd missed over the years, and she gathered the feel of them to her like a greedy child grabs for a new toy.

She was soaring, but not in her usual detached way, looking for the out that made her previously miserable life bearable. No, now she was flying and she had someone there with her, pushing her to go ever higher. Oh God, she thought again as he used those deliciously calloused fingers to stroke her tiny nub of pleasure.

"Oh Leland," she screamed as they crashed down together.

Falling to his damp chest, she felt her body labor to bring oxygen in her lungs. She snuggled her face into the crook of his neck as he lazily stroked her back.

This, out of everything, was the thing she savored most: the intimacy of being connected to someone of her choosing.

He was still hot and heavy inside of her, and the knowledge of that made her sigh in contentment. She didn't think it would always be perfect between them. Still, this moment was the closest to perfection she'd ever had, and she wanted to enjoy it.

"Morgaine," he whispered into her ear.

"Um," she moaned as he shifted, causing a shiver of anticipation to race along her nerve endings.

"Now can we go to the bed?" he asked.

Sitting up, she looked down at him and smiled.

"Yes, now we can go to the bed."

Chapter Fifteen

Leland couldn't help smiling as he rode his bike along the highway. With Morgaine snuggled close behind him and the open road stretched out in front of him, he felt as if he was at the top of the world. They'd extended their stay by another two days, but the real world eventually made a valid argument that they needed to go home. Leland was working hard to stay in the moment, a phrase that Morgaine enjoyed using, and let their relationship play out the way it intended to.

His wolf was anxious to have her mated, but Leland could be patient. He'd fought for so long against his feelings that it was nice to just exist with them, and enjoy the magic that he and Morgaine were creating. Feeling a blush tinge his cheeks, he couldn't wait to get back to the lodge so they could improve on their routine. As if sensing his thoughts, Morgaine began to work her way under Leland's shirt and caress his stomach.

He had to call on all his powers of control not to pull over and have her again. They'd already stopped at a rest station less than an hour ago for a quickie, and at the rate they were going, they'd never make it back home before it got to dark. Chuckling, Leland

took Morgaine's hand, brought it to his lips and gently pressed kisses on her fingertips. He felt her body relax and press further into his and heard the sound of a sigh over the roar of his bike.

This sensation of rightness was so foreign to Leland, but the more he let himself experience it, the more accustomed he was becoming to it. He'd scoffed at the males in his Pack when they found their mates, but now he could truly understand the pleasure they were experiencing. It wasn't just physical, either—there was something deeper developing between them that made him feel stronger and surer about who he was and who he was to her. He wondered what everyone would think when they got back to the lodge. Except for a quick call he took from Duke earlier in their trip, he hadn't heard from any of his Pack mates. Smiling, he was sure he'd get teased quite a bit, but he was confident that everyone would support him. Noticing the sign for their turnoff, he hummed to himself with pleasure.

It was nice to get away, and having such great company made the trip even better, but it was good to be home. Watching the scenery fly by as he maneuvered his bike up the mountain, he felt the usual feeling of calm sweep over him as he got closer to the lodge. With Morgaine pressed tightly behind him, there was an added feeling of peace.

Turning at a bend, he saw Loup Lodge appear in the distance and was struck again by the beauty of the place. As the Pack grew over the years, extensions and add-ons had been included, but every time Leland saw it he thought of the early days when it was just a small little hunting lodge that promised a future for the original members of his ragtag Pack.

Pulling up, he noticed several cars parked around the front of the lodge. Once he'd turned the bike off, he removed his helmet and realized a couple of the SUVs were from Fae and Garrick's security company. The other luxury cars he didn't recognize, but he figured a meeting must be in process.

"I can't wait to learn to ride so I can have a bike of my own," Morgaine said behind him.

Stepping off the bike, he watched as she took her helmet off and smiled up at him. He didn't think he would ever get tired of watching her smile at him. Leaning over, he gave her a soft kiss on her lips. It was uncharacteristic of his usual hesitant behavior, but from the look she gave him when he pulled back, he knew it was the right thing to do.

"I'm sure you can borrow Mina's while we try to find the perfect one for you," he replied.

Getting off the bike, she wrapped her arms around him and squeezed. When she tilted her head back, he couldn't resist leaning down and giving her a

deeper kiss this time. It caused his body to harden in anticipation of all the other places he longed to kiss her.

“Race you inside,” she whispered before she took off toward the lodge.

Leland’s practical side told him he needed to unpack the bike and move it around to the garage before he went inside. It looked like it might rain, and it was the responsible thing to do. Yep, that was his practical side; but watching her butt bounce in her figure-hugging jeans as she sprinted away, he realized that being practical was completely overrated.

Morgaine giggled as she ran through the front door, heading toward the stairs that would lead her to Leland’s room. Well, if she had anything to say about it, it would become their room pretty quickly. She had just made it to the stairs when a familiar voice calling her name caused her to stop.

“Morgaine, I know you want to extend your little sexcapade, but Duke and Dev need to meet with you.”

Morgaine turned to see a smirking Harper standing in the hallway. Shaking her head, she walked over to her friend and gave her a bear hug.

“Damn, it was that good?” Harper said with a chuckle.

“Maybe we should compare notes. How is Simon, by the way?” Morgaine retorted, smirking at the flush that colored her best friend’s cheeks.

“Who knew sex would make you so cheeky?” Harper replied, stepping back and giving her a onceover.

“What’s your excuse?” she countered.

Laughing, Harper leaned over and gave her another hug. “I missed you, even if I had great sex to occupy my time.”

Hugging her friend back, she laughed with her. She could sense it when Leland walked into the lodge, and she wondered what the two of them looked like. They were laughing and hugging each other like two schoolgirls.

Releasing Harper, she turned and faced him. He was watching her closely, and for a second she worried all the progress they had made was lost. With a hesitant smile, she watched as he walked over and put his arm around her waist.

“Hey, Harper.” His greeting sounding more relaxed than the tension she could feel in his body.

“Are you going to piss on her next?”

The dry tone of Harper’s comment caused Leland to shake his head and groan.

“Did you really expect anything else from her?” Morgaine chuckled, looking up at him.

“No,” he replied, leaning down to kiss her on the tip of her nose.

“Now that you’ve gotten that out of your system, can we go meet the others?” Harper interrupted with her usual sarcastic manner.

Rolling her eyes, Morgaine refused to let anything spoil her moment with Leland. Everything seemed to be finally falling into place for her. She had the home that she wanted, a life of her choosing, and a mate of her own. Holding on to Leland’s hand, she walked into the sitting room where Duke and Dev met with their guests.

So lost in the euphoria of having everything she ever wanted, it took her a moment to notice that both Fae and Dev turned to face her with pensive expressions. Frowning, she tried to read the message in their eyes but failed. She did understand the slight nod that Dev gave her. Turning to look at the other people in the room, she felt as if her breath had left. The same curious feeling from when she’d first met Fae and Dev was working its way through her body.

Morgaine studied the person currently causing the tingling of awareness to travel across her body. She was dressed in robes of various shades of white and blue. Her skin was the darkest brown she’d ever seen

and made her think of polished ebony, which created a startling contrast to her ice blue eyes. Her hair was coiled into tight locks that were beaded and fell well past her shoulders. Much taller than Morgaine, she appeared to stand almost six feet with a frame that appeared lithe and lightly muscled. She was breathtaking, and the more Morgaine stared at her, the more she realized that she *knew* her.

It was the same instinctual feeling that drew her to Fae the first day she saw her at Garth's house and later when Dev came to rescue her. Yet, unlike those times, she watched this new woman with hesitancy. She didn't elicit the feeling of calm and familiarity that Fae and Dev brought out in her; instead, the stranger made Morgaine want to shrink into Leland's side. As she stared into those cool, icy blue eyes of the other woman, she shivered.

"Hello, my sister. I've been waiting anxiously for your return," the strange woman stated.

"Sister," she whispered, looking at Fae and Dev.

"There have been some interesting developments while you were away, Morgaine," Dev said, giving the woman a cool look.

"That was diplomatic," Harper commented from the doorway.

"Harper," Dev said, giving the younger female a sharp look.

“Zipped,” Harper replied, pretending to zip her lips.

The usual oddball behavior of her best friend had what she assumed was Harper’s intent: she calmed down. Giving her a grateful smile, she pulled away from Leland and walked over to Fae and Dev. The two women quickly embraced her.

“Morgaine, I’d like to introduce you to Luna, the priestess of the Goddess Chosen.” Dev gestured toward the other woman.

Feeling more centered with the other women around her, she smiled at Luna. There was a pause, and then the other woman smiled back. If she was breathtaking before, she was beyond stunning now, wearing a smile that seemed to light her up from within.

“I am very pleased to meet you, my sister.” Luna continued to smile as she nodded her head in greeting.

Sighing, Dev gave Morgaine’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “Why don’t we sit down so we can talk.” Dev pointed to the couches and chairs in the room.

Dev ushered Morgaine to one of the settees in the room and sat her between herself and Fae. Having the other two women next to her helped to squelch some of her anxiety, but it wasn’t until Leland stood directly behind her that she felt she could relax a bit.

She watched as Luna glided over to a chair directly in front of them, with a young girl in similar clothing walking to stand behind her.

Duke and Garrick sat in chairs adjacent to the settee Morgaine and Harper went to stand next to Simon, whom Morgaine hadn't noticed when she first came in. Some other members of both Packs were in the room, but it appeared that the only other person with Luna was the young girl at her side. "Luna, I'm just going to get right to the point. Why are you here?" Dev asked in a brusque tone.

Morgaine held her breath as she stared at the other woman. She could tell that Dev's no-nonsense manner amused Luna. Smiling, she tilted her head and studied them sitting on the settee. Since she'd been freed, Morgaine had become used to the looks she and the other women got. Everyone could tell there was some type of connection between them, but it went far deeper than physical characteristics.

Morgaine had never been more aware of her ignorance about her parentage than she was now. Her focus had always been on surviving the life she was living, not worrying about her past. Now she knew that ambivalence on her part was going to have consequences; she just hoped they weren't more than she was willing to sacrifice.

“The Goddess has sent me,” Luna stated with an air of purpose and serenity.

“Excuse me?” Morgaine blurted out before she could process the words.

“I’ve come for you, my sisters,” Luna replied.

Looking over at Dev and Fae, she could see they both had the same perplexed expression. Morgaine felt as if she was missing something, and she hated the feeling. She’d lived the majority of her life in the dark, and when she’d finally found her light, this woman was coming in trying to dampen it.

“I think you’re going to have to explain yourself,” Dev commented in a flat tone.

Smiling again, Luna looked at the three of them and smoothed the folds of her robes. The gesture seemed a bit out of place for a woman who’d appeared so confident in her demeanor earlier. Morgaine wondered why explaining herself was making Luna nervous.

“The Goddess sent me a vision and led me to you. She spoke of children of hers separated by circumstance but reunited by purpose. You must come back with me to learn that purpose and the way of the Goddess.”

“Why now?” Morgaine asked quietly.

“I don’t understand.” Luna looked at her with a confused expression.

“I want to know why now?” Morgaine could feel anger bubbling to the surface.

“Well, the Goddess only recently spoke to me...”

“Bullshit.” Morgaine cut her off with a sharp bark.

“I...” Luna looked to Dev and Fae for some type of guidance. It seemed that Morgaine’s sharp word had dissolved the calm exterior she’d had initially.

Morgaine felt the silence stretch and build between them, feeding the anger she’d denied herself for so long. This was not what she’d expected when she’d looked forward to coming home with Leland. She’d seen a life guided by her own purpose, and now here was some stranger looking to derail her from her path. The old her would have cowered and hoped for another outcome, waited for some miracle to appear and deliver her from her circumstance. But Morgaine wasn’t that woman anymore, and no one was going to drag her back to that place.

Chapter Sixteen

Leland could feel anger rolling off Morgaine in palpable waves. It was so strong he could taste it on his tongue, and it was making him sick to his stomach. Without thinking, he reached over and touched her shoulder to help calm his anxious nerves and hopefully give her support.

“I think maybe you should tell us a bit more about what you mean,” Fae spoke, breaking the silence that had fallen over the room.

“I don’t need an explanation. I don’t need anything from her or her Goddess,” Morgaine said with a steely coolness.

“Morgaine.” Dev sighed, gently placing a hand on the younger woman’s knee.

“No. Where were her visions when my brother and I were taken? Where were her visions when I was bent to some man’s will? Where was she when I needed her, because I sure as hell don’t need her now.” Morgaine stated each word with an icy precision.

“I’ve fought for my freedom, and I’ll be damned if I allow someone to take it from me again.” Fixing Luna with a hard stare, Morgaine continued, “You and your Goddess are too late, and if you try and interfere with my happiness, if you try to block my path in

anyway, I will make sure that the story of your very existence is wiped from the consciousness of the world.”

Leland watched in amazement as she stood with her usual grace, but with an added bit of steel in her posture. Turning to him, she gave him a look that asked a question she’d never have to doubt the answer to.

Will you follow me?

Nodding his head, he moved from behind the settee and followed her out the room. Leland had never been so bold in his life, and as he followed his mate to their room, he felt as if a weight had been lifted off his chest. He didn’t know what the future would bring, or what the consequences of disobeying the priestess of the Goddess Chosen would cause, but he knew that with Morgaine, none of that mattered.

Following closely behind her, it was only when they were in his room, now their room, that he allowed himself to gather her in his arms. He gently stroked her back as her body shook. “You were wonderful,” he whispered with awe.

Sobbing, she clutched him closer and buried her face in his chest. He held her as she cried out her anger, frustration, and possibly fears. He cooed words of encouragement and kissed her lightly at her temple.

Guiding them to the bed, he laid her down gently and gathered her in his arms.

“What have I done?” she whispered, snuggling closer to him.

“What do you think you’ve done?” he whispered back, resting his chin on the top of her head.

“Ouch,” he shouted when she pinched him.

“Don’t go all sage teacher on me, Leland. My anger is fading, and I’m starting to freak out. I just said ‘fuck you’ to the priestess of the Goddess,” she chided, looking up at him.

Sighing, he squeezed her closer to him. He really didn’t know what to say. He’d be lying if he said he was upset that she didn’t want to leave. He would have respected her decision, but it would have still hurt. Knowing that she’d chosen this life, a life that included him, made him and his wolf happier than they’d ever been.

“We’ll figure it out together. But I’ll never let anyone make you do something that you don’t want to do. I lived my life in fear until I joined Duke’s Pack. I’ll never go back to that, and I won’t let you either.” The hard edge to his words surprised him a little, but he knew he’d be willing to die to protect Morgaine.

“Oh Leland,” she sighed nuzzling his neck.

The sweet simplicity of the gesture warmed his heart and other parts of his body. He had a mate, he

thought, and the idea made him smile. He hadn't marked Morgaine yet, but he knew that she was his and he was hers, and that was all that mattered.

"I wonder what Dev and Fae are going to do?" she asked hesitantly.

"Probably the same thing you did, but possibly a bit more diplomatically," he teased.

"Because Dev can be so diplomatic." She snorted.

They both laughed, thinking about what Dev was possibly saying at that very moment. He wouldn't be surprised if after he and Morgaine left, Duke had taken over the discussion. Dev was many great things, but adept at navigating political situations she was not.

"Do you still want to mark me?" Morgaine asked, startling Leland with her question.

"Do you still want me to mark you?" he asked in return. He'd listened to every word of her impassioned speech to the Goddess's priestess, and he'd taken those words to heart. He wanted Morgaine to know what it was like to be free, and if that meant he never marked her, he'd be okay with that.

"Ouch," he cried out from the pinch she gave him.

“Don’t mess with me, Leland. I’m in a vulnerable place right now,” she stated, moving from his embrace to sit up on the bed and look at him.

“I’m serious, Morgaine. Do you want me to mark you? I know that you’re my mate, but I also know that you pride yourself on being free, and I don’t want to ever do anything that makes you feel trapped,” he replied sincerely, sitting up also.

He couldn’t read her as she stared back at him. Leland knew this was an important time in their relationship. They’d had their time away, but now reality, with all its trials and tribulations, had made its presence known. He would follow her into the fire of life and was confident she’d do the same for him, but he didn’t want her to feel there was an obligation between them. He knew what it was like not to have choice, as did she. He wanted their relationship to always be about them choosing each other, because it was what they wanted, not because of what a mark required.

“Oh Leland,” she sobbed, throwing herself at him.

He was initially concerned that he had done something wrong, until she started placing quick little kisses across his face.

“You are just so...so...” She breathed out, locking her lips with his.

Smiling against her lips, he kissed her back. When she pulled back to look into his eyes, he could see tears threatening to spill out. Rubbing his thumb along her lips and jaw, he whispered, “I love you.” She kissed his thumb as it made its way back to her lips and smiled as her tears fell down. Leaning over, she kissed him on his lips. He could taste her tears, flavored with her love for him, and he was at peace.

“I love you too, and yes, I’d like for you to mark me.” She paused, looking at him hesitantly.

“Just not right now,” he said with a small smile, understanding what she was saying more than if she had used words.

“Yeah, just not right now,” she replied, smiling.

Gathering her to him, he let his hands and mouth explain to her how he understood what she needed. As he joined his body with hers, he knew that “not right now” didn’t necessarily mean “never.”



JANET ECKFORD

Like most great superheroes (or super-villains, depending on who's telling the story) Janet Eckford lives a double life. By day Janet is a mild-mannered crusader for justice (or nefarious deeds, depending on who's telling the story) and by night an indestructible creator of prose (or pathological liar, depending on who's telling the story) while munching on her favorite cookies—oatmeal raisin. A native West Coaster who hails from the sunny state of California Janet, has loved the romance genre ever since she convinced her dad it was required reading when she was eleven. Janet believes love shouldn't have a color code and strives to create stories that represent that belief.

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