

The background of the cover features a shirtless man's torso, showing his chest and midsection, with his hands in his pockets. He is wearing dark jeans. In the background, a city skyline is visible at night, with various buildings lit up. A large, bright crescent moon is positioned in the upper right corner of the image.

Someone is about to get some

Spice in his life

The
Alpha
Annie Nicholas

The Vanguards Book Two

Back Cover Copy

Someone is about to get some Spice in his life.

Spice has nothing but the clothes on her back when she returns to Chicago. She's looking for a better life, and that means reuniting with her estranged twin sister, Sugar. She isn't thrilled to find out Sugar's boyfriend is a vampire. But then she meets Eric, once the bottle-cap-glasses wearing nerd next door - now grown into the kind of man she'd love to snuggle with on this cold winter night...and he's offered her his room in Sugar's house.

Eric can't believe Spice has returned. He'd given up hope of ever seeing her again, let alone having her stare at him as if he's sex on a stick. But now that all of his fantasies for them are coming true, reality rears her ugly head and Eric must tell Spice his intimate secret; he's actually an Alpha werewolf looking for his mate and he thinks he's found her.

Content Warning: Graphic sexual content.

Highlight

All those bad things happening to drive her here couldn't be coincidental. She crossed her arms over her chest. "Where is my sister, and what are you doing in her house?"

The Omegas glanced at each other, confusion apparent on their faces.

The man in the kitchen stuck his head out of the door, chocolate brown eyes wide as he stared at her. "Spice?" The smile he'd given to her when he thought she was Sugar returned but wider.

Her heart skipped a beat. In the light his face seemed familiar as well. "I know you."

"You should, we were only neighbors forever as kids."

"Eric!" He had grown. *Stupid, of course he's changed.* But she never expected that the skinny, lanky bottle-cap-glasses-wearing nerd would develop into a charming, handsome I-wanna-snuggle-you-on-a-cold-night kind of man. "Hi." The jobs as a hostess, a bartender, and the most recent, a stripper taught her how to talk to men the way they liked. But with him grinning at her like a happy puppy, her mind went blank.

He swept her into his arms in a bone-cracking hug.

"Wow, I'd forgotten Sugar had a twin." Tyler scratched his chin. "You look exactly alike, except your hair is short."

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by

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The Vanguards: Book 2

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Dedication

To all my fellow geeks.

Chapter 1

No one could call Spice Monroe weak, at least not to her face, yet she returned to Chicago with nothing but the clothes on her back. If only the strong survived, then why did she feel like such a loser?

Narrow, box-like homes lined the street as she peered at the addresses in the dark. The bus driver dropped her off a block away with directions. Cold winter wind blew through her thin trench coat. She pulled it closer, but her teeth started to chatter anyway. If she didn't find it soon, she'd turn into a Spicesicle

She must have taken a wrong turn. Maybe she was supposed to take a left instead of a right? The wealthy, established neighborhood screamed of money and when she abandoned Sugar neither of them had any.

The street sign matched what she looked for and the number on the house appeared right. She gazed up at the three-story building and swallowed around a hard lump in her throat.

Her sister lived here? She pulled an envelope from her pocket and checked the return address once more. It was correct. Maybe Sugar rented, Spice doubted a librarian's salary was enough to afford a house in the northwest side of Chicago.

The dark brick brownstone sat close to the curb. A wide set of granite stairs led to the front door. Christmas lights still hung from the window and around a tiny evergreen tree struggling to live in the small front yard.

She could relate to it.

It was February. Sugar should have brought those decorations in a while ago.

Spice sighed and stared at her feet. They hadn't spoken in years. Things in Vegas went from bad to worse for her during that time. She never wanted her twin sister to know but now she didn't have anywhere else to go.

She knocked. The wind picked up, and she shuffled her sneaker clad feet to keep numbness at bay. No one answered, but she could see a light in the window.

Bad idea. Sugar shouldn't care about her. Not after the way they parted. Spice hadn't written or called once since she left, and her little sister never had any way to contact her, yet managed to figure out where to send this letter. The envelope crinkled in her hand. Inside, the note didn't say much except Sugar missed her.

She spun around and took a step away from the house. Tears threatened to spill from her eyes. She couldn't remember the last time she'd cried, but shame burned bright in her soul.

Warm yellow light streamed from behind her. "Forget your keys, Sugar?" a male voice asked from the doorway.

She stopped and glanced over her shoulder but saw only his silhouette.

“Oh my God, you cut your hair. Daedalus is going to freak.” The laughter in his comforting voice disappeared and he moved closer. “Don’t cry.” He wiped a tear from her face. “It looks great.” With a grin, he ruffled her short blond curls.

She couldn’t help but smile back.

He thought she was Sugar, her twin sister. Something in his voice sounded familiar. The face didn’t ring a bell though, but shaggy brown hair fell around most of it. He had a nice, easy-going smile. It would be wonderful to come home to a smile like that every night, but it belonged to her sister.

Her grin faded.

He wrapped his strong, thick arm around her shoulders and pulled her inside. Laughter drifted from the living room where three men and an oriental woman were setting up a board game.

One of the men, who had short cropped red hair, looked up. “Where’s the food? You were supposed to grab some grub on the way home from work.”

“We’ll order pizza.” The guy next to her squeezed one more time before walking into the next room, a huge kitchen.

“You cut your hair.” The woman spoke with a thick accent and sprung across the room to run her fingers through her hair.

Spice retreated and bumped against the entrance wall. This game of pretending to be Sugar used to be fun as kids but not anymore. With her hands raised, she kept the strangers at bay as they surrounded her like a pack of wolves. None of them looked dangerous, but what were they doing in her sister’s house while she was at work?

The way they grinned at her and each other, she concluded they were all good friends.

Sugar had everything she wanted; a loving man, friends, and a home.

“Daedalus let you cut your hair?” A short man built like a bodybuilder approached her.

The awe in his voice snapped Spice out of her self-pity and the protector inside reared its head. This was the second reference to someone allowing her little sister to do something. “What do you mean ‘let me’?”

What kind of relationship did Sugar have? She needed permission to cut her hair? Maybe destiny brought her back to Chicago to save her little sister from some monster. Again. All those bad things happening to drive her here couldn’t be coincidental.

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Where is my sister, and what are you doing in her house?”

They glanced at each other, confusion apparent on their faces. “What?”

The man in the kitchen stuck his head out of the door, chocolate brown eyes wide as he stared at her. “Spice?” The smile he’d given to her when he thought she was Sugar returned but wider.

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“Eric!” He had grown. *Stupid, of course he’s changed.* But she never expected that the skinny, lanky bottle-cap-glasses-wearing nerd would develop into a charming, handsome I-wanna-snuggle-you-on-a-cold-night kind of man. “Hi.” The jobs as a hostess, a bartender, and the most recent, a stripper taught her how to talk to men the way they liked. But with him grinning at her like a happy puppy, her mind went blank.

He swept her into his arms in a bone-cracking hug.

“Wow, I’d forgotten Sugar had a twin.” The redhead scratched his chin. “You look exactly alike, except your hair is short.”

Eric set her back on her feet. “Let me take your coat.” He tugged on the belt and untied it. To her surprise, the small action sparked warmth between her thighs. Not like he took off her clothes but she began to wonder what it would feel like if he did.

Their eyes met. His pupils dilated, the chocolate brown faded to amber, and something feral peeked at her.

She gasped and stepped back.

The pretty oriental girl took her arm and dragged her into the living room. She chattered about making tea, but Spice’s attention riveted on Eric as he stood with the men surrounding him.

What the heck? She’d seen need in men’s eyes before but this was darker, deeper, and so much more alluring.

The redhead tried to take Eric’s arm, but he shook it off and stomped out of sight.

Spice sat on the overstuffed couch. “What did you say your name was?”

“Katrina.”

A dainty, petite girl with long black hair to her knees, yet she gave Spice the impression of great strength. Life in Vegas taught her to be an excellent judge of character. Too bad it had taken her so long to learn.

“I’ll be back in a minute. You stay while I make tea.” Katrina slipped away to the kitchen.

Every flat surface in the living room held a book. Soft cover, hard cover, tattered, or new, Sugar loved her books. The walls were lined with shelves filled with them. Spice picked up the closest one and smelled it. The scent of paper always reminded her of her twin.

The large, square coffee table in front of her held the game Risk. Different colored pieces lay scattered on the thick blue carpet.

Game night at Sugar’s house. She glanced at the hallway. With Eric. Many questions formulated in her head. What happened to her reclusive sister over the past two years? When did she get friends? *Probably when her only one, me, left town.* Did she hook up with Eric?

Hope sprung in Spice’s heart. Her attraction to him was out of character. She usually loved them tough and bad. Maybe he could be the new beginning she’d come home for.

* * * *

Tyler followed Eric into the kitchen with Robert and Sam in tow. “What’s wrong with you, Eric? You almost lost control of your beast.”

Running his fingers through his hair, he tried to hide the blush heating his cheeks. *Spice is home*. He'd lost hope of ever seeing her again. The desire in her eyes when he loosened her jacket and the smell from her pussy set his beast-side on a craze.

I, Eric Turner, the geek next door, turned her on. The sexiest, most confident girl he'd ever met, his high school obsession.

"Sorry, she took me off guard." He looked at Robert, his calm, overly serious second in command of the pack, who shook his head at him. "Damn, I almost changed in front of her. What a disaster." Eric's mouth went dry.

Sam handed him a glass of water. If anyone understood losing control of his beast, it was him. Ever since the Omegas conquered the Ayumu werewolf pack, their females kept knocking on the door. The bodybuilder had trouble refusing them, and his beast liked the attention. He didn't completely transform mid-intercourse anymore but they heard his howls.

Eric needed to stop thinking of the pack as Ayumu. They were all Omegas now and he their alpha. The sip of water he tried to swallow went down the wrong way and blocked his windpipe. Nothing came out, not a cough and not a breath.

"Eric?" Sam asked.

Katrina scurried into the kitchen. "I make tea. You want some?" She stopped. "What is wrong with Eric?"

He coughed out a manly squeak and pointed to his throat.

Redheaded Tyler pushed pass Sam and pounded on his back.

Not a moment later Spice sashayed into the room. Even in his distress, her presence drew him like a magnet to iron.

A solid smack on his back set off a cough. He expelled the water from his throat, and it landed on her generous, rounded chest.

She stood with arms out at her sides, and her mouth hung open.

"Smooth, real smooth." Sam patted him on the shoulder and exited the room. The others followed in silence but a few seconds later, Eric heard their restrained laughter from the direction of the living room.

He grabbed a dish towel from the rack by the sink and raced over to her. "I'm sorry." Without a coherent thought in his scrambled brain, he dried her tight, white sweater.

Tension in her shoulders as he bent over to stroke around her curves clued him in that he'd done another boneheaded maneuver.

Her intense stare weakened his knees as he glanced up with her breast cupped in his hand. The urge to fondle it sent a shiver up his spine, but the ingrained gentleman inside of him beat down the beast, who wanted more than just a touch.

He jerked his hand away. "Sorry." Alphas shouldn't apologize that much. Daedalus would kick his ass if he heard him.

Eric straightened and swept the annoying hair out of his eyes. Why did he decide to let it grow? Who cared if all those guys in romance books had long freaking hair?

“Don’t be.” She gave him a small, seductive smile.

He kept waiting for this wet dream to end.

“Who’s Daedalus?”

Nothing more deflating to a man’s ego than to ask about the resident stud vampire. “Sugar’s boyfriend.”

“The one she has to ask permission to cut her hair. Then you’re not together?”

“No.” That question showed how much she paid attention to them as kids. He and Sugar had been best friends since sixth grade. Dating her would be like dating a sister. Even though they were identical twins, Spice got placed in a different category from Sugar. She topped the list for the five-finger-knuckle-shuffle when he needed it.

She leaned closer and ran her finger down his chest. It left a trail of heat along his skin. “What’s happened since I left two years ago?” Gesturing around the room, she raised an eyebrow. “New house, new boyfriend, new friends, and...” She stepped to press against his body and gazed at him with green sparkling eyes. “New Eric.”

Where did he start? *We hired a Nosferatu vampire to teach us how to fight about a year ago, who by the way, is banging your twin sister. Oh yeah, all of us are werewolves, except Sugar, and I defeated the local alpha in a fight to the death so it made me top wolf in Chicago.*

“Nothing much. We pay rent to Sugar and live here.” The old Eric she referred to still resided inside of him. He still liked *Star Trek*, ‘live long and prosper,’ worked from home for a computer software company, and read as much as Sugar.

His heart twisted a little. She didn’t like *him*; she liked the changes the beast made inside of him. After the werewolf attack, his eyesight returned to twenty-twenty. He got stronger and faster, which meant leaner and more muscular.

She moved back and placed her hands on her hips. “Six of you live under this roof?”

“Seven. Daedalus lives here too.”

Shaking her head, she grinned and looked at the floor. “Unbelievable.”

He heard the front door open and close. “I’ve got Thai.” Sugar’s voice, higher and more musical than Spice’s, called out.

“What’s going on?” Daedalus must have given her a ride from work. “Why are you guys so serious?”

Chapter 2

The expression on Sugar's face made Spice's long, smelly bus trip from Las Vegas worth the effort. Her little sister squealed, shoved the bags of food at her male companion, and hugged her. "Spice, I can't believe you're here." Sugar's reaction melted a little of the ice she'd formed around her heart.

A tall, bald man approached them, juggling the extra bags of Thai in his arms. Upon a closer look, she noticed the slight up-turn of his ears into points, the pale skin, and when he smiled at her, the sharp fangs.

Dread clenched her heart. Without having to ask, she knew who this must be. Daedalus. Her innocent, stupid twin shackled up with a vampire.

Sugar released her. "Daedalus, this is my sister."

He nodded in her direction. "I've heard so much about you. This is a pleasant surprise."

"I wish I could say the same."

"Spice!" Sugar's eyebrows rose as her eyes went wide.

"What the hell do you expect from me? You hooked up with a bloodsucker?" She'd dealt with her fair share of these creeps. They might be legal citizens but it didn't keep them from being monsters.

Sugar stepped between them, then started shoving her down a hallway. Once out of sight, she grabbed Spice's arm and led her into the master bedroom.

As the door closed she heard Daedalus comment, "I want to be the red pieces." She insulted him in public and he worried about a board game?

"Spice Clara Monroe, you'd better behave in *my* house. Do you understand me?" Her little sister stood with one hand on her hip and shook her finger an inch from her face. "I love that vampire. He's the best thing to ever happen to me."

All she could do was stare at her. She'd grown into a strong woman. Even though they shared the same birthday, Sugar always seemed much younger than her. Frail and sweet, so easily hurt and so easy to love. "You've grown a back bone."

"I've had to, you left me." Her voice hiccupped on the last word. "Where have you been?"

Spice glanced at her shoes. "Around." The worn sneakers would be terrible in the Chicago winter. "I need a place to crash." She shrugged. "The house seems full though. Could I crash on the couch until morning?" After that, she didn't have a clue what to do. She'd sold her backpack and clothes at a thrift shop to get the cash for the bus here.

A touch on her hand drew her attention back to Sugar. “You stay as long as you need. Sisters stick together, right?” She used to always say that to Sugar when they were kids. When their parents would leave them alone and scared at night so they could go out to parties, she’d snuggle with her twin and speak those words.

Spice nodded. “Yeah—” She tried to choke back the sob but it won the battle and came out. Turning her back to Sugar, she covered her face with her hands and swallowed back the other sobs that threatened to burst from her. Tears were for weaklings.

Arms wrapped around her from behind and hugged her close. Her sister leaned her head against hers. “I’ve missed you so much. Don’t leave me again.”

A pressure built inside her chest. If she spoke, the dam would break. It hurt.

“Spicy?” Sugar’s voice carried an echo of the little girl she used to be.

“I won’t.” She spun around as the tears poured from her and grabbed onto her twin. “Never. I’ve missed you too.” Oh, how she had. She’d let shame get between them but wouldn’t let it ever happen again.

She wiped her face on her sleeve as Sugar hurried to retrieve a box of tissues from the bedside table. The king-sized bed took up most of the room and a set of crossed swords adorned the wall above it. “What’s with the decor?” Spice took the offered box and used one to blow her nose. “Thanks.”

“Daedalus made those ages ago. They’re...special.”

She quirked an eyebrow at the weapons. “How?”

Sugar stared at her. “He told me in confidence. You should ask him, I’m sure he’d tell you.”

The door creaked open, and the vampire stuck his head in the room. “Tell her what?”

Her twin’s face bloomed into a beautiful smile as she spotted him. He grinned back like a love struck fool and walked to stand next to her. She wrapped her hands around his arm. “She was asking about your swords.”

No doubt they were in love. It made things worse.

“Tell her,” Sugar coaxed.

“Umm...” He glanced at Spice. She could see a touch of animosity toward her on his face and knew it must be because she’d voiced her opinions in front of everyone. “A long time ago I preyed on any kind of human that crossed my path.” He rubbed the back of his neck, then his scalp. “There came a point when I made a decision to stop. I created these swords to defend the innocent and atone for my past. They’ve become a symbol for my clan and those who follow my teachings.”

“Who do you prey upon now?” She crossed her arms over her chest. How old was he that he used swords?

“The willing.” He gestured to Sugar. “The occasional evil doers, there are always plenty of those.”

Great, not only handsome but he had a conscience. “Who decides whose evil?”

His eyes narrowed as he glared at her. It made her soul shrivel up and hide in a corner. “I do.”

She swallowed with a mouth gone dry. "Oh."

"Stop it. Both of you." The command in her little sister's voice snapped them both to attention. "I'm not a child, Spice. Being with Daedalus is my choice. I love him."

The anger in his gaze dissolved when Sugar spoke those words. Any hope to save her sister disappeared with it.

"I know you're both in love. That's the problem. He's going to ask you to cross over, to become vampire." The way she jerked her hand on his arm told Spice she'd hit the bull's-eye. He'd already asked her.

"I-I haven't accepted his offer." She stepped closer to him. "Yet. I need to think about the consequences first, but it will be my decision. Not his *and* not yours." Her twin faced Daedalus. "Spice is staying for a while. We'll need to shuffle people around." She didn't ask him, she told him.

Pride swelled in Spice's chest. Maybe she worried for nothing.

* * * *

Eric chuckled to himself as he watched Sugar push her sister to her bedroom. Spice was in for a surprise. Her twin had changed since she'd left.

"I want the red pieces." Daedalus handed the bags of food to a hungry Tyler who hurried to the kitchen with it.

Katrina followed him. "Do not gobble all the noodles this time."

"What color do you want to be?" Daedalus asked.

"I don't think I'm going to play." Eric sat on the couch next to Robert and rested his right ankle on his left knee. If Spice freaked out over a vampire, how would she act once she found out he was a werewolf?

Daedalus smiled and rubbed his hands together. "I love Risk and anything to do with world domination."

Sam sat by the board game and set some pieces for play. "Eric's got other things on his mind." He pointedly stared at Sugar's bedroom door.

"Really?" Daedalus stopped placing his game markers. "There something to like in that woman besides looking like my fiancée?"

The question irked Eric. No one should judge Spice by her prickly exterior. She'd had a hard life. He knew since he'd witnessed most of it. Leaning forward, he faced the Nosferatu vampire. "I don't think you're qualified to make any judgments about her."

His eyes widened at Eric's pointed remark. He tilted his head as if seeing the Alpha for the first time. "Maybe not."

"Don't mind him, Daedalus. He's been acting weird since she walked through the door, almost lost control of his inner beast when he helped to take off her jacket."

Daedalus remained quiet until Sam finished setting the game. Then he glanced at Eric. "You need to get laid."

Eric chuckled. "That's your answer for everything."

"It usually works. If you would just choose a mate from the pack you wouldn't be having so much trouble."

Robert, who sat next to him, nodded.

"You're agreeing with him?" Eric twisted to face him.

"Not that sex cures everything, but the Ayumu pack is so unhealthy because Michael refused to take a mate. You shouldn't follow the same path. The pack needs an alpha female to help you lead."

"We need to stop thinking of them as Ayumu. They're just as much as Omega as we are. I haven't met anyone in the pack I could love."

Daedalus groaned. "Sometimes you have to take one for the team. People marry for politics. This is the same thing. Your one year grace period is over. No matter how much you patrol, you won't be able to stop dominance challenges among the females of the pack. Once they're done, they'll expect you to mate the winner."

"Don't tell me they're still challenging. They promised to wait until the full moon."

"I interrupted one on the way to get Sugar." Daedalus shrugged. "You've stalled for a year. Time's up." He glanced at the master bedroom door, then winked at him. "I'll go check on the girls." With preternatural grace he stood in one smooth motion and left the living room.

Katrina and Tyler carried small cardboard boxes of food to the game table.

"Cashew chicken." She handed him one of the boxes with chopsticks. "Red curry beef." Robert reached for it as she named it. Katrina's voice faded into the background with the others as they ate.

Crazy urges stampeded through Eric's head. He wanted to barge into the master bedroom and see what they were doing. The king-sized bed would easily accommodate the twins and Daedalus. Women threw themselves at the vampire all the time. Why wouldn't Spice? He didn't need to be telepathic to read Daedalus's mind when he saw the sisters hugging—identical twin ménage.

"If Eric has to mate within the pack that means Spice should be free game." Sam's words interrupted his thoughts as if slapped by a wet glove.

He grabbed the thick, muscled, short man by the scruff and pinned him to the floor. Moo Shu Gai-Pan spilled onto the carpet. "No one touches her. She's mine." He stared at each of his original pack mates, then released Sam.

"Yes, Alpha."

To hear them address him by his title hurt. What was wrong with him? Twice in one night he'd lost control.

"I'm sorry, Sam. Here, have my dinner. I've lost my appetite." He stood to leave. All he wanted was solitude to pick at these new emotions tearing him apart.

The bedroom door opened, and Daedalus stepped out. A tick in his temple twitched. "Spice will be staying with us for a while. We need to play musical beds until we can figure out a better solution."

“She can have my room.” Eric nodded to her as she leaned out of the doorway. “It’s across the hall from you. I don’t mind sleeping on the couch.”

“Thank you.” Her soft words made his heart soar.

Chapter 3

Spice snuggled into Eric's pillow and tugged the blankets over her.

Her sister led a pretty nice life. Daedalus slept all day someplace in the basement so Sugar could use part of that time for herself. She worked an occasional shift in the evening at the city library, and her friends lived under her roof. No one seemed to be sponging off of her like Spice worried.

Yesterday afternoon, Katrina took her shopping and bought her some clothes, the basics: jeans, socks, underwear, sweaters, and a thicker jacket.

"I'll pay you back as soon as I can, Katrina. It's very thoughtful of you." For once, when she spoke those words, she meant them.

"No need. When I came to Chicago to live with Eric, Sugar did this for me. It is like a circle. One day you will do the same for someone else."

At a loss for words, Spice hugged her. This wasn't a con or a handout but something a *real* friend did. "Thank you, and I will." The promise rung with truth and lightened her heavy heart, but something Katrina said echoed in her head. "You came to Chicago to live with *Eric*? Not Tyler?" Doubt and dread tangled themselves with her shredded confidence as she waited for the answer. If Katrina and Eric had a past, she didn't want to complicate her life more by getting involved.

"Both. They lived together next to Sugar. It was strange to be in an apartment with only boys, so I stayed at her place a lot." Katrina's pager went off and she glanced at the message. "Sorry, have to go. My office needs me."

"Sure, ah, what do you do for a living?"

"I'm a Chinese interpreter and work for many of the companies in the area who deal with China. Daedalus helped me set up a small company."

Food for thought.

Katrina owned a business and the vampire was involved. Again.

The others had been nothing but kind to her as well. Spice had questioned each one about their lives, and they shared similar stories. All struggling to get by until Daedalus came into their lives. She wondered if any of them realized how much he helped, guiding each of them on the right career path that matched their personalities. Social working vampire? She kind of hoped he would act as her compass and send her in the proper direction too. The choices she'd made sucked, and she couldn't trust her desires anymore.

She pulled the blankets closer around her ears and squeezed her eyes shut. The soft bed squeaked a little as she rolled over. Enough thinking, she needed to sleep. Tomorrow she had a job interview at local bookstore. Sugar set it up for her.

The flannel blankets smelled like Eric. At first, she wanted to toss them in the wash but the scent offered comfort, a reminder of his gentle, contagious smile. Last night she fantasized they were his arms wrapped around her body.

He was the only one she hadn't questioned. Whenever they got a moment alone any coherent thoughts went south, straight to her crotch. Thank goodness the last few nights he'd been out. She didn't want to screw up her chances by crawling under his covers the first night. Impulse control worked better when the temptation wasn't available.

At first, she thought he went to see a girlfriend and she moped around the house, but Sam cleared all that up for her today. He told her they patrolled the neighborhood, like a volunteer watch, and this week was Eric's turn.

If he got any better she'd have to file a patent on him as the perfect man. Warm, melting-chocolate brown eyes, strong prominent cheekbones, and thick just-tumbled-out-of-bed hair inflamed her whenever she thought about him.

Like now.

Sliding her hand inside her panties, she located her throbbing clit and tried to imagine it was Eric's fingers that massaged the spot, but she'd never been very good at pretend. He would probably be real gentle and tease the area until it made her crazy.

All she managed to do with her thoughts was get more hot and bothered. She stuck two fingers in her pussy and pumped as she reached under the tight t-shirt. Her nipples hardened at her touch, and she clenched her thighs around her hand. His fingers would be longer and thicker than hers. He wouldn't need to stroke so hard to make her come. Breaths coming faster, she got closer to the light at the end of the tunnel but she couldn't finish the deed. Not when the focus of her fantasy slept on the couch at the end of the hall.

* * * *

The smell woke him. Creamy and sweet, the intoxication of it would have made him swoon if he wasn't already lying down. Every woman carried their own unique scent, this one didn't belong to Sugar or Katrina. It could only be Spice, in *his* room, tucked into *his* sheets, and on *his* bed.

Did she have someone in there with her making her so heated? He sat upright and yanked the blankets off. His hard-on tented the boxers he wore. Inhaling deeply, he realized no other smells joined hers, she must be alone. He closed his eyes and leaned his head on the back of the couch.

They had this floor to themselves. Daedalus had taken Sugar out for the night. They wouldn't be home until much later.

Spice probably lay naked on his bed, touching her body, running her hands along her smooth white skin, nipples perked and ready for tasting. He stroked his cock. Nothing would please him more than to offer to help her out with those needs, but he wanted more than a quick hump. It frightened him how vulnerable she seemed. In high school, she intimidated the crap out of him. Now, he wanted to scoop her up in his arms and tell her everything would be all right, that he'd take care of her if she'd let him.

The smell faded and he slowed his stroking, she must have climaxed without him. He sighed and opened his eyes.

She leaned against the wall, watching him.

His cock went soft, and he snatched his hand out of his boxers.

“Hey there, big guy. Don’t stop on my account.”

He stared at her for a moment, unsure what she meant. She wasn’t angry? No, she still smelled turned on. His heart raced. Could he masturbate in front of her? He did a few experimental tugs but the shock of finding her in the room with him traumatized it.

“Need some help?”

His mouth went dry. Several different comeback lines twirled in his head, but he couldn’t decide what to use. “I wouldn’t mind.” He tried to make it sound sexy, but it came out more like a croak. His fantasy was turning into a nightmare.

“I’ve been thinking about you.” She stepped across the living room, then pulled her t-shirt over her head, standing in front of him with her round, firm breasts exposed. Her nipples peaked, giving them little up-turned tips. Only a tiny pair of pink panties kept her from being naked.

He loved pink.

His cock got over its issues and returned with a roaring standing ovation. It ached with lust. He took off his shorts while sitting and continued where he’d left off. Things had gone from bad to great in seconds. He would have been happy to just look at her, but then she knelt in front of him and spread his legs so she could fit in between them and rested her breasts on his thighs.

With a held breath, he gave silent thanks to God for not letting him come right there and then. He suspected what she wanted to do, and it could be a big mistake to let her. She felt alone, he understood this, but using him to fill the emptiness would just hurt them both. They deserved better and needed to take things slow.

She replaced his hand with her own.

His beast roared inside his head and shattered any thoughts from processing. Taste, smell, and desire ruled him.

Her small, delicate fingers tightened and caressed his cock with a slow, steady pace. How could he stop now? The beast’s reaction to her shocked him. It never seemed interested in mating with anyone, only fighting, until Spice walked back into his life. Every time she touched him it wanted to surface, as if needing to touch her as well.

No matter how much he tried to distract his mind from the onslaught of pleasure, he felt on the edge of exploding. *Not yet, please not yet.*

Her head of short, blond curls moved forward. The rosebud shape of her mouth opened and approached the tip of his cock. Moist and warm, her tongue swirled around and around. Her lips so close to wrapping around him.

Panting, he flung back his head. Torment couldn’t be any sweeter.

She washed his shaft with long sure strokes of her tongue, then posed her pursed lips on his tender tip. Cool air brushed the scorching skin as she blew a gentle breath.

Urgent yearning swelled between his thighs. With a slight thrust of his hips, he pressed against her lips, silently pleading to let him in.

She parted them but didn't consume him like he wanted.

He delved deeper in her mouth and was rewarded with her hungry moan. The scent of her excitement surrounded them. It was too much. He didn't have a lot of experience with women so his willpower's reserves were depleted.

Advancing further with each heave of his hips, he reached the back of her throat. She took all of him. His fingers and toes tingled while his breaths came hard and fast.

With voracious appetite, she began to suck and slid his cock in and out of her lush, moist mouth.

Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God. Clenching his hands along the back of the couch, afraid to grab and distract her, he was so close to blowing.

"Spice." Her name came out sounding deep, as if from the bottom of his gut. "Yes—" he croaked. "Oh, baby. I-I'm going to come."

She didn't hesitate or stop but continued at a more demanding pace until he poured his seed down her throat. Clinging to his thighs, she held onto him and swallowed. The ceiling spun for a moment while he tried to catch his breath. A week ago, if someone told him he'd be getting a blow-job by Spice Monroe he'd have laughed in their face.

All those wishes he'd thought wasted on her finally came true.

The brush of her nipples on his thigh caught his attention. She crawled onto his lap. Flawless, milky white skin covered her voluptuous curves.

He pulled her close. During that whole time he hadn't touched her once. She wouldn't get away without him getting at least a taste. He trailed his fingers from her shoulder to her collarbone, then down her breasts to her nipples.

She arched her back as he touched her.

"You're so beautiful." Life started to return to his cock, not a full hard-on but it definitely filled.

He laid her on the bedding and bent to take the hard nub in his mouth. The small mewling moans she made rekindled his passion. Her other breast jiggled as she wiggled under him. He massaged the soft globe in his hand; he could spend the rest of the night just playing with them, but she had other ideas.

The pink panties came off and she flung them to floor. "Fuck me."

Those two words acted like a bucket of ice-cold water dumped on his crotch.

She must have noticed his hesitation. "What's wrong? If you don't have a condom, I've got one in my purse."

Of course, she would. He sighed. His beast wanted to but he'd let it have its way already tonight. "I don't think that would be a good idea."

Her hands gripped his shoulders. "What?" The question snapped like a whip, but he knew she hid her hurt behind the anger.

How did he explain himself without pushing her away forever? With no experience to draw from, he decided to stick to the truth, even if it embarrassed him.

She started to slide out from under him, but he gripped her ass and yanked her back. "I want to...but...but we need to take things slowly. If you're just looking for someone to fool around with, you're better off with Sam. I'm not a one-night stand kind of guy."

She blinked at him for a moment, then a shy smile replaced the angry frown. "How much more do you want from me, Eric?"

The way his name slipped off her tongue sent a shiver up his spine. "I want it all, baby. Body, heart, and soul—forever." She tensed in his hands. "Spice, I know people have hurt you but I don't play games. If anyone is going to end up with a broken heart, I'm afraid it's going to be me."

She took his face between her hands. "I'm scared." With a light touch of her swollen mouth, she gave him a small tender kiss. It meant more to him than the blow-job ever could. "You're offering me everything I've been looking for and I'm going to screw it up. I always do." She glanced around him at the hallway. "Maybe we should talk about this in your bedroom."

He chuckled. "No. I want our first time to be special."

"How?"

"I don't know. When you're sure about us, then I guess we'll figure it out."

She grinned. "Then I'm sure about us. Let's go."

"Spice, I'm a virgin." It wiped the smile off her face.

"Was-was that your first BJ?"

He pressed his body on hers and returned the tender kiss, hoping to relieve some of the anxiety in her eyes. "No, but it was the best."

"So, you fool around?"

He nodded as he nibbled on her ear lobe. "But I don't go all the way." A quiver made her tremble in his hands as he whispered in her ear. He liked it.

"I want to be the one, Eric." Her voice shook.

Lifting his head from kissing her neck, he stared down at her. "I don't want to fuck, I want to make love. Do you love me?"

She chuckled. "I just met you."

"No, you've known me most of your life. Maybe you should try to remember that."

The vulnerable girl hiding inside the angry woman peeked out through her eyes. "I will." She sighed and tried to wiggle out from under him.

"Where are you going?"

“Well, I’m not going to steal your virtue tonight. I may as well try to get some sleep so I’m fresh for my job interview.”

“But I’m not done.” He forged his fingers between her folds. “Let me at least repay the favor.”

She gasped as he slid inside her tight pussy. Being a virgin didn’t mean he lacked the skill to make a woman beg for mercy. Becoming an alpha had its perks, but the novelty of fooling around with the willing females of the pack wore away quick, especially when one of them got angry for not going all the way.

With each thrust, her hips met his hands. She whispered dirty encouragements in his ear, and it surprised him how much he liked it. “Harder,” she pleaded.

Oh, how he wanted to replace his fingers with his cock. For once, his morals pissed him off.

He twirled his fingers inside her, searching for that magical spot. The way she cried out told him exactly where it lay, and he worked it until Spice became a mass of thrashing limbs.

Her cries probably woke the others downstairs and maybe the neighbors. Smug with her satisfaction, he hugged her close and waited to wake up.

Chapter 4

A noise in the hallway outside of Eric's bedroom alerted Spice. She shoved the half-wrapped present under the blankets of her unmade bed and spun around.

Her sister stepped through the doorway.

"Jesus H. Christ, Sugar. You about gave me a heart attack." Her heart slowed with relief now that she knew it wasn't Eric. She wanted to surprise him with a gift. The realization amazed her. When was the last time she cared to give something to anyone?

"What are you hiding?" Her twin peeked under the blankets. "A book? Is it for me?" She grinned with a wicked glint in her eyes. The vampire's personality had rubbed off on her.

"No." Spice pulled it out and exposed the cover. It had taken some work to get Eric to admit the box of romance books under his bed belonged to him, but they'd both enjoyed her methods of persuading his confession. She smiled, remembering the last three nights. He still refused to join her in his bed but didn't protest if she searched him out during the wee hours of the morning and joined him on the couch.

His virginity tortured her. At first, she believed it was the reason for her infatuation but after three days she realized what she felt meant more. Like a moth to flame, his kindness drew her. She hoped she didn't get burned.

"That's Eric's favorite author. How'd you know?"

"It wasn't hard to figure out. I went through his books and she had the most titles. Look." Inside the cover was the author's signature. "She did a signing at the book store yesterday. Do you think he'll like it?"

Sugar gripped her arm and laughed. "He'll love it. How's the new job?"

"I never thought I'd like working with books. It's...peaceful." She finished wrapping the gift in bright shiny blue paper and taped the edges, then took a navy blue ribbon to tie around it. Her sister placed a finger over the knot to hold it while she tied a bow. "It's the best job I've had in a long time."

Sugar's smile faded as she stepped closer. "If you ever need to talk, I'm here for you."

Without meeting her stare, Spice nodded. "I know." Her voice cracked, and she cleared her throat. "That part of my life is over. It's in the past." Taking a deep breath she glanced at her little sister, whose concern painted her face, then smiled. "I'm ready to start fresh."

"Eric is part of it?" Spice realized then the concern on Sugar's face wasn't only for her but for Eric, her best friend, as well.

"I think so."

Her twin hugged her suddenly. "Nothing would make me happier than if the two of you fell in love."

Spice couldn't return the gesture and stepped away, waiting to hear the "but" part of the speech. Whenever something concerned her, the use of that word went with it. *You're smart, but you can't handle the responsibility* or her favorite *you're beautiful but don't have enough talent*. She could write a memoir filled with these kinds of statements.

"But I don't want Eric getting hurt."

Even though she was familiar with such expectations, didn't mean it stopped hurting. "Hmm..." It was the only sound she could make. If she opened her mouth, she might tell Sugar where to shove her worries. What about *her* heart? Would anybody be troubled if *he* hurt *her*?

"Don't give those eyes, Spice."

"What?"

"The eat-shit-and-die glare you give people when pissed." Sugar placed her hands on her hips. "You don't have a good track record when it comes to men. Use 'em and lose 'em, isn't that your motto?"

"It used to be. Until I became the one used." She set the present on the dresser. Eric would be home soon. He'd gone out with Sam and Robert to check on some friends but promised that after he returned he'd take her to a late dinner. She didn't want to wreck the night by carrying a bunch of emotional crap around. "I won't hurt him."

She was about to embark on the most risky endeavor she'd ever been part of—a relationship. Tonight, she'd give him everything, her trust, her dreams, and her heart. No one, except her twin, had deserved such trust. The book symbolized these gifts. She touched it.

"He means something to you." The awe in Sugar's voice should have been insulting, but Spice laughed at it. They knew each other too well.

"Yep, for the first time, I'm in love."

A squeal of joy escaped her little sister just before she jumped on her and knocked them both to the floor. Sugar landed on top of her, the air whooshed from her lungs, and stars pirouetted in front of her eyes. Her sister yelled, "Yes, yes, yes!"

"What's going on in here—oh, my."

Spice glanced over Sugar's shoulder. Daedalus stood in the doorway, his eyes wide and his mouth hanging open. She'd seen that look on other men before once they'd met her twin. The ménage fantasy stare. Not on his life. She'd had her share of cold-blooded life-suckers.

With a twist of her hips, she dumped Sugar to the floor. She appreciated her enthusiasm, but it still stung that she doubted the sincerity of her intentions toward Eric. If anyone understood her, it should be her sister. The emptiness in her soul grew a little larger. She hoped Eric believed in her. They weren't teenagers anymore, and she'd been through enough crap to recognize the real thing when she felt it.

Daedalus lost his dreamy expression and replaced it with a crooked grin. "I thought I was the only one who could make you scream like that." He leaned against the doorframe and folded his arms over his chest.

“Daedalus.” Sugar sounded so scandalized Spiced had to chuckle. The girl shared her bed with a vampire yet still managed to keep some of her innocence. It amazed her. Why couldn’t Spice retain any?

The sound of the front door closing carried to the bedroom, followed by Eric’s call. “Honey, I’m home.”

Dang, she wasn’t ready for their first official date.

Sugar grabbed onto the dresser as she stood, then sashayed past Daedalus. With the tip of her fingernail, she traced a line down his bulging bicep. Her stare never left his as she led him to their room and closed the door.

Spice wanted to give her sister a mental high five. The way the vampire’s expression softened when he watched her spoke volumes. She had worried about who controlled who in their relationship, but after this little display she wouldn’t anymore. Yet, she still had to force herself not to shiver at the thought of what they’d be doing in there. If she was going to be part of her twin’s life again, she needed to learn to accept the bloodsucker.

Eric poked his head around the doorway. “Are you okay?”

She smiled at him from her place on the floor. “Yeah, I got waylaid by a squealing sister. You know, if you close the door, we could just spend the evening in here.” She popped the button on her jeans and exposed a little belly flesh.

His eyes darted straight for it. The hunger in his gaze made her breath catch. It made him look so feral, but he blinked and it faded.

“No, I was promised a date, a formal one, with you in a dress.” He stepped into the room and offered her a hand to stand.

She took it. Her man not only read romance, he wanted it in his life. Maybe she should have read one his books to get an idea of what he expected. She bit her bottom lip.

“You’re nervous?” He chuckled and pushed a stray curl behind her ear.

“It’s been a long time since someone asked me on a date. I’m not sure how to behave.” The heat of her blush burned her cheeks. “I don’t want to disappoint you.”

He lifted her chin with his finger. “I made you blush.” The awe in his voice made it deeper, sexier and the innocence of his words made her love him so much more. “Nothing you do would ever disappoint me. I’m still thrilled you want to spend any time with me.”

There were two sides to this man, the hungry beast who peeked from his eyes like when she popped her button, and the sweet gentleman who saved his virginity for someone special.

She’d be that person, no matter what it took.

* * * *

The fireworks ended over the Chicago River. Spice and Eric watched them from the Signature Room on top of the John Hancock Center. The city sparkled below them. A busboy removed their empty dinner plates from the table, then refilled the wine glasses.

Spice's smile lit up his evening. "How did you ever get such a great table on such short notice?"

"I know the cook." Being an Alpha had some perks. Loyalty to pack members still ran deep, even in his large antisocial pack. It was something he tried to nurture. The head cook, being a member, offered him an open reservation as an incentive to find a mate.

"A man with connections." She reached across the table and took his hand. Live piano music drifted through the room while she gazed at him across the candle-lit table.

This night couldn't get more perfect. She wore a small, slinky black dress that left just enough flesh exposed to spark a man's imagination. It clung to every rounded curve with spaghetti straps baring the white creamy skin of her shoulders and back. When they entered the room earlier, he couldn't help but notice the stares she drew. His heart swelled with pride.

"You've changed so much." She squeezed his hand. The statement hit a sensitive chord within him. He had changed a lot; he wasn't even human anymore. How the heck would he tell her without her running away?

He'd always wanted her but never imagined he would get a chance to have and keep her. The fear of losing her grew each day. He swallowed around the lump in his throat and squeezed her hand back. "I'm not the only one. Two years ago you wouldn't have given me the time of day."

A wounded look came to her eyes. "I didn't mean to hurt you, but you're right. I learned some hard lessons while away." She brought the wine glass to her lips and drank the dark red liquid until she emptied the vessel, then lifted the bottle to fill it once more.

"Where did you go?"

"I'm a firm believer that the past is behind me, and I don't care to dwell on it." She raised her glass again, but he placed a finger on the rim and stopped it before it reached her lips.

"I'll let you keep your secrets if you let me keep mine." He quirked an eyebrow at her and waited. They needed honesty for a relationship to work. If she couldn't confide in him, then he wasn't ready to take any more steps, no matter how much he wanted to fuck her.

"You have a secret?" She set her glass down.

"Yup."

"Let's hear it."

He laughed and leaned back in his chair. "Ladies first."

"Nobody's ever accused me of being a lady." She tapped a long, manicured, red painted nail on the glass's rim. "Fine, I'll go first but your secret better be worth it." The wine made her cheeks rosy and her smile a little lopsided.

He grinned. Maybe he should let her finish the bottle. It could prove to be interesting.

She took a sip. "I went to Las Vegas and tried to make it as a dancer."

He remembered Sugar mentioning something about Spice taking dance classes and getting a scholarship to a school.

“I bombed. The competition was too much. I ran out of money and met this guy...” She ran her finger around the rim of her glass and stared at the contents as if lost in the memory. “He made me feel special.” She smiled with a touch of sorrow. “I was a fool. He talked me into doing things I’m not proud of to make money.” She glanced at Eric as if waiting for him to prompt her for details. He didn’t need them. “Six months ago he introduced me to a vampire and I started to ah—work for him.”

Now he understood where her hostility toward Daedalus came from. The shame in her voice made him regret pushing her to confess. “Spice, I’m sorry. You don’t have to continue if you don’t want to.”

She sighed, then drained the glass of wine. “I need to finish now that I’ve started. I was his pet, something pretty to keep around and show off and use. Once I came to my senses, I realized there were two possible outcomes to living with a vampire, eventually getting killed by him or becoming one. I didn’t like my life and hated my future, so I ran.” She reached for the bottle with a shaky hand.

He took it and kissed her fingers. “Here’s to new beginnings.”

The trembles stopped and she met his gaze. Light from the candle reflected off the unshed tears in her eyes.

“I bet you’re a beautiful dancer.” He stood and came around to her chair, then offered his hand. “Show me.” They had the rest of their lifetime to get to know each other. He didn’t need to press for more info. Now, she would confide in him without worrying about judgment.

Her face transformed as she beamed up at him and took his hand. He led her onto the dance floor and hoped he wouldn’t make a huge fool of himself.

She twirled around him to the slow blues song and faced him with her hands on his chest. Her stiletto heels gave her more height and brought her rosebud mouth closer to his. He only had to bend at the neck and—

With a playful glint in her eyes, she stepped back and placed his hands on her waist, then rested her hands on his shoulders.

The waltz was the only dance he knew. It may have seemed odd with the music, but she never complained. She moved with grace in his hands, light as a feather and smooth as silk. She made a few adjustments to their steps and made it look easy and fresh.

He could have danced with her all night, but the song ended and she stepped into his arms and whispered, “I have a present for you at home. Let’s make it an early night.”

The instant cock salute those words produced made him a little dizzy, and he closed his eyes for a moment. He used her body as a shield as he shifted it to the side.

Her gaze followed his hand. She grinned at him and slid past him as she brushed her fingers over the bulge in his pants.

Mortified, he glanced at the tables but caught only a few stares. Most were envious ones. He rushed their waiter and paid the bill while she strolled by the windows, waiting for him. His beast wanted to scoop her up and have her as dessert right on the table. He needed to take a few deep, cleansing breaths and concentrate on making his beast sleep. If she meant what he hoped for, to consummate their relationship, then he didn't want the creature to be part of tonight. The loss of his virginity was for him and Spice alone.

Chapter 5

Spice squirmed the whole way home. Sharing her past with Eric was like a weight lifted from her shoulders. Suddenly she didn't feel so alone. The meal, the talk, and the dance were perfect. Now the best part of the date could begin. Just the thought made her wet with anticipation.

Eric fumbled the keys as he tried to unlock the front door. A feral growl escaped him and made her jump. He glanced at her with alarm. "Sorry, I didn't mean to frighten you."

"No problem." She stepped closer to him and took the keys from his hands. "Just promise to save it for bed, I liked it."

She turned her back on him to unlock the door. The light poured out as she went inside the house. She looked over her shoulder and caught the glimpse of amber in his eyes. *Weren't they a chocolate brown?*

He blinked and stared at her. The color she remembered returned.

The house sat quiet for once. No board game shouts from the living room or sports from Daedalus's man-cave. Somehow everyone knew what she planned for tonight and apparently approved since they had given them some privacy.

They hung up their coats and their eyes met. Her courage crashed. What if she overdid things in bed and freaked him out? It never worried her when they fooled around because he set limits. Tonight was no holds barred.

He planted a soft kiss on her mouth. "It'll be fine. I want to do this."

Her insecurities must have shown on her face. "That's the problem. I don't want it to be *fine*. I want to blow your mind away."

A large grin spread his lips. "You can blow me all you want."

She rolled her eyes. They'd be all right, she'd just let him have the reins. "Then follow me, baby. I want you to show me your dark secret."

His eyebrows shot up and his eyes widened as if she'd slapped him instead of inviting him to drop his trousers. Then it dawned on her, his secret, he hadn't told her yet. She'd meant his cock when she spoke. Kicking herself in the ass for wrecking the moment, she pulled him down to her lips and kissed him with enough heat to make him forget his name. With an expert's ease, she slipped her tongue inside his mouth.

He returned her every move with as much passion.

They shuffled to the bedroom in each other's arms. At the door she pulled away. "Make yourself comfy. I'll be right back." She retreated to his bathroom and yanked off the dress. Under it she wore a matching set of black strapless bra and panties. She plumped the girls up and pulled the edges of her underwear to show a little more ass. Reaching for her heels she hesitated. He mentioned he liked them, so she left them on.

Candle-lit shadows filled the bedroom when she returned. The blankets sat in a pile on the floor, only a white sheet and pillows remained on the bed. Her breath caught when she saw Eric. He lay on his back with arms behind his head, wearing nothing but his suntan. Light played along the lines of his muscles, making them more defined.

Nothing would please her more than to touch and massage every inch of his long legs and torso. She'd seen her fair share of buff bodies and knew the difference between beach muscles and working muscles. This was a body of a fighter, sleek and lean, ready to snap into action. Odd, how an image of a predator came to mind when she looked at her gentle, loving boyfriend.

"Are you going to stand there all night?" He grinned at her.

"Let me enjoy the moment. I've never seen you completely naked in this kind of light before." She strolled to the dresser and lifted the wrapped present, then brought it to the bed.

Eric rolled to his side and leaned on an elbow to sit up. "What's this?"

"The present I told you about." She sat on the edge of the mattress. Offering him the gift made her a little queasy. What if he didn't like it? She could stand on a stage without any clothes in front of a bunch of strangers and not feel a bit insecure, but one selfless act made her squirm.

He chuckled. "When you said you had a present for me at the house, I thought you meant... sex."

"That's *your* present to *me*, silly." She placed the gift in front of him. "Open it."

He did as she asked and stared at the book, then flipped the cover. "It's signed? You met her?" He touched the signature. "Wow, this is nice of you, Spice. You didn't have to though."

"I know, but I wanted to." She ran her fingers through his thick hair. "I like making you happy." Truth rang in her words, and she hoped he heard it. Everyone worried she'd break his heart, but no one considered how frail her own heart had become. She was about to lay her hopes and dreams on this man and if he failed her, she didn't think she'd survive. "I love you, Eric."

His head snapped up from examining the book. "What?" He set the gift onto the floor, then gathered her into his arms. "Really?" The question was softly asked.

She scooted closer to him so they sat touching, and nodded, afraid she'd say the wrong thing.

He buried his hands into her curls and drew her mouth to his. The demand of his lips as they consumed hers ignited the fire that had dwindled down to simmering coals. She didn't need to hear the words, he already told her with his actions.

The firm muscles under her hands flexed as he pulled her onto his lap. His hard, full cock pressed against her panties, and he rocked his hips.

She dug her nails into his shoulders. At this pace, they'd both come before he entered her. With all her willpower, she shoved away from his warm embrace and sat on his thighs. "Whoa, turn down the heat."

"I want you." He gripped her ass and tried to coax her back onto his cock.

"Trust me, I can't wait to have you too, but we don't get a second chance at a first time."

The words must have reached a part of his brain not focused on entering her pussy. He stopped dragging her over his body and took a deep breath. Then a small evil smile came to his mouth. He lay on his back and placed his hands behind his head. "Please, do with me as you will then."

Originally, she wanted to give him the reins and let him have her as he needed, but this could be better. He'd last longer and the experience would be mutually beneficial, a moment to remember.

Her eyes traced from his face to his chest, running along his abdomen to his thick, erect cock. It looked ready to explode. She could see it pulse with his heartbeat. If she indulged in what she wanted to do by stroking and sucking it, then it would be over. She wanted him to climax with her.

This night was for him.

He definitely didn't need any more foreplay but she did. Stretching herself along his body, she pulled one of his hands from behind his head and guided it inside her panties. She entwined her fingers with his and pinched her clit as he stroked her pussy.

The brush of his fingers at her entrance sent a shiver down her spine. He entered with a slow slide and she joined her finger with his, showing him what she needed.

A groan came from deep inside his chest. His free hand slipped into the cup of her bra and released her breast from its confines.

She leaned forward and offered her hard nub to his mouth. Elation electrified her as he sucked on it and sent a thrill of pleasure through her nipple. She ground on their entwined hands and pumped their fingers deeper inside.

"You're overdressed, Spice." He spoke in a voice thick with desire as he removed his hands from her body and tugged on her lingerie.

The withdrawal of his touch almost made her cry out. Her bra snapped open and slipped off her shoulders.

His hands cupped her breasts and squeezed before flipping her onto her back with a feral growl. She squeaked with surprise, but the passionate handling only stoked her sinful desires.

He yanked her panties down her legs and tossed them to the floor, then spread her thighs far apart as he pressed his mouth to her pussy.

She could have sworn she heard him whisper, "Mine," before plunging his tongue inside her, sucking with a carnivorous hunger. Writhing under the onslaught, she dug her hands into his hair and wrapped her legs over his shoulders to rest her stiletto heels on his back.

Pressure built between her legs, she moaned and raised her hips to open them more for him. He slipped a finger inside her as he stared up her body to meet her gaze. The candlelight reflected off the deep amber of his eyes. Untamed fever burned in his stare.

It excited her. She inhaled a shaky breath and released her hold on him.

With an unnatural grace he crawled up her body, lifted her hips to his, and thrust his cock into her pussy. Each succinct lunge went deeper and deeper inside.

She cried out, astounded at his fervor and loving every moment of it. Her quiet gentleman turned animal in bed. She'd died and gone to heaven.

His breaths came in gasps and sharp little growls joined in time with his thrusts until he arched his back and drove himself as deep as he could go. The heat of his seed filled her, and she cried out with him as the pressure exploded, replaced with ecstasy.

* * * *

Eric lay in their bed with Spice cradled in his arms and pressed against his body. In the dead of night, he couldn't sleep. How could he? A self-satisfied grin spread across his face. He really made her scream on their second round. She'd even left a few scratches on his back. Too bad they'd be healed by morning.

He never told her his secret. Guilt threaded itself around his heart. First thing tomorrow, he'd confess. She did say nothing would drive her away from him. God, he hoped she really meant those words.

He pulled her closer and buried his nose in her hair.

The scent soothed him and his beast. She smelled like his. No other way to describe it. So much for keeping his beast under wraps, it liked Spice as much as he did. For once, they agreed on something.

His cellphone went off. In the silence of the house, it made him jump as if struck by a cow prod.

Spice murmured in her sleep while he untangled himself from her body.

Scrambling in the dark, he found his trousers and answered before it woke her. "What!" He tried to whisper.

"Get dressed, we have a problem." With that, Daedalus hung up on him.

Chapter 6

“Have you told her about your being an Alpha of a werewolf pack yet? Lovers should know these kinds of things.” Daedalus shifted his black Jaguar XJ into second gear while Eric attached his seatbelt. The vehicle fit the vampire’s personality, big, sleek, and fast. Every time Eric rode in it, he realized how little he owned.

No car and no house; his job paid well, but he didn’t have the time to make a home. If Spice stayed maybe some of it could change. He sighed. “You know I slept with Spice?”

“Subtle is not your middle name, Alpha. You still carry her smell.” Daedalus stopped at a red light.

“I wish you wouldn’t call me that.” He fiddled with the belt across his chest. Maybe if he started calling Daedalus “Prime,” then he’d get the point on how annoying it was to hear his title repeatedly. “I guess the other Omegas must suspect since they deserted the house. What does Sugar think?” He should stop considering his friends as the only Omegas. They needed to be one pack.

“You haven’t spoken to her about shagging her sister?” The light turned green, and he continued toward the abandoned warehouses.

“No, she knows I carry a torch for her twin. It feels odd confiding in her while Spice might be doing the same.”

Daedalus laughed out loud. “So you’re going to use me instead.”

Eric crossed his arms over his chest, the muscles made it more difficult, he still wasn’t used to them. Twenty-five years as a skin-and-bones weakling was hard to forget. “Why not? I’m worried she might be using me.”

“For what? Sex?” His voice rose with incredulity. “Oh, wait a minute. You want her to fall in love with you?”

“Is that so unbelievable? I know you’re not crazy about her, but she’s a great person. Someone just needs to give her a chance. She’s vulnerable right now, and she might *think* she loves me but really I’ll turn out to be a crutch.”

Even though Sugar and Spice grew up in the same horrid home, it was Spice who took the brunt of the abuse to protect her little sister. The others didn’t know this, but he and Sugar did. He remembered finding Spice hiding in the apartment building’s shed one afternoon. She had a black eye and split lip. When he barged in she threatened him. *Don’t you go running off and telling Sugar, you little dweeb, or I’ll pound your ass.* Most would have been insulted, but he’d heard her parents yelling through the thin walls of the building and knew she’d pretended to be her twin. She’s taken that beating and others for Sugar. In an odd way, he thought of her as a hero.

Daedalus took the corner at a sharp angle, making Eric's seatbelt strain. "You're a dumbass, worrying about love when we're on our way to break up a room full of women who are competing to be your pack mate. You need to man-up and take care of your pack. Not moan about a human girl."

"I'm here, aren't I? We'll stop this nonsense tonight. I'm going to it make illegal to challenge without my permission."

"You can't do that, Eric. Haven't you read the copy of the Accords I gave you?" Silence filled the car as Daedalus sped to the on-ramp of the interstate. "Look, challenges are pertinent to werewolf packs. It sets the hierarchy. The strongest female should lead the pack at your side."

Eric looked out the window at the other cars as they passed them. No one would convince him to take a stranger as his mate. He needed to find a way out this mess. "You're telling me to back off from Spice."

"I'm telling you if you fall in love, it will only end with heartbreak. Arranged marriages still exist and they work...mostly. This is almost the same thing. You can agree to have lovers if you insist on keeping the girl."

He shook his head before facing Daedalus. "It's too late. She smells like mine. I can't touch another woman."

"Damn it, you being a romantic drives me nuts." Daedalus hit the steering wheel with the palm of his hand. They came up to their exit and cut across two lanes to catch it.

"Holy crap, you're going to have a wreck and kill me."

"It wouldn't be any worse of a disaster than what you're doing to your own life." He made a right turn and screeched into an industrial park, then slammed on his brake and popped the shift stick into neutral. At this time of the night the place was deserted. "You inherited a sick pack, and you need to nurse them back to health."

Anger boiled in Eric's gut. He undid his seatbelt so he could face the vampire-turned-asshole. "I didn't ask for this responsibility." Then he grabbed Daedalus by the shirt and shoved him against the car door. "I don't care about these Ayumu mongrels."

"They're Omegas now." Daedalus's cool, calm voice reached the reasoning part of Eric's brain. "If she means so much to you, then make her wolf. Take her as your mate."

The suggestion slapped him across the face. "I'd never turn anyone on purpose." He let go of his friend and sat back in his seat.

Daedalus straightened his shirt. "Why not? Ask her first, I'm not telling you to do it against her will."

"I-I..." Eric stared out the windshield at the buildings. "How do you tell someone you're a werewolf?" Sure, the law considered them legal citizens, just like vampires, but people didn't accept them. Where was the romance in turning into a hairy monster? He quirked an eyebrow at his companion. Or a bloodsucker. "This isn't about me, is it? You must have asked Sugar to become a vampire."

For a moment, Eric didn't think Daedalus would answer him but it made sense. The vampire sat still, like stone, as only the dead could.

"I did."

"And?" He couldn't guess Sugar's decision. A year ago she'd run from all of them, too freaked out by their differences. Now, they lived happily under one roof. She'd even joined them a few times on full moon celebrations in the forest to watch them change. Maybe Spice could accept him.

"She's thinking about it. To be honest, I thought she'd turn me down, so I'm happy she's at least giving the idea a chance." He shrugged. "If she says 'no' I'll be forced to watch her age and die, and I don't want to. Is it selfish of me?"

"Is it selfish of me to want to be with the woman I love and not take some stranger as a mate?" He gave a silent prayer of thanks for getting this opportunity to make his point to his thickheaded mentor. Daedalus was a true friend and had a lot of experience for them to fall back on, but he thought and lived like a warrior.

Eric was a lover.

"No, it's not. Point made, but I'm not the one you truly have to convince. There's a warehouse full of female werewolves duking it out as we speak. What are you going to do, Alpha?"

"Shit if I know. Let's go before someone gets seriously hurt."

Daedalus shifted the car back into motion and drove to the warehouse where Eric had killed Michael, the old Ayumu alpha. Forest surrounded the building as it tried to reclaim this abandoned area. It was ideal for the pack to use.

Eric hated the place. Not just because it held bad memories but it symbolized the way the pack lived their lives. Hidden and abandoned by humanity. Things needed to change and as alpha it became his responsibility.

Ten cars sat in the parking lot by the entrance. A low growl rumbled in his throat. Daedalus heard through the grapevine some of the females were forming challenge rounds tonight, but Eric hoped the rumor to be false. When he took control of the pack, he'd asked them for a year before he picked a mate. His one year anniversary passed a month ago. Since then, the women with ambition to lead next to him had been challenging each other to obtain dominance. The one who wins gets the prize. Him.

They parked next to the cars. "What next, Alpha?"

"If I break this challenge up, they'll start another one tomorrow. I'm getting tired of these games."

Daedalus leaned his seat back and placed his hands behind his head. "If you need me, holler. I'll come running."

To add to Eric's stress, over the last few weeks Daedalus had stopped being a physical presence at his side. *Time to cut the apron strings*, he'd said.

"Sure you will."

The vampire grinned and flashed his fangs.

Eric opened the car door and climbed out. He stretched since his six-foot frame felt cramped after being folded into the sports car. A faint cry of cheering came from the warehouse. He rolled his eyes. How was he going to deal with this?

He walked to the door and entered the building. Two werewolves fought inside a cacophonous ring of crazed women and snarling beasts. The larger of the fighters smashed her opponent to the ground, then pinned her with a clawed foot. She howled her win.

At least these fights weren't to the death.

After she gloated, the female beast looked in his direction. From her scent, he recognized her as Clair, the most dominant of the challengers so far. She changed back to her female form, her fur melted to smooth skin and her bones slid into place without a single pop. Her long brown hair fell to her hips but instead of using it to cover her nudity, she flung it over her shoulders. The others turned to stare at him.

Show no fear . I'm bigger and stronger than them. He swallowed. "Time to go home everyone. Fun's over." With a gesture of his arms to scatter, he approached the group. A few whimpered and crawled away but most stood their ground. They were competing to be the alpha female after all. "I said it's time to leave." He glared at each one.

Four others walked away, which left three facing him. Clair crossed her arms under her bare breasts. "If you won't choose a mate then the *Accords* state we're entitled to fight for it."

She used the *Accords* against him. The very thing he'd done to get Michael into the challenge ring. Most paranormal races still followed the general laws set down centuries ago. Vampires, merpeople, selkies, and other Were races, but the werewolf population had forgotten them. Eric suspected on purpose but couldn't figure out why. He brought the *Accords* back to the Ayumu—the Omegas, he needed to stop thinking of them as separate.

"I'm very aware of your rights, Clair, but I've found a potential mate. These challenges are over until I've courted her."

"You can't do that now! We gave you a year." Clair howled and changed back to beast form. It took strength and stamina to transform twice in a short period of time. Eric had no doubt who would win those challenges and didn't care for Clair one bit.

She and the other two females stalked toward him.

His beast roared and tore from his body. He was going to kick their disobedient, mangy asses.

Clair crouched low to the ground and stalked on all fours while her two companions circled him on either side. The woman on his right started to change into her beast form but couldn't complete the act. She crumpled to the ground in an exhausted heap.

He sighed at the sight. It was irresponsible of Clair to encourage acts of stupidity from her pack mates. A Were could die if caught in such a state. What kind of leader would she be? His pack would wither and die if she became their heart.

Without further contemplation, Eric pounced on the woman to his left, who remained in her human form. He threw her against the wall. Her head banged against the hard surface, and she fell to her knees. She was lucky he restrained his beast. It wanted her unconscious.

A snarl warned him of Clair's attack. He spun and caught her neck in his grip mid-leap. Her confident demeanor evaporated into a whine.

"Did you really think the three of you could take me on?" He sent his thought to her mind but could sense her beast had more control over her than it should. Disgusted, he tossed her toward the exit, then changed back to his human form. Naked, he faced her beast, crossed his arms over his chest, and glared at her. "Get out."

If she didn't fear him, she would have followed suit and changed back as well, but she stayed in her beast form. When she started to crawl away, he turned his back on her.

Big mistake.

The treacherous bitch lashed out and gouged his back with her claws. Not a fatal wound but it hurt him.

If he'd called for Daedalus's help it would make him look weak. With a growl born of frustration, he spun around to watch Clair run out the exit with her tail between her legs, abandoning her accomplices.

He turned to the woman slumped against the wall who rubbed the back of her head. "This is what you want in a leader?"

She didn't respond or meet his gaze, merely laid herself prone on the ground.

When Eric stumbled out of the warehouse, naked and injured, the vampire jumped out of the car and offered a shoulder to lean on. "You sure have a way with women. Remind me to never take any of your advice."

Eric chuckled.

Daedalus pulled a gym bag from the trunk of the car, opened it, and offered Eric his workout clothes.

"They stink."

"Don't be a wuss. Dawn's approaching, hurry and dress." He got into the driver's side and started the vehicle.

On the trip back, an overturned vehicle caused a traffic jam on the interstate. Daedalus shouted at the windshield. "Eleven hundred years old and I'm going to fry in the sun because humans can't drive."

"Leave the car with me and find a hiding spot until nightfall." Eric grimaced as he turned in his seat. He could feel the blood trickling down his back from Clair's claw marks.

Daedalus's pupils dilated as he stared at him. "You're bleeding quite a bit." He ran his tongue over a fang.

"Snap out of it, buddy. The cars are moving again."

His friend blinked and turned his attention back to the road.

They raced against time to get home and lost as they pulled up to the house.

Daedalus's exposed head burst into flames as he stepped out of the car and the first rays of sunlight peeked over the horizon. Shrill shrieks accompanied it.

Eric scooped his friend into his arms, not thinking of burns, and ran for the house. Kicking in the door, he found Sugar inside, the source of those screeches as she watched her lover burn from the living room window.

Chapter 7

The sound of the front door being kicked in and Sugar's distressed high-pitched voice startled Spice from a deep sleep. She jumped out of bed and reached to wake Eric only to find him already gone. Grabbing a dirty t-shirt and jeans from the floor, she got dressed while stumbling down the hall to investigate the noise.

Sugar's voice came from the basement and Spice ran by the front door, which hung from one hinge. Oh God, someone had broken in and was attacking her twin.

She glimpsed sunlight peaking over the horizon. Thin smoke wafted in the air and made her cough. What the fuck? "Sugar!"

Taking the stairs two at time, she ran past Sam and Tyler's empty bedrooms to the open door of Daedalus's man-cave. She saw Sugar ahead as she ran through the doorway following someone. If this was some sort of sex game she'd kick both their asses. Then the time dawned on her half-asleep brain, what was a vampire doing up during the day?

A smoke trail led to Daedalus's room, and anger boiled in her chest as she heard her little sister's sob. Someone had hurt *her* twin. She stomped the rest of the way into the room, then stopped in stunned silence.

Eric placed a limp Daedalus in his coffin and allowed Sugar to give him a quick kiss before closing the lid. "He'll be all right. We just got the timing wrong." He chuckled. "Maybe he'll have a tan after this."

Sugar smacked his arm. "It's not funny."

Crossing her arms over her chest, Spice fumed. "Can someone explain to me what the hell is going on?"

Her sister twisted around, tears stained her cheeks and soot smudged her nose. She wiped it on the sleeve of her housecoat. "The sunlight caught Daedalus on the way in the house. I freaked when I saw his head burst into flames." She glanced at the coffin. "He'll heal in his sleep. We just needed to get him inside."

"That explains the smoke." A flaming head? *Cool*. "Is it always this exciting around here?" The adrenaline still coursed in her bloodstream which made her shout the last question. Everything seemed under control. No one had broken in, Sugar appeared physically fine, and Eric was accounted for. She took a few deep breaths, and her heart rate slowed.

Blood drops on the floor led to the shiny black coffin. "Why is he bleeding?" She pointed to the trail.

"What?" Sugar spun around and reached for the lid, but Eric took her hands.

"It's from me." He glanced at Spice.

In three steps, she was at his side and examining his body. A large blood stain spread across the back of his shirt. She grabbed the bottom of it. "Off," she ordered as she pulled it over his head.

He groaned when he lifted his arms. Four deep lacerations crossed his back from the right shoulder to left hip, one next to the other.

"Oh my God, something attacked you!" She leaned in for a closer look. "I can't see in this light. You might need stitches."

"I'll be fine, Spice."

"My ass, you'll be fine. You probably got rabies from whatever clawed you. Up to the bathroom where I can see your wounds better." She smacked him on the bottom. "Now."

Sugar glanced at the coffin, then back at them.

"I'll take care of Eric. You can stay here if you want." Not like her twin could do anything for Daedalus, but if she needed to be close to the coffin for her own sanity, so be it.

Spice followed Eric up the stairs. Blood oozed from the jagged wounds in slow drips and seeped into his gray track pants. Not as much bleeding as she'd expect though.

In the bathroom, he stood in front of the large vanity over the sink and looked at his back. "It will heal, Spice. Don't worry about me."

Upon closer examination, she saw that some of the gouges went to muscle. Her stomach rolled over. "You need to see a doctor. We'll use Daedalus's car, it probably has blood all over it anyway."

Eric moaned. "He's going to kill me when he sees the passenger seat."

"Screw him." She opened the cabinets looking for disinfectant and bandages. The least she could do was clean the wounds and prevent infection from setting in. "What kind of dog attacked you anyway? A Rottweiler?"

She heard him shuffle his feet, then sit on the covered toilet. "It was a werewolf."

The bottle of peroxide slipped from her hands and she blinked while it tumbled to the floor. She heard the words, but it didn't want to register.

"Spice?"

She lifted her chin and stared into his brown eyes, then the adrenaline kicked in again. "Jesus H. Christ, Eric. Th-that's contagious, right? We need to get you to the hospital. Do they have a vaccine or something?" She gasped. "I better call nine-one-one." She spun around and ran out of the bathroom to the kitchen where a phone hung on the wall.

Things had been going too well. She *knew* it. A black cloud of bad luck followed her wherever she went, and now she'd passed it on to Eric.

In her frenzy to reach the phone, she didn't hear him follow her. As she picked up the receiver, he placed a finger on the button to disconnect the line before she dialed.

"Don't," he whispered. "I never told you my secret."

She slowly hung up the receiver. Her heart dropped and rolled with her stomach. Deep down inside she knew what he'd tell her.

“I won’t catch it, Spice. I am already a werewolf.”

Her knees weakened and she sank to the floor. “When did you plan on telling me?” His eyes, she’d seen them change color but let it go. It explained the changes that had occurred since the last time she’d seen him, not only the physical aspects but the more feral edge she glimpsed on occasion.

From the corner of her vision, she saw him wince as he crouched next to her. “Last night, this morning, as soon as I could get the courage.”

Turning her head to stare at him, she noticed how he braced himself as if waiting for a physical blow. His shaggy, long hair fell over his bent head like a veil. The strong line of his muscled shoulders sagged as he balanced himself on the balls of his feet and used one hand on the floor to steady his stance. His fingers lay splayed by her hip.

Did it matter?

Werewolves were considered legal citizens. Hell, Sugar shackled up with a vampire. Eric made her world a brighter, better place. No man had ever done that for her. This week they’d been together gave her more joy than any other time in her life. She brushed her fingers over his hand.

His head lifted, and he met her gaze. The pain etched on his face aged him. It wrung her heart like nothing ever had. She’d caused it, not his wounds, and she never wanted to see this expression again. Reaching out, she touched his chin and came to her knees to draw closer to him. “*What* you are doesn’t matter, only *who* you are does.”

Such simple words, yet it carried the heavy weight of how much he meant to her. He rewarded her with a huge smile. The one she loved. The one he’d given her when he first realized who she was. Comfort and warmth radiated from that smile.

It lifted her soul.

“You’re not going to leave me?” He sat next to her.

“Never.”

He wrapped her in his arms but grimaced with the fast movement.

“We should treat those wounds.”

“No, trust me. They’ll be healed by nightfall. Injuries don’t last long with werewolves. These haven’t healed yet because I got them in my human form, so they take a little more time. The ones I got as a beast are already gone.”

Beast? She swallowed, not sure if the dryness came from fear or an odd sense of curiosity. “What were you and Daedalus doing?”

“I was stopping a challenge, but they—”

“Challenge?”

“I-they-I.” He blew out a frustrated breath. “Maybe I should start at the beginning.”

She nodded. “Did you volunteer to become one?”

“No! Never. When I was in college I got attacked while walking across the campus. I don’t think whoever did it planned on my surviving. They tore me apart pretty much.”

“Why?”

It looked like he stared at a faraway place. “There’s something about the smell of fear that can be intoxicating. If you don’t restrain your beast, take control of it instead of the other way around, it can lead you down a dark path.” He sat in silence for a moment, then shivered with a deep sigh. “It left me to die. I awoke in the hospital with Sugar at my side. I lived with her as I recovered until the local werewolf pack, the Ayumu, took responsibility of me. I went to live with some of them.” He shook his head. “Some were no better than animals. Dominance is very important to pack hierarchy, and I didn’t understand that concept at the time.”

“How could you? You were dealing with a huge life change.” She stroked his hair as he leaned his head against hers.

“I can’t express how good it feels to tell you.” He kissed her forehead. “But there’s more.”

She snuggled to his chest and listened to the pounding of his heart. What a sight they’d be if someone were to walk in at this moment. Eric half naked with bleeding claw marks across his back with her dressed in dirty laundry sitting on his lap in the middle of the kitchen floor. She snorted.

Eric seemed to take it as a sign to continue. “I left the pack as soon as they deemed it safe. I couldn’t wait to get away from them. The apartment next to Sugar became vacant, and I took it. Your little sister was my rock during all this. She helped me find the others, Sam, Robert, Tyler and Katrina.”

“They’re werewolves too?” She sat up straighter in his lap and knocked his chin on her head.

He laughed while he rubbed it. “Yes.”

“Sugar’s the only human?”

“And you.” His grin was infectious. “But you need to let me finish.”

She listened as he told her how Daedalus came into their lives and the Omegas absorbed the larger pack of Ayumus.

“An alpha of a pack.”

“Trying to be. I don’t think I’m doing a very good job. They insist I need a mate. The old alpha, Michael, never took one, and they blame that for making them such a male dominant pack with little morals. The male alpha is the soul of the pack, but the female is the heart.”

“Mate? As in they want you to fuck someone else besides me?” She crossed her arms. “I’m not into sharing.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to. That’s what caused the fight tonight. Some of the females were conducting challenges for dominance at an abandoned warehouse we keep for such things. I stopped them. Then I announced I wanted courting rights since I found a potential mate. Three of them turned on me. I had to put them in their place, otherwise the males would view me as weak and start challenging me as well.”

“You want me as a mate? To become a werewolf?”

“No, no. I’d never ask anyone to do that. I’m still not sure what to do now, but this will give me some time to think and plan. Don’t worry, I’ll figure it out.” He ran his thumb along her cheek and heat flooded her body. “I just want us to be together.”

“You fought werewolves to be with me.” She grinned at him and winked. “I think I’m a little turned on.”

With a display of speed she’d never witnessed from him, he dumped her on the floor and crawled on top. His eyes faded to the golden amber she’d glimpsed before, but this time he didn’t try to hide it. “Then you don’t hate me?”

“I meant what I said last night. I’m here for keeps, babe.” She ran her fingers into his thick mane. “It’s nice to know you’re not perfect. Everyone should have a flaw.”

He laughed. “I’m far from perfect.”

“I don’t know. From here you’re looking pretty damn fine.” She pulled him down to her lips and slid her hands around to his back.

He flinched.

“Shit.”

“I’m okay, really.”

She laughed. “Go to bed. I’m going to make some breakfast. After I take a plate to Sugar, I’ll bring you one.”

“Naked. Serve it to me naked.”

She laughed. “Definitely not perfect.”

Chapter 8

Daedalus strolled into the living room, the tip of his right ear a little less pointy since his head caught on fire two days ago. Eric tried to hide his amusement behind Spice's wild, short curls. The vampire turned out to be sensitive about the small loss.

The memories of their crazy car ride home were still vivid. When Clair and her cronies jumped him in the warehouse, he freed his beast and kicked their mangy asses. The fact they thought he could be taken down so easily ate at him. He still needed to prove himself to his pack.

Behavior like Clair's needed to be stomped out of the pack. Dishonorable, untrustworthy, and disgraceful could be used to describe many of them, but over the last year he'd chased away the worst and nurtured the best. Now he needed to figure out how to unite the old pack with the new.

His first step sat in his arms. Beautiful lush curves pressed to his body. Spice may not be wolf and could never be the pack's heart but she owned his, and with her support he could accomplish anything.

Spice, forever her little sister's champion, came to her rescue when she heard the screams only to find they'd been keeping secrets from her.

Forced to reveal the truth, he couldn't believe his luck when she accepted everything without much question. Unlike her twin, who had run, needing time to come to terms with the paranormal, Spice knew what she wanted. Him.

He kissed the back of her neck as she rolled the dice. They played Monopoly tonight with everyone in the house, and she dominated.

"No distracting the master, honey." She waved him off.

Daedalus stopped by the table with a letter in his hand. "This was pinned to the front door. It has your name on it." He offered it to Eric.

"Somebody made a hole in my brand new wooden door with a pin?" Sugar rose from the floor by the gaming table and went to inspect the damage.

"It's just a door." Daedalus followed her.

Their chatter faded into the background as Eric looked at the envelope. His name was scrawled on the front in pen. He slid his finger under the edge and tore it open, then pulled out a folded piece of paper.

His breath caught in his chest as he read it.

Spice leaned closer and read it as well. "Can she do this?"

"No." He smacked the note with his hand, wishing it was Clair's head instead, and re-read it out loud.

Eric,

Did you think I wouldn't find out she's human? Accord law states a mate has to be of the same species. Courting time denied and challenges have continued until this evening.

I've won.

Keep the girl as a pet, I don't care, but I will rule at your side.

Clair

The paper crinkled as he crushed it in his hand. "Can't I get a break?" he shouted at no one in particular.

Sugar and Daedalus returned to the room, he quirked an eyebrow at Eric, never approving of outbursts from him. *Leaders must maintain a calm exterior at all times, to reassure his people, no matter how angry or frightened they might be inside.*

Offering the note to the vampire, Eric started to pace the room with slow, steady strides. How was he going to take care of that bitch?

"They didn't know Spice is human?" Sam asked as he rose from his seat next to Katrina. His eyes darted between Daedalus and him.

"Of course not, I wouldn't be able to stall them if they did." He glared at Sam and smelled his fear from across the room.

Sweat beaded on the smaller muscular werewolf's forehead as he edged around the table.

"What did you do, Sam? Why are you suddenly afraid?"

He stopped, his breathing a little heavier, and stood behind Tyler. "I-I didn't know, man. If someone would have told me I wouldn't have said anything."

"To who?" The question came out as snarl. For a moment, a red haze blinded him. He hadn't been this angry since his confrontation with Michael.

Sam fell to all fours and crawled to his Alpha's feet. "Last night, I met a girl at a pack party. You-you asked me to go to them to feel the pulse of the pack. She took me home, and we had a good time. Her questions sounded so innocent, like curiosity about her aloof Alpha."

Eric took a few deep breaths and blew some steam off. He didn't want to hurt Sam. His anger was at Clair. "She asked about my prospective mate?"

"She seemed excited about it. I couldn't help but brag and say what a great match you guys made. It never occurred to me you couldn't mate a human."

"Didn't you ever read the copy of the Accords that I gave to everyone in the pack?"

Sam stared at the floor and shook his head.

Each of the original Omegas pack was in the room. Eric turned and looked at them. Katrina pressed herself against Tyler, who didn't have anything funny to say for once. Robert sat on the floor with his arms crossed over his chest and glared at their groveling friend.

“Did any of you read it?” Eric tried not to sound disappointed.

“I have trouble with English, but Tyler read them to me. I admit to not understanding much of it though.” Katrina rested her head on her boyfriend’s shoulder.

He smoothed her long black hair with his hand. “Same here, dude. I grew up with English. It’s like Shakespeare wrote it or something.”

Eric sighed and rubbed his temples.

“Maybe I should get a modern translation of the Accords made,” Daedalus offered.

“We’ll figure this out, Eric. You’re not alone.” Robert’s declaration didn’t ease his worry.

Every week something new came up, and every week he had to find a solution for the problem. The burden of the pack would eventually break him. He needed help. He needed a mate.

Spice stayed quiet, sitting on the couch, the dice still clutched in her hand. He could almost hear the wheels turning in her head. It made him nervous. She’d want to do something, but Clair would tear her apart, literally.

“Game night is over. Get off the ground, Sam. We’ve got work to do.” He extended his hand to the smaller werewolf at his feet. Sam might not be able to keep his dick in his pants and could be careless, but he was loyal and true. Eric couldn’t buy those last two qualities in a person.

Sam took Eric’s hand and pulled himself to his feet. “Sorry,” he mumbled, then looked around Eric to Spice. “I’m a bonehead, if you haven’t figured it out yet.”

“I have,” she responded.

He cleared his throat and stared at his shuffling feet.

Eric glanced at her over his shoulder and winked. He didn’t want his girl to carry a grudge against Sam. If memory served him right, Spice could carry one with a vengeance. “I want the four of you to split up in two groups. Find the pack and see where they stand on Clair. I’m going to see if I can find and confront her myself.” He turned to Daedalus. “I’d like you to stay here and protect them.” He nodded to the twins.

The Ayumu had attacked his home after he won the challenge against Michael. It wouldn’t surprise him if Clair tried to kill Spice. Daedalus, a Nosferatu Prime, could easily take on whatever she planned.

“You also know the Accords better than any of us. Can you see if there’s a loophole out of this?”

The vampire shook his head. “We’ve been down that road. The Accords clearly state—”

Eric touched his shoulder. “Look again.”

“Too bad Spice’s not pack.”

Eric squeezed Daedalus’s shoulder when he spoke those words. He didn’t like the hint contained in them. Sometimes the vampire couldn’t stop from meddling.

“I’ll go over them now. Send someone to relieve me before dawn.” He left with Sugar in tow.

The Omegas got their jackets and left the house. Eric stood by the door as Spice wrapped a scarf around his neck.

She came to her tiptoes to give him a tender, short kiss. “You do what you have to do and deal with her, Eric.”

He took her face between his hands, not too surprised to hear such a comment from his fierce love. “I’m not killer, Spice.”

“She sounds conniving, selfish and untrustworthy. It will poison those around her. Only the strong survive, your pack deserves someone with the strength and conviction to kill for it. If you need to take a mate besides me, I can understand, but choose one with the right qualities. I’ve been a mistress before, I can be one again.”

He swallowed around the lump in his throat. Over his dead body.

Chapter 9

“Tyler’s right, this stuff is difficult to read. Legalese is hard enough in modern English let alone in ancient English.” Sugar passed Spice a copy of the Accords. If her smart sister couldn’t read this, then she wouldn’t be able to. She sighed and set it back on the table. *Piece of crap paper.*

Dawn arrived as they spent the night searching for a solution. Daedalus slept in his coffin, and Katrina crashed on the couch in the living room. The others were still out searching the city for Clair.

It drove Spice nuts to be so helpless. “I need to know more about werewolves. Do you have access to the internet?”

“Sure, there are computers in Robert and Eric’s office upstairs.” Spice had been there once or twice in the last two weeks but only at the doorway. “They’re password protected but I have them.” Sugar grabbed her sister’s hand and led her.

They huddled around one of the computers, side by side. “What do you want to know?”

“How to fight a werewolf.”

Sugar twisted in her seat. “Really? Have you ever seen a werewolf in its beast form? Watched them fight?”

“No, but I’m starting to think I don’t have a choice. Everything you and Daedalus told me last night points to one solution. I have to challenge Clair and beat her before she claims Eric. Let’s see if they have any weaknesses.”

“There is another solution.” Katrina’s accented voice startled both sisters. She stood in the doorway, her thin, narrow face solemn and her hands clasped in front of her.

“What?” They spoke in unison. Spice screwed her lips in annoyance. Twenty-five years and they still managed to sound like the Doublemint twins.

Katrina came into the room and sank onto Robert’s thinking couch. “I will challenge Clair on your behalf. If I win, I will be Eric’s mate in name only and represent you in the pack.”

Spice opened her mouth but nothing came out. She turned to Sugar, who looked just as speechless. What could she possibly say? Honesty always worked best when lost for words. “Uh... do think you can win?”

“Spice.” Sugar smacked her upper arm.

“Hey, she offered. I don’t mean any offense, Katrina, but you’re tiny. Is Clair small too?” Maybe they could make this work.

Katrina smiled. “My human size is irrelevant. What matters is how strong my beast form has become. I lived a long time as a werewolf in China before escaping to America. Over there one needs to learn to fight to live.”

Sugar leaned forward. “Really? How long have you been a werewolf?”

“Longer than your age.” Her smile turned secretive.

“You never told me any of this.” Sugar waved her hands, confusion drawing her brow down.

“Like you advised me, I built barriers between me and the past, then focused on my friends and future. If Clair takes over as the female Alpha our pack will wilt, not grow. My future begins to appear bleak.” She shrugged. “I don’t know if I can win. I haven’t fought a challenge in decades.”

“Decades?” they both said together. Spice glared at her little sister. “Stop that.”

Katrina giggled. “You two are so cute.”

Spice aimed her stare at Katrina. “This doesn’t sit well with me.” She left her chair and paced the room between the two computer desks. Her fingers caught in the tangles of her short curls as she ran them over her head. “Eric belongs to *me*. I should be the one fighting.” Daedalus’s words floated back to her memory. *Too bad she’s not wolf.*

Her heart skipped a beat. It would solve all their problems. Did she have the guts? She stopped her pacing and stared at her sister, who faced a similar problem, just not as urgent.

“What if I became a werewolf?”

Sugar got to her feet. “No, Eric would be furious. He never wanted this from you.”

“I know, but maybe it’s what I want. I came home to find a fresh start, and I found him. He’s everything I need and more than I deserve. The least I could do in return is become what he and the pack needs.” She shifted her gaze to Katrina. “Is it that much of a sacrifice?”

The petite woman didn’t answer. She fixed her stare on the floor.

Sugar shook her head. “It doesn’t matter, there’s not enough time to change you. Eric’s body took weeks to transform the first time. I doubt Clair will wait.”

“Sugar’s right, once the pack accepts her as Eric’s mate the only way you will be able to take your place by his side is a challenge to the death. We need to act now while the challenges are only to dominate.” Katrina still didn’t meet their mutual stares as she spoke. She fiddled with a button on her red sweater instead. “I know another way.”

“And...”

Katrina leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees, and faced them. “A human’s body needs time to assimilate the werewolf contaminant. It needs to be a certain—what is the word I need?” She looked at them as if searching for the answer in their faces. “Concentration, yes? When something gets strong like coffee?”

They both nodded.

“Once at the right level, it will trigger the first change on the full moon. It is where the myth came from. Eric took time to change because he fought it. He didn’t want to be werewolf. It’s different for those who choose the change.”

“Since I want to become one then I should be able to change sooner.” Spice grinned and hugged her sister. “This might work.”

“But first you need a high concentration of contaminant in your blood. I saw it happen in Beijing to a young prince, who needed to be changed quickly so he could inherit the pack from his deceased father. His choices were much as yours. If he waited for the natural change then he would have had to fight the new Alpha to regain the pack. If he became werewolf that night, then the challenges would only be to dominance. It is very dangerous what they did.”

“Wasn’t he born a werewolf?” Sugar asked. She came and sat next to Katrina to grasp her hand.

“No, none are. The world would be overrun with us.” She chuckled. “The placenta keeps the baby human. Once they reach maturity they can choose their own destiny.”

“So if I have ch-children they’ll be human.” Spice shook her ice cold hands, trying to get the blood to flow into them again. “What do we have to do?”

Katrina released Sugar’s hold on her hand and rose from her seat to face Spice, then smoothed the wrinkles from her black slacks. “I have to get a concentrated amount of Werewolf contaminant into your heart. If your body rejects it, you’ll die.”

She felt her eyes almost pop from their sockets. “You gotta’ *what*?”

“No!” The command in Sugar’s voice made them both spin in her direction. “I won’t allow that. We’ll let Katrina fight. Once she wins if you want to become werewolf the old fashion way, then go ahead.”

“If Katrina wins then I have to kill her to be Eric’s mate, Sugar.”

“Then stay human, be his mistress and Tyler could be Katrina’s lover.” She jerked her head and sighted on Katrina. “You did tell Tyler, right?”

“Of course not, he would never allow me to fight.”

“Great.” Spice crossed her arms and tapped her foot. Eric would be elated if they managed to find a solution to stay together. If she tried to become werewolf she could die. Tyler might kill her anyway if Katrina got hurt challenging Clair in her stead. What if Katrina didn’t win?

Clair would own Eric. The crunch of her teeth as they ground together snapped her out of her reverie.

She’d have to become a werewolf and fight Clair as an Alpha. Either way she’d have to face death. Sweat trickled down her back. She had more faith in the tiny oriental werewolf’s knowledge than in her own fighting skill. Her best chance at survival probably lay in Katrina’s hand. When she faced Clair as a beast they would fight for dominance, not death. If she lost, then she had no one to blame but herself.

She glanced at her little sister sitting on the couch, worry etched into her face. “Will you still love me if I became pack?” It was the only thing left that would stop her.

“Spicy, nothing could ever change how I feel. You’re my twin, a piece of me.” Tears trickled from her eyes.

“Then let’s do this. That stray humping bitch won’t get her claws into my man if I have anything to do with it.” She knew squat about werewolves and less about the Omegas but once she won this challenge they would be hers as well. “What do I have to do?” She rubbed her hands together and stared at Katrina.

“Fight to survive.” She removed her clothes and folded them into a neat pile on the couch. Naked, Katrina kissed Sugar on the forehead, who cried in silence with her legs drawn to her chest just like when they were little girls and their father yelled at them.

Spice was an expert at the art of surviving. Abusive parents, scum-sucking boyfriends, drugs, alcohol, none of them kept their hold on her. She fought back and won. This wouldn’t beat her either.

Silky black fur grew from Katrina’s skin. Her face elongated, bones cracked, and joints snapped as the tiny woman grew into a magnificent, huge bipedal beast.

Spice’s heart fled to hide in her shoes, and her courage followed.

The beast swung its head in her direction.

She stepped back but realized she had nowhere to run. It blocked the only exit from the room. She changed her mind. This wasn’t such a good plan. She opened her mouth to tell her to stop, but Katrina drew her thick muscled arm back and stabbed her long, sharp claws into Spice’s heart in one smooth motion.

Sugar’s ear-piercing scream filled the room so her sister couldn’t tell if she screamed as well. The pain spread across her chest and stole her breath as she coughed up a splatter of blood. She raised her chin to stare at the beast. It had Katrina’s eyes and sorrow poured from them. If she could speak, Spice knew she’d say *sorry*.

She wanted to tell her that everything would be all right, there was nothing to apologize for, but the room tilted and she grabbed onto Katrina’s furry arm. Her claws remained embedded in Spice’s body.

The beast guided her to the ground and shredded her shirt open with the other claws. She stared with tunneling vision as it leaned its muzzle close to her chest and tore her wound wider.

She cried out. It sounded weak even to her own ears. Blood pumped from her chest.

Katrina opened her mouth and drool oozed from her canines to mix in with the blood. A steady stream of the clear slime came from her mouth until it coated the wound and the bleeding stopped.

Concentratio n ? She pondered to herself as the darkness closed in. Katrina spoke of it. Maybe werewolf drool contained more contaminant.

“What the hell is going on here?” Spice recognized Tyler’s voice as he hollered. “Katrina, oh my God, what have you done?”

“She’s changing Spice.” Sugar’s tear-filled words answered him.

“Tyler, I know what I am doing.” Katrina must have returned to her human form to speak to him.

They sounded farther away. Spice wanted to shout, to tell them she was still there, but her vocal cords wouldn't work.

"You must keep Eric away from here. Take him on a wild goose chase if you have to. If she survives this wound and if I mixed in enough of my saliva with her heart's blood, she should change with the full moon tonight."

"That's a lot of *if's* Katrina," he shouted.

"I know."

Chapter 10

Spice cracked open an eyelid and peeked around. A computer desk faced her. She was in Eric's office on Robert's thinking couch. Someone had placed a pillow under her head and a blanket over her body.

How did she get here?

The last thing she recalled, they'd been playing Monopoly, she'd been winning, and the dice were in her hands. Daedalus gave Eric a letter.

Clair. The werewolf bitch wanted to steal Eric from her. With a swift kick of her legs, she flung the blanket off and sat up. Her feet landed on a sleeping Sugar who squeaked when stepped on.

"What are you doing on the floor?"

"What are you doing trying to leave?" Her little sister scrambled to her knees and proceeded to open Spice's shirt. A bandage covered the area over her heart.

She thought back to Katrina and the beast she'd grown into. Their plan. She touched the bloody bandage and expected to wince but no pain jarred her. Pulling on the edges, she gasped as she exposed healed new flesh. "How is that possible? I had a huge hole."

Sugar cupped her mouth with her hand and shouted, "Katrina, she's awake."

"How long have I been out?" She rotated her left shoulder and arm. Nothing hurt, this was a definite perk.

"All day. The sun's setting, and Daedalus should be awake soon."

"The sun has set, and Daedalus is already here." The vampire stormed into the room wearing a pair of black silk boxers. "What have you three brainless twits been doing? I could smell Spice's blood from my coffin."

Spice had never seen him undressed before. His skin, so pale it seemed almost translucent, covered hard, sculpted muscles over his chest, arms, and abdomen. Her sister sure had a keen eye for scrumptious male flesh. She met Sugar's gaze and gave her a mental high five.

Katrina made her way around the vampire, carrying a tray of food, which she set in front of Spice.

The smell made her stomach growl. She could discern the scent of beef and ham from the cheese and bread. Each little particle differed from the other. She passed her nose over the sandwich on the plate and inhaled deeply. Her mouth watered.

"Spice?" Sugar quirked an eyebrow at her. "Are you going to eat it or inhale it?"

She grinned. "Thank you, Katrina. I'm starved."

"That is normal." Katrina eased onto the couch next to her.

"Normal for what exactly?" Daedalus asked.

The sandwich called her name and she took a huge bite from it. Layers upon layers of meat assaulted her taste buds, and she growled in tune with her stomach as she tore into another bite.

"You might want to feed your sister more often." Daedalus stepped closer to the couch, his eyes narrowing as he observed her eating.

"Leave her be. We must deal with a greater hunger. Controlling it controls the beast within." Katrina offered her a drink. "Try not to choke though."

"Beast?" He gasped. "You made her a werewolf?" He examined her while she gobbled her food. "I must be getting old because I sense she's almost complete. How is this possible?"

Spice swallowed a half-chewed lump. "What does he mean *almost* complete?"

"You still need to make your first physical transformation." The tiny oriental woman swiveled to face the vampire. "I made Spice part of the pack this morning. It was a dangerous risk, but neither of us could figure a different solution."

"Thank you for not killing me, by the way," Spice mumbled around another bite of sandwich.

"Amazing, but how?" Daedalus crouched on the balls of his feet and watched her like a spectator at the zoo.

Spice narrowed her eyes at him, and a rumble came from her chest. It stopped short as her sandwich fell onto the plate and she looked down at her body. "What the hell?" Something inside of her shifted as if trying to get comfortable. "Katrina?" She didn't mind the note of panic in her voice, it was honest. What had she done?

She gave up her humanity for the man she loved.

When did Spice Monroe start making sacrifices?

She sighed. The day Eric spit water on her and set her soul at ease.

"Your beast responded to your emotions. It will take time for you to master these skills. You won't be allowed to be by yourself for the next few weeks."

"And you plan to set a novice werewolf against a dominant alpha?" Daedalus gaped at the three of them. "This should have been set in motion weeks ago. Not tonight."

"Some people were kept in the dark." Spice shoved the last of her meal in her mouth. He made a good point. She knew how to street fight but this took it to another level. Teeth and claw versus fist and feet, she pondered for moment and concluded maybe she could use it to her advantage. "Daedalus, if you're not on board with the project, then bail. I don't need anyone knocking my confidence right now. I'm more than capable of doing that on my own, thank you very much."

He studied her, then nodded. "I'm on board this crazy train."

She laughed and Sugar joined her. The skin under her sister's eyes looked bruised. A twinge of guilt ran through Spice. Did she ever once consider what she was putting her little sister through? She remembered her tears. Sugar had sat on this couch and watched her best friend stab her twin in the heart. After that Spice passed out but her sister stayed by her side and cared for her.

Gathering Sugar into a hug she whispered, "I love you." She was about to put her sister through hell again by trying to fight for Eric.

“Sister’s stick together.” Sugar patted her shoulder and they parted.

Spice glanced at Katrina. “What do I do now?”

“Is the moon out yet?”

Daedalus moved to the window. “I don’t see it.”

“Usually, we wait for the full moon. It helps draw out the beast.”

“Great, I get to add getting furry once a month as well as getting my—”

“Hey, hey, old-fashion vampire in the room. I don’t need to hear it.” Daedalus left the window and crossed the room to the door. “I’m going to get dressed.”

Sugar rose to follow him. “You need to feed.”

He stopped her. “You’re exhausted. I can wait. Sounds like tonight might provide some sport. I wouldn’t mind you washing my back though.”

They left Spice alone with Katrina. She twisted to face the small woman.

“We should discuss controlling your beast before you transform. Otherwise you will be seduced into allowing it to take over, to give up responsibility of your actions and ultimately part of your humanity. This happened to many of the Ayumu, some no better than beasts even in their human forms. We’ve cleared out those who didn’t wish to change, and taught better control to those who wanted to remain. But once you’ve crossed over that line it is almost impossible to regain those pieces of yourself.”

“So the moral of the story is don’t cross over to the dark side.”

Katrina leaned forward until their noses almost touched.

“No, it is not to let the beast get control. Ever.”

“You keep speaking like I have a creature living inside of me. Am I not the beast?”

“Yes, you are but the animalistic side of your nature will be more prevalent. Instinctual urges will want to dominate, but you need to be in charge of them.”

“Like what?”

“Hunger, territory, sex, and pack will affect you.”

Spice cleared her dry throat. “When you changed I could still see you in the beast’s eyes. How do you keep it under control?”

“I always stay in the forefront of its mind. Never succumbing to the lure of oblivion.”

“Oblivion? Why would you want that?”

“You have to remember, most werewolves did not choose this path. They were made against their will. The fact you volunteered for it will give you a greater advantage since you will have less inner turmoil and a purpose to your existence.” Katrina took her hands. “Let us do an exercise.”

She nodded. The noise in the shower, far below them in the basement, distracted her. Her new and improved hearing made it possible for her to hear that Sugar was doing more than just washing Daedalus’s back. She smirked until Katrina squeezed her hands.

“I want you to close your eyes and focus inward. Try to...introduce yourself.”

Crossing her legs, Spice tried to get comfortable. Meditation wasn't on the list of things she liked to do. She closed her eyes. How did someone look inward? Roll their eyes back? Her parents always told her to quiet her mind and stop thinking, but there was no "off" button so how did—

Something prowled in the darkness.

Her eyes sprung open. "Oh, crap."

"Don't be afraid. Remember it's part of you."

"It's a lot freakin' bigger than me." Her heart pitter-pattered at the thought of becoming that creature. *Arnold Schwarzenegger, watch out.* She took a deep breath. Nobody made her cringe without a fight. Did she always win? No, but boy did she try.

Closing her eyes, she tried to remember what she did to get past the guard dogs to escape her last place of "employment" in Vegas. She pulled out a piece of imaginary meat and set it in front of her. Not a moment later the beast appeared and sniffed at the offering, then swallowed it in one bite. Covered in pure white fur, it eyed her with her own emerald green eyes. "Cool." It approached and rubbed against her shoulder. She ran her fingers through its soft fur before it disappeared.

The phone rang.

Her eyes snapped open again. Katrina stood, then walked to the desk and answered it. "Where?" She nodded. "We'll be there soon. Stall them, Tyler." With a grim expression, Katrina considered her and hung up the phone. "It's time. I know you're not ready. It may still be best if I challenge Clair first."

Spice took a shaky breath. "No. It ends tonight."

Chapter 11

If Eric ever saved enough money, he'd buy this abandoned warehouse and tear it down. Empty and worn, it symbolized *his* pack. The Alpha was the soul of his werewolves, but this pack didn't reflect him. He sighed. They needed him to have a mate. She would be the heart, and then the real healing could begin.

His people, his pack.

He observed the large group as they gathered inside. Every lifestyle and race was represented in the mix of the people who mingled in front of him. They owned Chicago after all. Some chose to attend in their beast form, which he accepted. Not everyone wanted their human form to be known.

After searching throughout the night and day for Clair so that he could confront and deny her, he'd decided to draw her out instead. She wouldn't be able to resist the opportunity to try and claim him in front of everyone. If he succumbed to her, then they'd be mated in the eyes of the pack for life. His stomach rolled at the idea. It could never happen, not with Spice in his life, but the pack would remain damaged.

Raising his arm as he stood on a dais constructed for such meetings, the room became silent. All eyes turned his way. It used to make him nervous to speak publicly. Not anymore, practice made perfect, and boy did Daedalus make him practice. He recalled his advice each time he needed to make a speech. *A good leader must know how to sway his people to his way of thinking. Words are power.*

"My people," he cried out. "My pack, some concerns have been burning in my mind. The foremost is the way I keep thinking of *us*." He rested his hands on his hips as he took a relaxed stance on the stage. "I don't know if any of you do this, but I keep thinking of this pack as divided. There's the original Ayumu, the Omegas..." He gestured to his friends standing on the dais with him, except Katrina who should be arriving soon. "And those who recently joined us in the past year."

Most in the group nodded their heads.

"This is wrong. We should be united. A family, that's what a pack is. When one of us falls down, we lift and support them. Do we fall upon them and rip out their throats? Are we Jackals?"

A few cries of "no" answered him. Good, at least someone listened.

"Of course not, our souls have been mixed with those of wolves. Strong predators who hunt together. Honesty, honor, and heart describe the wolf. Do they describe our pack?"

A low mumble developed among his people. It was about time he made them think.

Pacing the length of the dais, he waited a moment. "No, they don't. Some may say those aren't the true traits of a wolf, that wolves in their essence are vicious animals."

Someone shouted, "Yeah." He made note of who and would deal with them personally later.

“These characteristics come from us.” He gestured to himself. “The human part of the equation. Every time you allow your beast to consume your humanity, the less control you have over it.”

Silence blanketed the room, and his people watched him expectantly.

“As your Alpha I have decided we will no longer be known as the Omegas or as the Ayumu. We’re one pack.” He shouted the last sentence and paused as he waited for the echo of his voice to subside. “We’re Vasi. Guardians of the streets of Chicago, our territory.”

Cheers began before he finished his announcement. It warmed his heart to hear them support his idea. For a year, he wracked his brain trying to figure out what to do with his pack. Spice inspired the protector in him and brought forth this concept. They would defend the city instead of prey on it.

As the noise died down someone clapped loud three times. “Very nice, Alpha.” Clair slinked through the crowd. She wore a short red dress and a pair of matching stilettos. Her long, brown hair swayed as she made her way to the dais. “As your mate, I agree with the name change. Omegas made us sound weak, but giving us a role in what...crime fighting? I don’t think this would be a profitable venture.”

“I don’t accept you as my mate, Clair.” He crossed his arms. If he didn’t make a stand against her now, in front of everyone, then she’d slowly gain power.

“Your year is up, and I’ve won the challenges. You need a dominant female at your side. One of your own kind, not some floozy.”

His lips parted to respond, but the side door burst open and the most beautiful creature he’d ever laid eyes on stalked into the warehouse.

* * * *

Spice had listened to Eric’s speech through the crack of the door with Katrina. She crouched on the ground so they could both watch. Pride swelled inside of her with each point he made to the pack.

“Eric has so much potential,” Daedalus commented from behind them.

They swiveled around and found him with Sugar under his protective arm.

Spice leapt to her feet. “It’s not safe for you here. You should have stayed at home.”

“And miss your shining moment? Never. Daedalus will stay with me. This isn’t my first werewolf challenge.” She grinned but wrapped her arms around the vampire’s waist and squeezed.

He met Spice’s glare and a silent agreement was made. Sugar’s safety would be his priority.

“I’m glad you’re here.” The new werewolf nodded to them.

The cheering started and Katrina tugged on her elbow. “Clair is hiding in the back. I think she’s waiting for the right moment to make her claim. You’d better transform.”

Muscles in her shoulders tensed at the idea. *Easier said than done.* “What do I do?”

“Strip and stand in the moonlight, then do the exercise I showed you at the house. Meet your beast and invite her out.”

Turning her back on the vampire, she undressed. She could hear Sugar order Daedalus to not look.

“Not like I haven’t seen it before. You’re identical.”

“That’s my point.” She heard a thump.

Once naked, Spice shut her eyes and called to her beast. It perched on the edge of her awareness but wouldn’t approach. She ground her teeth and urged it to take her, but it yawned. “Katrina, it’s mocking me.”

She heard Sugar snort and whisper to her bloodsucking boyfriend, “Sounds just like Spice.”

The sound of a person clapping silenced them.

Katrina peeked back in the door’s crack. “It’s Clair. She’s trying to claim Eric.”

A snarl escaped Spice, and when she closed her eyes her beast raced to her. The collision snapped her bones and popped her joints. She tried to scream but only a howl came out.

Looking at the gravel on the ground, she raised her head. The light from the street cast her shadow onto the building. *Holy cow, I’m huge. All right!*

Without a second thought, she smashed through the door and stalked across the floor. Clair’s scent filled her nose, and the beast declared her prey. Baring teeth, she paced through the crowd toward the bitch.

Clair spun around. “Who the fuck are you?” Without removing her dress, she transformed into her brown furred beast. Shredded red material fluttered at her feet and the shoes exploded.

Like I can answer, you stupid bitch.

“You can, whore.”

She blinked. The voice came within her mind, not via her ears. Katrina could have mentioned that ability. *“Get away from my mate. I’m here to challenge you.”*

“Not until you tell me who you are.”

“Spice, his girlfriend.” She glanced at Eric, waiting for his reaction at her announcement.

“We can only hear each other in beast form. You’re new to this and you expect to win a challenge against me, cub?” She thwacked an open paw across Spice’s muzzle and raked her claws over her eyes.

Reflex saved her sight as she ducked her chin and rolled. The crazy woman had tried to blind her. If Clair wanted to play dirty, Spice would bring the mud. She sprang onto Clair’s back and bit into her neck. Fur rubbed against her tongue and tickled her nose. She shook her head like she’d seen dogs do when playing with toys and hoped to rattle Clair’s brain.

“Is that all you got?” The mangy cur flipped onto her back and crushed Spice under her weight, then twisted out of her grasp.

The crowd made noise but it wasn’t clear for whom. They didn’t know anything about her. Heck, Eric didn’t know the white werewolf was his girlfriend and soon to be mate.

Clair’s teeth reached for her throat.

With a swing of her large paw, Spice batted the Jezebel away. *“Are you trying to kill me?”*

"Never, but accidents do happen." She lunged and pinned Spice to the floor, then kept snapping her jaw.

Only with luck did Spice keep her from biting anything vital, but Clair landed a few painful bites around Spice's collarbone. A growl built deep in her chest. The beast wanted to hurt the one who dared try to take their mate away. It knew how to move on an instinctual level, and Spice understood how to hit.

In one of the moments where she jerked away from Clair's maw, she glimpsed Eric. Concern painted his face.

She did what Katrina warned against, she allowed the beast a little control, a partnership for just this one time. It leaped forward mentally and pried Clair from her. With supernatural speed the white wolf pierced her back claws into the opposition's abdomen and tossed her with a kick.

The brown werewolf flew off and landed on the hard concrete floor, but the pale beast didn't let her have a reprieve. Bite after bite landed on Clair's head. Blood splattered from lacerations and made the beast thirst for more. Spice tried to restrain it and needed all her strength to keep it from killing. *Don't do it.*

With a roar, Spice regained control. She grabbed Clair, lifted her high and drove her headfirst into the solid ground. Staggering back, she prepared for another assault, but the brown beast's body remained limp. It melted back into its human form.

Eric ran past her and checked Clair's pulse. "She's knocked out." He pointed to two pack members. "Take her away." Then he turned to the white werewolf. "Who are you?"

Her beast retreated, and she felt herself reform into a human. She watched Eric's eyes widen as he saw who he addressed. Elation filled her.

"Spice, what have you done?"

"I've won the challenge." Standing naked in front of strangers didn't bother her. If anything it made her more empowered. This was her pack, and they needed her. The man before her would be her mate, and they needed each other.

Her future became apparent and it made her happy.

She smiled and let the things she felt shine through. Her beast preened inside and urged her to finish. Facing the pack, she shouted, "I lay claim on Eric as my mate. Does anyone dare challenge me?"

Stunned silence answered her.

Traversing the small space between her and Eric, Spice ran her fingers through his hair and yanked a handful to expose his neck.

He gasped when she jerked his head back but didn't resist as she bent her mouth to his skin and bit down until she tasted blood. Katrina had told her how to mark her mate. She licked the wound and left some saliva so it would leave a faint scar. Her mark on his skin was a better symbol than any wedding ring. She let him go.

"You did this for me?" His hands rested on her shoulders.

“For us. If I stayed human I’d only be sharing half your life, and I want it all.”

His gaze wandered from her face to her breasts, then back up with more heat in his expression. “My white wolf.” He pulled her into his arms and lifted her to his mouth, then returned the bite. It burned, and she held back a yelp but couldn’t stop the reflexive squirming in his arms. Her thigh brushed along the hard bulge in his pants, and her pussy moistened in response.

The light touch of his tongue on the mark cooled the pain. “I want you,” he whispered against her skin.

She wrapped her legs around his hips and ground against him. He felt so solid and strong as his hands cupped her bare ass. “Take me.”

“Here?” It made her glad to hear excitement in his voice and not horror. They were a sick pack and needed reassurance they’d be taken care of by their alphas, who loved one another and didn’t mind expressing it.

The pack seemed to settle down for the show. No one called out or jeered. She glanced over his shoulder. Most gathered in clusters to watch, some already started to enjoy themselves with fellow pack mates.

A brush of lips on her nipple startled her and elicited a moan. Eric suckled on her, drawing harder and harder on her flesh. His fingers dug into her as he pressed his confined length against her pussy.

He shuffled to the dais and laid her upon it.

She undid his pants as he removed his shirt. The jeans slid to the floor, and she shoved her hands into his boxers to stroke his hard cock. It pulsed.

Nothing seemed more right at the moment. He removed his underwear and kicked his legs free. Twisting her around to face the dais, he ran his cock between her ass cheeks while caressing the tender flesh.

She glanced at him over her shoulder and saw his eyes fade to amber just before he leaned her forward to gain access to her entrance.

His gaze locked with hers. “Your eyes, they’ve changed to blue.”

The white wolf came to the surface, sensing her mate close and wanting him as much as she did. She pressed her rear against him in invitation.

It was all Eric needed, and he shoved his cock all the way into her, growling the word, “Mine.”

It didn’t hurt since she was already wet, but the sudden sensation and pleasure made her groan out loud.

He snarled as he began to pump in a quickening rhythm. His hand reached around and fondled her breast.

The delicate touch, such a contrast to the brutal, yet intoxicating thrusting from behind, sent chills down her spine which made her clench even tighter around him.

“Oh, yes... Spice...oh, yes.” He released her nipple and grabbed her hips. His strokes grew desperate.

The cry of her name on his lips made her curl her back to give him better access to her core. Aching ecstasy grew inside, she couldn't hold it back anymore. Her orgasm shook her body as she met him thrust for thrust until his cries of release joined hers.

He collapsed next to her and gathered her to his sweat-soaked chest. “I love you, Spice.”

She drew his face to hers and placed a gentle kiss on his lips. “I love you too.”

A massive cheer filled the warehouse as hope filled a united pack. From this day forward, their pack would be strong and proud, they would be Vasi.

About Annie Nicholas

http://www.lyricalpress.com/annie_nicholas

Annie Nicholas writes paranormal with a twist. Her stories are off the beaten path as she creates romantic, suspenseful, attention grabbing fiction.

She hibernates in the rural, green mountains of Vermont, where she dreams of different worlds and conflicts to pit her characters against.

Mother, daughter, wife are some of the hats she happily wears while trudging over the hills and dales of her adopted state. The four seasons an inspiration and a muse.

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