



Three days of hell, in charge  
and already out of antacids

# The Beta

Annie Nicholas

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The Vanguards Book Three



## Back Cover Copy

*Three days of hell, in charge, and running out of antacids.*

As the pack's Beta, Robert needs to watch over the Vasi werewolf pack for a few days. He hates the responsibility, but his job is to dissolve any problems while his Alpha honeymoon. Nevertheless, trouble comes to town and her name is Esther. She's beguiling, beautiful and picks his pocket. Although Robert doesn't trust her, he still wants to possess her.

Esther arrived in Chicago with the intention of slaying a vampire named Daedalus. While trailing her quarry, she encounters Robert who unhinges her world. He doesn't know her trade, and she doesn't know his connection to the vampire. Disturbed by her attraction to this unusual werewolf, she can't decide which prey to hunt—the one who's stolen her heart or the one who'll fill her bank account.

Content Warning: Hot graphic werewolf sex, growing body parts, and one pissed off Nosferatu vampire.

## Highlight

“This is my place.” Esther lied with the ease of an expert.

“All right.” Robert shoved his hands deeper in his front pockets as if not sure what to do with them. “It was nice meeting you, Esther.” His gaze flickered to hers, and he cleared his throat. “Would you like to have dinner sometime?”

The innocent anxiety of his request melted her to the spot. In her profession the men she got acquainted with were arrogant sons of bitches. “I’d like that.” The answer came out before she knew it, but at least it rung with honesty. Something she didn’t hear often enough.

He grinned, relief awash on his expression, and took out his cellphone. “Give me your number and I’ll call you to make plans.”

Torn, her heart fluttered in a small flight of frenzy. She wanted to see him again, but knew she could never offer what he deserved. Smiling, she gave him a fake number. Better for him if he never got to know her, but she wanted one more thing before they parted. She stepped closer. “Won’t you kiss me goodbye?”

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## Dedication

*To my husband and sons for their patience when I disappear into my writing cave.*

## Acknowledgements

To Rebecca Royce and Hailey Edwards for brainstorming with me and holding my hand when I needed it.



# Chapter 1

Competent leadership went hand-in-hand with confidence. Tonight, Robert couldn't find either. The alpha of the Vasi werewolf pack had left Chicago on his honeymoon, which placed Robert, his beta, in charge.

The weight of responsibility crushed him like a big, fat elephant. His goal to keep the pack intact seemed jinxed.

He folded his eyeglasses and placed them in a case, tucking it in his back pocket. If they broke it wouldn't be a big deal. They weren't prescription anymore. Becoming a werewolf cured his eyesight. He just wore them out of habit, like a safety blanket.

Before knocking on the apartment door, he took a deep, shaky breath, and prayed it wouldn't be his last. Burgundy paint cracked and flaked when his knuckles rapped the door.

"What?" a deep voice barked from the other side.

He hated this part of his duties to the pack. It blowed. Why Eric, his alpha, insisted on making him beta was beyond him. Even Daedalus, their vampire trainer, appeared doubtful about the decision. Robert agreed with him. He sucked at confrontation, didn't like people in general, and preferred computer linguistics over speaking.

Glaring at the door, he restrained his beast who didn't like being pushed into this situation anymore than he did. "Let me in, Talon." A thug's name suited him.

The door cracked open, and a set of dark brown eyes challenged him through a veil of unwashed hair. Talon's beast had too much control over him. Shifters like him gave their race a bad name. "What's the problem, Bob?"

A growl rumbled in Robert's chest at the jibe. "It's Robert, or do you want me to start addressing you by your given name, Timothy?"

Pulling the door open, Talon loomed over him. "You can address me any way you want, asshole, but I ain't responsible for my actions."

This type of macho posturing was why Robert left his old pack before finding the Vasi. He didn't have time to waste on pieces of shit like Talon and couldn't care less about werewolf hierarchy. "Actually, that's why I'm here."

Robert's teeth elongated just enough to indicate deadly intent, then he jumped the brute, going straight for the idiot's jugular. He bit Talon's flesh hard, not piercing the skin, and they landed on the apartment's carpeted floor. The scent of stale cigarette smoke permeated from its fibers, making Robert want to gag.

Preferring to remain mostly in his human form, Robert had learned, with a ton of painful practice, to allow his beast's development in concentrated parts of his body instead of all at once. Now he could grow his claws, teeth, or other things at will. It took concentration and exquisite control to accomplish it. As far as he knew, no other Vasi had this ability.

"So." He let the word roll in his chest as he spoke around a mouthful of Talon's flesh.

His prey didn't struggle, which surprised the hell out of him. He expected...more. But despite the lack of resistance, the smell of fury poured from Talon.

Placing a knee on the thug's sternum, Robert pressed his one hundred and sixty pound frame on him as he allowed his claws to grow and rest under Talon's eye. He released his grip on the idiot's throat. "Rumors are racing through the pack. I thought I'd get the truth from the source."

Three more days, he only had to keep things together for three more freaking days before Eric and Spice got home.

When Eric won the alpha's challenge two years ago, Robert thought their problems were over, but they'd only just begun. Thank God, Spice showed up at their doorstep and mated with Eric. The pack needed a strong alpha couple to pull it out of the depravity it had fallen into with the old alpha.

Chicago's werewolves had grown and matured under their nurturing guidance. They'd chased off most of the troublemakers and supported the weak, but a few issues remained, like Talon.

"Some concerned pack mates called me." Sweat trickled down Robert's back as he ground his knee into Talon's chest. The jerk might be playing nice now, but Robert expected to leave here with quite a few bruises if not worse. "They're worried you're going to try something stupid."

Movement in the window across the room caught Robert's attention.

Daedalus stood outside on the ledge of the third-story apartment. He gave Robert a thumbs-up then leaned against the frame as if watching a show.

Talon shifted under Robert's weight and threw him off balance. Landing on his side, he rolled with the force and got to his feet. Years of training with Daedalus, the Nosferatu vampire warrior who surveyed the fight, kicked in.

As his opponent charged, Robert's heart raced with anticipation. When Talon's hands reached for him, he twisted out of his way, grabbed his adversary's head and used the momentum to slam it in the wall.

The plaster cracked and dented inward. Sliding to the floor, Talon lay still.

Robert stumbled back, waiting for retaliation, but his assailant didn't move. Talon's chest rose as Robert flipped him over, but his eyes remained rolled back in his head. Robert blinked. Talon was unconscious? He'd won that easily?

Yes! He pumped his arm in victory. All those antacids he'd popped this afternoon were for nothing. His first unofficial challenge, and he ruled.

A tap at the window reminded him of his audience. Heat rose in his cheeks, and he dragged his gaze to his vampire trainer.



Daedalus gestured to open the window, so he scurried over to comply.

“Did you kill him?”

“No.” Robert glanced at Talon’s supine body.

“You’re within your rights. Your pack mates heard him say he was going to attack you.” Daedalus squeezed his six-foot frame through the opening into the apartment. “What a dump.”

“Killing won’t solve my problems. I need to earn the pack’s respect so no one will think to challenge me again, but not this way. Not to mention, killing is illegal.” The idea of murder turned his stomach, though it appealed to his beast. Good thing he always maintained strict control and not the other way around. Too bad he couldn’t say the same for Talon.

Some pack members held poor dominance over their inner beast, losing too much of their humanity as the animal took more and more control of their personality. Some poor souls lost it all and became nothing but animals needing to be put down. The old alpha allowed terrible things like this to happen, which had left the pack a mess.

“In some instances killing is necessary.” Daedalus crossed the room, baring his fangs as he crouched next to Talon.

Robert’s soul shriveled at the sight. “Don’t.” Could he fight the vampire and defend his helpless, yet stupid, pack mate? Sure, but he’d lose.

Daedalus was a gazillion-year-old vampire warrior who thought tossing him around the practice mat taught good fighting skills. After the way Robert just defeated Talon maybe the vampire really knew how to teach. Didn’t mean Robert could defeat his instructor.

Daedalus paused. “It’s a mistake to let him live. He’ll come after you again. Creatures like Talon always do.”

Hanging his head, Robert played with the temptation. Only three more days, then these kinds of decisions went back on his alpha’s shoulders. “Let him be. I’ll deal with it if he didn’t learn his lesson tonight.”

Disappointment passed over Daedalus’s face. Robert hoped it was because of a missed meal and not his decision. He and the vampire were far from best friends, but he did respect the bastard’s opinion.

“Let’s go,” Robert said. “I’m sure there’s still time to find a nice juicy evil-doer before sunrise for you to snack on.” He left the apartment and heard Daedalus close the door as he followed.

“You did well tonight.” Daedalus slapped his back so hard it rattled his molars. “There’s an alpha in you. I knew it. We’ll schedule more sparing time together. Hone your reflexes and increase the speed of your attacks.” The Nosferatu eyed Robert’s shoulders and arms. “Maybe add some bulk with more weight training.”

“I don’t think—”

Daedalus waved and ran ahead. “I’ll see you tomorrow night, buddy.”

“—that’s necessary.” God, they were buddies now? He sighed. Crap and a truckload of it. He had no desire to get molded into an alpha. He wasn’t thrilled at being the Vasi’s beta. More sparring time meant more bruises.

He descended the stairs out of Talon’s apartment building and exited onto the sidewalk. At this time of the night, traffic trickled one car at a time. The neighborhood left much to be desired, and he had parked his car blocks from here to avoid any theft. Muggers were welcomed to try him though. If he had to, he’d bust out his beast in an emergency.

Paranormal races were legal citizens, after all, but they still needed to be discreet. Occasionally a pitchfork-and-torch-wielding mob formed, so the Vasi tried to stay low-key. They didn’t need bad publicity.

\* \* \* \*

Esther Longfellow watched her mark climb through the third-story window of the red brick apartment building across the street. The vampire had used his fingertips placed in the mortar joints to scale the wall. He did it with such ease, her stomach went queasy. After sitting on the sill for a few minutes, Daedalus crawled inside. His friend had entered the building by the fucking door earlier. What were they doing?

She’d hunted vampires for years, but never from the Nosferatu clan. No one ever had until this contract came out. The payment offered too many zeros to ignore. But she wasn’t stupid enough to sign anything until she’d assessed the situation. The dead couldn’t spend money.

Her heart had seized earlier when out of nowhere the vampire had passed her on the street after she’d parked her car. What a lucky break. She’d followed him and his friend from a distance to a decrepit apartment building, then ducked into the alley across the street.

The Nosferatu didn’t even try to hide his origins. Bald head, exposed pointed ears curling on each side, and a flash of fang as he’d spoken to the thin young man next to him. It had to be Daedalus. She doubted Chicago could house more than one Nosferatu vampire. They were very territorial.

Crouching in the alley across from the apartments, she aimed her digital camera and zoomed the night vision on the vampire as he exited through the front door. No doubt about it, he matched the pictures in her file. Why did he go in through a window and out the door? What evil deed was he up to?

She took a deep, calming breath, squashing her excitement. Now wasn’t the time to attack. Her bag of tricks sat in the trunk of her car and she couldn’t focus after being mentally shaken from the lucky encounter. She respected what she hunted. A fan of the paranormal, her secret obsession made her a formidable slayer. She didn’t want them all destroyed, only the troublemakers, the evil-doers, the murderers.

And Daedalus liked to kill.

This takedown would need a lot of preparation, two of them being a quick getaway and a comfortable hole to hide in for the remainder of her life. The Nosferatu clan was a vengeful lot.

If she succeeded in slaying a Prime from this clan, they'd write her name in the slayer's history book. She grinned. Legally, what she did for a living was considered murder but in her book she served justice.

Watching him disappear down the block, she leaned against the alley wall. She couldn't risk following him anymore. Lacking information, she needed to do some more research like finding out where he rested during the day. She hadn't become successful by being unprepared. The challenge of this contract got her blood pumping.

Another man exited the building not long after. He wore a rumpled button-down, short-sleeved shirt tucked into loose jeans. His mouse brown hair cried for a cut and a comb.

He pushed his glasses up his nose and bent to tie his running shoes.

Recognizing him as the person who had accompanied Daedalus earlier, Esther heard opportunity knocking. He didn't look like a threat being thin and weak. She crossed the street and approached him from behind. "Excuse me. Do you have the time?"

Glancing over his shoulder, his gaze traveled along her bare legs, to her knee length loose skirt, and finally met her stare. Her breath caught in her throat. The irises of his eyes reflected a non-existent light and shone pale amber. He blinked and it vanished, must have been the glasses that gave such a strange effect.

He rose in a single fluid motion that set her predator alarm off. Checking his cellphone, he gave her a shy smile. "It's ten after two." He scanned the area around them. "This is a dangerous part of town, ma'am. You shouldn't walk around alone. Trouble is going to find you."

Or maybe find him. She eyed his wiry arms and changed her assessment of him. Lean, tight muscles slid under his skin as he moved. He wasn't weak, more like a cross between a martial artist and a geek.

"Are you offering to walk me home?" Flashing him her most flirtatious smile, she toyed with a piece of her hair.

He swallowed. "S-sure." Shuffling to her side, he fell in next to her, eyes darting around them.

Men were so easy to manipulate, but this one actually wanted to protect her. So cute, she could have pinched him. Trying to be discreet, she took quick peeks at him. Nice strong chin and straight nose. Maybe a hint of freckles? It was difficult to tell in the dark.

"I'm Esther." She held out her hand. What the hell prompted her to use her real name?

Wrapping a firm hand around hers, he shook it. "I'm Robert."

His touch sent tingles along her arm. The name seemed too mature for him. "What are you doing out so late, Rob?" How did such a polite man like him get involved with a Nosferatu? She checked his neck for bites and didn't see anything, but there were more places on the body to feed from besides the neck. It would be a shame if he was a blood slave.

"Robert is fine. I was checking on a...friend." He stuffed his hands in his pockets. "And you, Esther?"

She laughed. "I'm up to no good." And she winked at him.

A rosy blush surfaced on his cheeks as he stumbled.

Something in this man attracted the devil inside of her. She entangled her arm around his and leaned into his hard body. The strength hidden under the geeky exterior sent a pleasant shiver through her body. Not all things were as they appeared. She hated surprises but not this one. If this was an act then he deserved an Emmy. She glanced at him, pleased that she needed to arch her neck back slightly to meet his sharp green gaze. She liked them tall, and she prayed he was the real deal.

God, what was she doing? She assessed him like a potential lover instead of a possible avenue to get her mark. *Stupid, focus.* Once Daedalus was out of the picture she'd come back for Rob if she still wanted him. Until then...she stopped in front of a duplex. "This is my place." She lied with the ease of an expert.

"All right." He shoved his hands deeper in his front pockets as if not sure what to do with them. "It was nice meeting you, Esther." His gaze flickered to hers, and he cleared his throat. "Would you like to have dinner sometime?"

The innocent anxiety of his request melted her to the spot. In her profession the men she got acquainted with were arrogant sons of bitches. "I'd like that." The answer came out before she knew it, but at least it rung with honesty. Something she didn't hear often enough.

He grinned, relief awash on his expression, and took out his cellphone. "Give me your number and I'll call you to make plans."

Torn, her heart fluttered in a small flight of frenzy. She wanted to see him again, but knew she could never offer what he deserved. Smiling, she gave him a fake number. Better for him if he never got to know her, but she wanted one more thing before they parted. She stepped closer. "Won't you kiss me goodbye?"

Returning his phone to his pocket, Rob ran his hands along her arms as he bent forward. The light, chaste brush of lips on hers sparked a craving for more.

As he withdrew, she followed and threw her arms around his neck, closing the distance between their bodies.

His shoulders tensed, but she didn't release him as she licked his bottom lip, asking to enter. He opened his mouth, getting braver when she moaned and pressed harder against him. Strong arms engulfed her, fingers threading through her hair, as Rob bent into her body.

She wished she could say she didn't enjoy it, but the fire behind his kiss almost had her ready to pull him into a dark corner and undo those loose jeans of his. Oh, how she'd make him beg to never stop. Running her hands down his back, she took slow pleasure in the lean power under his clothes. Every defined muscle traced a delicious image in her mind. Arousal bloomed between her thighs. She continued down until she grabbed his ass.

This time the moan that tore from her throat came involuntarily. Damn, she wanted him, bad, but she did what she had to and finished the kiss by softly nipping his delectable bottom lip.

His eyes widened, and he touched the spot where she'd bitten him.

“Too much?”

He raised an eyebrow. “I liked it. I’m just surprised that I did.”

Waving with her right hand, she tucked the left one behind her back. “Goodbye, Rob. I’ll talk with you soon.”

He grinned and strutted down the block, turning at the corner.

Releasing the breath she held, she examined the content of her hand. A worn brown leather wallet the size of her palm with the info she needed from Rob to find her mark.

## Chapter 2

The building blocked Robert's view of Esther as he turned the corner. His car wasn't in this direction, but he didn't want her to witness his jump and heel click. The werewolf blood running in his veins enhanced the excited leap, making it higher than a human's. He bent his knees to absorb the impact of landing. Tonight, he'd kicked ass and kissed a dark-haired beauty. Her smell still lingered on his hands with the memory of how her thick, mahogany hair felt curled around his fingers.

He couldn't believe his ears when she asked him for the time. Tall, she had long legs with a nice curve to her hips and breasts, intelligent blue eyes and a personality playful enough to draw him out his shell. She'd taken control of the conversation, no hesitation in asking him to accompany her home or in kissing him. He loved smart, confident women but one had never liked him back.

Grinning like a fool, he jogged to his car, burning off the extra energy her kiss produced. He'd wanted to do so much more with her, like push her against the wall so she could wrap her legs around his hips and allow him to grind against her core. Maybe tomorrow night, he'd get what he fantasized.

Approaching the car, he pulled out the keys. The gas gage was on empty on his way here. He needed to fill the tank, but he couldn't recall how much cash he'd brought with him. After working for banks and credit card companies for the last few years, he never liked using either, not trusting the system. His right back pocket, where he usually placed his wallet, was empty. Checking the left pocket, his heart sank into his gut as it turned out empty as well. He patted the front ones and only found his cell. Maybe he'd dropped it while wrestling with Talon?

Deep down inside, he knew the truth. Esther.

He was such a fool. Beautiful women didn't ask geeks like him for a kiss. Grinding his teeth, he pictured her laughing at him as she flipped through his wallet, counting what little cash he carried.

The hole in his gut grew wider. Crap, he didn't have anything to buy gas and no way to get home but his own two feet. The last thing he wanted to do was call Daedalus or anyone from the pack for a lift. He'd never hear the end of it.

Respect was something you earned, and how would he ever obtain any if he fell for obvious scams?

Clenching his fists, Robert turned around and marched back to where he'd left Esther. His beast stretched inside him, frustrated that he wouldn't release it. Control over one's inner monster sounded easy, but the struggle became an hourly routine. Shifters dealt with this all the time, day

or night, in sickness or in health. The first rule of the Vasi pack was human dominance over animal instinct, because once the beast started calling the shots the shifter began to forget right versus wrong and listened to the laws of the jungle instead.

Robert crouched by the spot where Esther had stood as she'd kissed him. Sometimes animal instincts came in handy. Her scent left a trail. He wanted his wallet back, and his pride.

Creeping into the nearby alley, he undressed, folded his clothes into a neat pile, and hid them behind a trash can. Naked, he called to his beast and allowed the full change. Pain built in his body as his limbs grew and bone molded into new shapes. He used to scream or howl as he transformed, but after three years of making the shift, he'd learned how to absorb the discomfort. It only took a few seconds, then he saw the world through his beast's eyes.

As a powerful, efficient killing machine he needed restraint. He took a deep breath, taking in the surrounding scents, then shook to settle his fur. Bi-pedal, he stood over six feet tall, but the elongated arms and increased flexibility meant he could run on all four when needed, topping speeds of forty miles an hour on a flat stretch.

Esther didn't stand a chance.

Licking his muzzle, he bent low to inhale her delicious scent, not surprised to find it led away from the duplex she claimed was her home. He followed her heady smell farther up the street where she'd crossed and entered another alley. The muscles in his back bunched, wanting to spring into action, to run howling into the night, sending fear in all who dared cross his path. He stopped in the alley and forced a calm over his beast. Nothing good would come from rampaging through this neighborhood. They needed to focus, take their time, and find their prey.

Fury at how the female had manipulated him boiled in his stomach. A growl rose in his throat as he stalked along the narrow alley. Filthy water lay in scattered puddles, and the faint scent of urine almost masked Esther's trail. He swung his head back and forth in a slow arc, not wanting to miss it.

The alley opened to a quiet street, not far from where he'd met Daedalus. No one should be around to witness a werewolf out for a stroll this late at night. He hoped. Even as a legal citizen, his size and form still freaked people out. Dead was dead when lynched by an illegal mob. Prosecution needed evidence, witnesses, and a compassionate jury to convict for murder. Those things tended to disappear when paranormal beings were the victims. Better to keep a low profile.

Scrambling over the cement, he raced along the sidewalk from shadow to shadow, just like Daedalus taught him. His heart pounded as her scent grew stronger, fresher. Around the corner, he spotted her not fifty yards away, wallet in hand as she rifled through his stuff.

The snarl escaped him before he could control the beast.

\* \* \* \*

The address on Rob's driver's license was located in a wealthier part of the city, according to the GPS app on her phone. Esther saved it and rubbed her chest. For some reason, it felt hollow.



The wallet contained very little—some cash, ID, and an ATM card. No credit cards, gym memberships, business cards. Hell, it looked like her wallet, except her ID was fake. She gasped. Could his be? Who *was* Robert McKay?

Someone who lived in a rich area should have more. Nothing about Rob fit her expectations. Investigating him interested her far more than her ticket-to-wealth Nosferatu.

A snarl from the pits of hell tore through the night air. Her heart leaped straight into her throat. She dived toward the building, rolling to get momentum, and sprung onto her feet.

Approaching from the end of the street was a huge, dark werewolf. Amber eyes glowed as it stalked closer.

She shoved Rob's wallet in her bra and palmed the thirty-eight special from her waistband. Some believed that women should carry small caliber handguns like a twenty-two or even a thirty-two, but that shit wouldn't stop a two hundred pound man, let alone a vampire or shifter. Just piss them off enough to want to take their time tearing you limb from limb. So a large caliber gun was a necessity in her profession. Her easy-to-conceal gun packed power.

Standing with her legs braced apart, she aimed. "Don't try it, fucker. This ain't no pop toy."

It didn't listen, just kept pacing forward. Her breaths became ragged. Stupid idiot probably lost control of his beast and now she'd have to wound him. She squeezed off a warning shot next to his clawed foot. She didn't kill for free.

The werewolf leaped from the ricochet of cement, rebounding off the building next to him with his feet, and sprung forward with incredible agility. This wasn't the run-of-the-mill shifter out of control, he was a trained warrior.

*Shit!*

She twisted and ran, knees pumping to her chest with every ounce of speed she could gather while wearing heels. People would be amazed at how fast a terrified woman could move on stilettos. She'd had enough practice to be a gold medalist. Killing werewolves was easy, it was the not getting scratched or bitten part that made her run like a coward. She didn't stand a chance at hand-to-hand combat with the thing, let alone outracing it. Her only chance lay with her car and her gun.

If that monster scratched her, then she'd be joining the pack. She didn't play well with others. The irony of a slayer turned monster wasn't lost on her. Actually, it happened more often than not, but she owned a special bullet to take care of herself if that ever occurred, and she'd take her destroyer on that last journey as well.

Heavy panting drew nearer as it closed the distance between them. She should have shot it dead when she had him in her sights. Jumping onto the hood of her silver gray sedan, Esther slid across it and landed on her feet. She swung around, aiming her thirty-eight special at her assailant's chest, but nothing followed her.

She choked on her fear. Where'd it go? Crouching low behind the car, she kept the gun ready, scanning the area. Nothing. How could something that big vanish?

The thumping of her heart drowned out her hearing. She tried to take a deep breath, to find the calm void she escaped to while hunting monsters, but damn it, she was the prey this time. A chill ran down her spine.

Taking one hand off her weapon, she reached in her pocket for her car keys. She tugged at them, but they snagged on something. She yanked and yanked, but it wouldn't budge. Her stomach cramped as the street remained quiet, almost as if it held its breath.

She glanced at the tangle of loose threads wrapped around the key ring and gave it another yank, but it only tightened the knot.

Hot breath blew on the back of her neck. She jumped in a lithe motion, landing on her feet, and spun around with her gun ready.

The creature plucked the thirty-eight special from her hands before she could pull the trigger. He discarded it over his shoulder like it was a toy. Towering two feet above her head, he glared with his iridescent amber eyes. His shoulders spanned at least twice her width.

"You are one big mother fucker," she whispered, awe apparent in her voice.

He bared his teeth and lunged.

She pressed against the car as her body froze, then pried her eyes open when the end didn't come.

The werewolf melted before her eyes as it transformed back to his human form. His fur shrank into pale white skin covering wiry muscles that slid back into place. The color of his irises darkened until she gazed into a set of sharp green eyes.

"You!" She placed her hands on Rob's bare chest and tried to shove.

He didn't budge an inch.

Rob was a werewolf? It took a moment for her thoughts to collect into something coherent, then she realized he was naked. Her prior imagination didn't do his body justice. Fine sculpted muscles covered his torso, arms, and legs. She stared—no, she might as well be honest—she gawked.

His cock swelled under her observation.

She swallowed around a hard lump in her throat.

"You have something I want." Rob placed a finger under her chin and dragged her gaze back to his face. He had something she wanted too.

With his hands, he patted her body. He yanked her car keys out of her pocket, tearing the tangle of threads, and dropped them to the ground. A growl rumbled deep in his chest. He spun her around, pressing her to the car.

Wetness pooled between her thighs. She wanted him to take her. Now. She didn't care if the whole neighborhood watched.

He used his hip against her lower back to pin her as he continued to search for his wallet.

Pickpocketing the thing was the best decision she'd ever made. She squirmed under his hips until she felt his erect cock against her ass and leaned into it. Hearing his sharp intake of breath drove her devilish side crazy. She rubbed against him, inviting more than a little pat and tickle.

Rob propped his forehead against her hair. "Esther, what are you doing?"

"What do you think?" She rested her body along his. "I never would have guessed in a million years that you were a shifter."

His hand slid over her abdomen. "Where's my wallet?"

"In my bra."

"Of course it is." He sighed and held out his hand. "Can you give it to me?"

Still a gentleman. She knew he wanted her, and she offered herself on a freaking silver platter. The men she knew would have torn off her panties and been balls deep inside of her by now. "Come and get it."

His grip on her tightened as he ground his cock against her. Slowly, he slipped his hand down her V-neck shirt. "Which side?"

She laughed, it sounded deep and sultry. "Guess."

Going deeper, he cupped her left breast inside her bra, taking his time to search.

Her nipples hardened at the brush of his hand. She arched her back, craving more.

"Nothing here." He switched hands and searched her right cup. "A-ha." He pulled out his belonging then quickly returned his hand inside her bra. He pinched her nipple and rolled it between his fingers until she cried out. Then he retreated from her. "You're beautiful, Esther, but I don't bed women I can't trust."

She clung to the car and caught her breath.

As Rob strolled away from her he changed back to his beast form. She'd never watched the transformation before. The fluid way he changed and grew must have hurt like hell, but he didn't utter a sound, just kept walking with his wallet in hand.

"Rob?"

The werewolf glanced over his shoulder.

"I'd let you tie me up if that would make you feel safer."

## Chapter 3

Esther dozed with one eye open. All afternoon she sat in her car, parked a few houses from Rob's, and watched nothing happen. As the place stayed quiet her thoughts drifted to neutral ground.

Or at least, they tried to. Rob left her in a bad way last night. Her vibrator finished the job, but she didn't get the kind of satisfaction he could have provided. What the hell was going on? A man never drew this kind of attention from her, she didn't believe in lust at first sight, but Rob proved her wrong. He wasn't a man though, but a full-blown werewolf, a warrior werewolf.

Fanning herself with her hand, she cracked open the car window. She should have dragged him into the alley when she'd kissed him. They would both be happier, and maybe she would have had a dinner date tonight instead of being crammed in her sedan with the remains of Taco Hell on her passenger seat.

She sat in front of his beautiful brownstone with a lovely granite staircase, hoping to follow Rob to Daedalus's lair. That's how she explained this stakeout slash stalker thing to herself for the hundredth time. *Focus on the Nosferatu, not the hottie werewolf.*

A pretty blonde walked by her car, wavy hair hung past her shoulders, heels clicking on the pavement as she hurried in the evening's fading light. If Esther had curves like that Rob would never have walked away.

The blonde climbed the steps to Rob's home.

No fucking way. Esther's heart took a nosedive as she sat up in her seat, clutching the steering wheel as if it were the edge of a cliff. Double-crossing bastard made a pass at her when he already had a nice piece of ass at home. The door to the house opened, and a gorgeous Asian woman with silky black hair past her waist stepped out. They exchanged a few words before continuing in opposite directions.

Esther checked her GPS. The address was correct. Could she have saved it wrong? She watched the Asian woman climb into a car, imaging Rob caressing her slim body as he'd done to her last night. She had the right place. Rob had a harem, and he'd played her like a finely tuned instrument with his geeky, innocent act. She knew he'd been too good to be true.

Her mind raced over all the painful things she would inflict on him once she caught his mangy werewolf ass. Contract or not, this trip just became personal.

\* \* \* \*

Twisting in his bed, Robert tossed the sheet off. He dragged his fingers through his hair and didn't need to look to know his cock tented his boxers. All afternoon he'd tried to sleep, but Esther kept intruding on his dreams.

Glaring at the bulge, he palmed it as he recalled the way her soft breast fit in his hand. Stroking his cock, he pictured her arching her back at his touch and releasing a little moan. She'd offered to be tied as he deserted her last night. A drop of dew spilled from his tip. He imagined her strapped to his bed, oiled, and really pissed off. His breaths quickened as he watched her writhe in his mind. He curled onto his side, pumping hard as he pictured climbing between her thighs and thrusting deep inside her wet pussy. In hot jets, he came into his sheets and moaned her name.

He rolled onto his back and stared at the ceiling. How pathetic, he jacked off to a woman he'd turned down. She didn't react like he'd expected when he found her with his wallet. Most women would have run screaming. She'd gotten intense and pulled out a gun, then shot at him.

What shocked him the most was the desire in her gaze as she assessed his body with a possessive eye. Her fear scent had faded and the smell of her arousal took over. She couldn't fake that. He turned her on, and that fact set him on fire. Grinning, Robert rose from his bed and pulled the sheets off, tossing them in the laundry basket.

All things considering, he'd had an excellent night. Maybe next time he'd get to keep the girl. Esther was beautiful on the outside, but her deceitful nature left him cold. How could he trust a woman like that? His gaze passed over his wallet. She hadn't taken anything from it.

Not like she had enough time to spend what little he carried. Still, she gave it back easy enough. He turned on the shower and stepped into the stinging spray.

The beast wanted a mate, or maybe he should say *to mate*. Every day, like clockwork, he woke to a hard-on. The other Vasi males in the house had admitted to similar problems, but they had access to release.

Eric had Spice, Tyler was with Katrina, and Sam took anyone willing to keep his bed warm. Robert needed a female in his life, someone to hang out with and give him direction. The pickings in the pack were slim though. Those who interested him were already taken, and getting involved with a human could be tricky. When did he confess to being a werewolf? On the first date?

After rinsing the soap from his body, he towel dried, dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, then put his glasses on. Too bad shifters didn't have an online dating service. Pack politics would make that difficult though. Alphas were territorial about females, they wouldn't let anyone stroll into their area and take one. Even Eric, who Robert considered pretty sane for an alpha, wouldn't let that happen.

Racing down the steps, he almost trampled Katrina as she crossed his path at the bottom of the staircase. She was on her way to the front door. "Oops, sorry." He smiled at her. "Didn't see you coming."

She straightened his glasses and returned his smile. "I heard you did a good job with Talon last night. Have a fun evening." She wore a black dress and heels with her hair loose down her back. Her outfit accentuated her Asian beauty.

"Date with Tyler tonight?"

“Yes, I am meeting him downtown for dinner.” She paused at the door. “Do you want to come?”

He shook his head. “I’ve got plans.” Lying was better than being a third wheel. He’d almost had a dinner date. Retreating to the kitchen before his pack mate asked any questions, Robert tossed a bagel in the toaster while he listened to the front door open and close. The click of heels in the hallway made him glance out the kitchen entrance. “Sugar, you’re home late.”

The petite blonde set her purse on the counter.

Sugar owned the brownstone they all lived in, the original Omegas pack—Eric, Tyler, Sam, Katrina, and himself—paid her rent. They’d been neighbors at first in an apartment complex. Then they started having troubles with the old pack of Chicago, the Ayumu. That was when they hired Daedalus, a badass Nosferatu vampire, to teach them how to fight. He and Sugar had fallen crazy in love. When Eric defeated the old alpha of the Ayumu, the Omegas absorbed them. Then Eric changed their name to Vasi, which meant Vanguard in the old language.

“I missed my bus. Is Daedalus awake yet?” Sugar straightened her skirt.

“I haven’t seen him, but I’ve only been awake a few minutes myself.”

Her smile turned sad as she examined his face. “You look exhausted. Don’t let him work you so hard, Robert.”

The *him* she referred to was the pack’s Nosferatu vampire warrior and her true love. “He’s only doing what’s best for us. Don’t worry, I can take it.” He slathered the bagel with peanut butter and poured a tall glass of milk.

Once Daedalus was ready they’d go running before hitting the all night gym. Yay.

“He told me you refused to kill Talon.”

Rob nodded while chewing on his meal.

“I’m glad. He wouldn’t agree with me—”

“Damn right, I don’t agree.” Daedalus stormed into the kitchen and blocked the entrance with his six-foot-two frame and crossed his arms over his chest. “Sugar, we discussed you placing ideas in their heads. I can’t have the boys hesitating on the field of battle.”

She confronted him with her five foot nothing, barely a hundred and ten pound body. “Field of battle? This is Chicago in the twenty-first century.”

If Rob had someone to place a bet with he’d put his money on Sugar winning. The little librarian had grown a backbone in the last year.

“Babe, Dark Ages or not, the pack needs warriors to protect their territory.”

“From what? They’ve chased off all the scum. The Vasi are coming together as one. No more factions. This should be a time of peace and you’re acting like—like—”

“Something bad is about to happen. Don’t talk military strategy with me. If I wanted to take over this city, now would be the time I’d strike. The pack is happy and their guard is down. Not to mention the alpha is out of the city.”

Rob's appetite vanished. He set his bagel back on the plate and drank the rest of his milk to wash down the bite stuck in his throat. Daedalus was the life of the party.

The vampire glared at him. "Taking Talon out of the picture last night would have sent a strong message to anyone listening."

Rob swallowed. "He didn't really do anything that merited his death."

"He challenged you. *You*." Daedalus poked him in the chest with a finger. "The beta of the pack. You're just as important as an alpha. Eric is the strength, he gathers the fold, but the beta, Robert, is the guiding hand."

"I know, I know. We've had this conversation already. I still don't see why anyone needs to die."

"I agree." Sugar took Robert's hand.

Fury flashed in Daedalus's eyes as he stared at their touch.

Rob released his hold on Sugar as if burned.

She didn't notice any of it, or at least she pretended not to as she continued to confront Daedalus. "I hate it when you kill."

"Killing is in my nature. Vampires aren't related to the Easter Bunny, Sugar."

"And this is what you want me to become? A murderer?"

If Rob could have fit in the cupboard by his feet, he would have crawled into it like he did when he was a kid and his parents fought. Trapped in a corner, they forced him to witness their on-going disagreements. Daedalus didn't want to watch Sugar grow old and die. Turning her into a vampire would prevent that, but the thought of it terrified Sugar.

*Ain't love grand?* And he wanted this?

"Is that how you see me? I don't always kill to feed."

She gasped and covered her throat with her hand. "I thought you stopped feeding on others period."

Like a fish out of water, the Nosferatu gaped. "I—I—"

"Who else have you been using? I haven't noticed as many bite marks on the boys." Sugar glanced at Rob's neck. He hated when it was his turn to feed the vampire, but he'd done it to prevent this kind of fight. "He doesn't even have an old mark on him."

"The boys are tired of me feeding from them. I can't keep forcing them, Sugar. It's like rape."

She cringed. "I didn't know." The color from her cheeks faded. "Then who?"

Daedalus wouldn't look at her.

"He's been using the scum off the street. Rapists, thieves, and drug dealers, the criminals police haven't caught yet." Rob couldn't stand watching them be angry. His whole childhood he'd witnessed his parents tear at each other. Sugar and Daedalus deserved better. They fought the odds trying to be together. "He's doing the city a service."

A tear spilled from her eye. "You kill them like that Ayumu asshole who tried to hurt me?"



Not the best example that Robert would have chosen. Sugar hadn't seen Daedalus shred that beast in the woods the night Eric won the alpha challenge, but she heard it from the parking lot and the event almost drove her away from all of them forever.

The vampire rolled his massive shoulders before leaning forward to face Sugar with his fangs bared. "Yes, I'm a murderer. It's what I've always been." He pushed past her and grabbed his black leather coat off the hook by the back sliding glass door, then left.

Sugar ran to the door and stared at the night. "He's gone. Shit, I keep screwing things up, Robert."

He'd never heard her swear before. "He'll be back. Let him cool off."

"How long have you known he's been feeding off others?" She pressed her forehead against the glass.

"A while." Feeling two inches tall, he placed his hands on her shoulders. "Sugar, you've been through this before. You can't expect him to change. He's been a vampire for centuries."

"But it's okay for everyone to expect me to change for him?" She touched his hand and squeezed. "I know you guys don't understand why I won't become a vampire. I'm not stupid, Robert. How would I feed?"

"You can use us or at least me. It's not the feeding part the wigs me out. It's the guy-on-guy thing that makes me uncomfortable."

She chuckled. "Daedalus could barely contain himself when I touched your hand. He'd rip your throat out if I fed on you."

"Good point. There's Katrina and Spice. We'll figure out a way."

"I'm tired and I don't... Killing is just wrong." She turned around and hugged him. "I'm glad you kept him from killing Talon last night. I don't know what to do."

He hugged her back. Two more days before Eric and Spice got back. He needed to keep the pack and their household together *two more days*. "Don't do anything. Let me talk to Daedalus." He pushed away to make eye contact with her. "I promise, things will work out. Okay?"

She nodded and wiped a tear from her eye.

His cellphone rang. It sat on the entrance table where he'd dropped it last night. He needed to answer, all pack members knew to call him this week and not to bother Eric.

Sugar gestured for him to go.

The caller ID showed it came from a Vasi member. Crap. He should have stayed in bed.

"Hello?" Listening to his pack mate, he watched Sugar make a cup of tea, then curl up on the couch with a well-worn paperback book. "I'll be there as soon as I can." He closed the connection.

All bad things came in threes. First Sugar and Daedalus's argument, now Talon was stirring up trouble at a bar on the other side of town. Someone in the pack tried to intervene, but got his ass beat for the effort. Robert would have to deal with Talon again. What would be the third issue?

He shoved his phone and car keys in his pockets. Two more days. At least he didn't have to work out tonight since Daedalus pulled a *Houdini*.

“I have to go, Sugar. Are you going to be okay?”

She glanced at him with a brave smile. “Sure.”

His heart wrung for her, so he ran to the basement and barged into Sam’s bedroom.

The short werewolf was pulling a muscle shirt over his overly developed torso. “Don’t you know how to knock? I could have had a guest in here.”

“Doesn’t matter. I need to go take care of a problem.”

“Is this problem named Talon?”

Robert nodded.

“Need some back-up?”

His stomach clenched at the thought of having to face Talon alone. “Probably, but I need you to stay home with Sugar instead.”

Sam came to attention at the mention of their token human female. “What’s wrong with her? Is she sick?”

“Big fight with Daedalus. Just keep her company until I can straighten things out.”

His buddy nodded. “Sure, but keep in touch. Tyler and I are available. You don’t need to take care of everything by yourself.”

“Eric does.”

“Bullshit, he turns to you whenever something needs to be done.” Sam clapped him on the shoulder and left the room taking the stairs two at a time. “Sugar, get your sweater. I need someone to take me to the movies.”

Robert followed the noise upstairs where his two friends discussed recent movie releases and exited out the front door.

## Chapter 4

Rap music thumped loud enough to rattle Robert's teeth while he pushed his way through Molten, the crowded bar, which contained all the things he didn't care for: noise, drugs, and people. Some of the Vasi liked to party here and from the phone call he'd received Talon had paid them a visit.

In the back, he saw some familiar faces and headed their way, but as he drew closer he noticed that most of the clientele sitting at these tables were from the pack. They gathered to him as if pulled by a magnet. Instinctual pack hierarchy, and it gave him heartburn. These people looked to him for guidance in Eric's absence, and his own instincts cried to glance over his left shoulder where his alpha usually stood.

He cleared his throat. *Time to man up.* "What happened?"

Simon, one of the more dominate males of the pack, rose from the table, sporting a fresh black eye and a fat lip. "Talon showed up shit-faced and started picking on a new member." He shot a look at a young guy sitting at a corner table.

Aaron, the kid's name was Aaron. He reminded Robert of himself when he transitioned from human to werewolf. Lost, alone and weak, but at least he had the Vasi for support. Robert didn't have anyone in the beginning until he met Eric.

"You okay, Aaron?" he shouted over the din. Daedalus told him to use names whenever possible. It was suppose to reassure his pack mates that he cared. By the kid's smile and nod, Robert would have to say it worked.

"We pulled Talon off the kid, but the dude's out of control. He said something about us betraying him, that he didn't recognize your unauthorized challenge last night." Simon chuckled. "Said you beat him."

"Well, it wasn't an unauthorized challenge. It was a warning, which is why he's still breathing. I'm starting to regret that part."

The smile on Simon's face transformed to surprise. "You beat him by yourself?"

Nice, even his pack thought him a trophy beta. He nodded, not trusting his mouth to be diplomatic.

Excited glances and pointing passed through the gathering as the news spread.

"Do you know where Talon's headed?" Robert needed to get his claws on that beast and shake some sense into him. Even if Robert lost a challenge to that idiot, Eric would never accept Talon as beta. Maybe the dude had a death wish? If he kept acting like this it would leave Robert no choice. God, he'd never killed anyone before and didn't want to ever start.

“He didn’t say, but he likes to hang out at a biker’s bar over by the Ukrainian village. The Twisted Tire or something? It’s off I-Ninety.” Two other males gathered by Simon. “Do you want us to come with you?”

Robert could hear both Daedalus and Eric in his head encouraging him to say *yes*. It would be a good bonding experience for him and the pack. A social event for males, get to know your beta night and watch him kick ass. “Not yet. I need to track him first, and I’ll move faster on my own.” For social animals, he and his beast didn’t fit in. They preferred solitude, and that’s why they’d become omega in the first place.

The Vasi had their share of omegas, just like any other pack, but they were nurtured instead of abused. Like little Aaron sitting at the table nursing his beer. The pack didn’t cast him out when Talon jumped him, they rallied around him. Robert really admired Eric’s work with the Vasi and hoped other packs would follow his example.

When Simon and his companions appeared disappointed at his refusal, Robert sighed and dug deep. “If I need back-up, you’ll be the first I call.”

They grinned and nodded.

He turned to leave and faced a wall of humans. Pushing through that mass of flesh flared his proximity alarms, and his beast strained at the yoke to thrash at the people who dared come too close. An exit sign glowed above the crowd, and he released the breath he’d been holding. Skirting along the wall, he shoved the door open when he reached it.

It brought him out to a narrow alley on the side of the building. The cool air was a relief, then he caught a whiff of a familiar scent. Something sharp and clean he’d recently had his face buried in.

Esther.

The door closed behind him with a *thunk* and took what little light it gave. She stood with her legs apart in the center of the alley, silhouetted by the distant street lights.

“Are you following me, Esther?” The muscles in his back tensed as he smelled gun powder. She held a gun again. Damn it. He glanced over his shoulder for cover if she got trigger happy.

“I’m trying to figure out what kind of sick game you’re playing, Rob.” She stepped closer, and he could see the outline of her weapon pointed at his head. “I hate being played for a fool, but you did a great job making me feel like one.”

He searched the area, however escape appeared slim. Next time, he’d take the damn front door. “I’m not the pickpocket.” She wasn’t either. Small-time thieves didn’t follow werewolves around with guns in their pockets. He couldn’t think of too many people who would. “Are you crazy? My pack is behind this door. If you shoot me they’ll tear you apart.”

“How many girlfriends are in there?”

“Girlfriends? None, I don’t have—”

She stormed toward him and pressed the gun to his chest as he retreated to the brick wall. “I saw the blonde go into your house.”

“Su-Sugar?”

She laughed without mirth. “Of course, she’d have a name like that. What’s the Asian woman’s name, Coco?”

“Katrina. They’re my roommates, not my girlfriends.”

The gun wavered, then pressed harder onto his sternum. “Bullshit.”

Survival should have been foremost in his mind, but the hard light in Esther’s eyes as she glared into his made him realize something extraordinary. “You’re jealous.”

“Fuck you, Robert.”

He grinned, he couldn’t help it. “I like it better when you call me Rob.” Taking a step from the wall, he pushed the gun aside. “Maybe I should take you up on your offer, Esther. Considering you always seem armed, tying you up may be in my best interest.”

\* \* \* \*

Esther retreated across the alley from Rob, fumbling her weapon as she clicked the safety back on and shoved it into her shoulder holster. The last thing she needed to do was shoot herself. Why did he have to bring up the tying? She’d never offered such a thing to anyone before, but the idea of Rob dominating her flicked her pussy button to the *on* position.

Would she really fall for the roommate line?

Rob strolled toward her, self-confidence oozed from him, the unsure geek of last night absent. His green eyes burned with an internal light from the beast within.

Yeah, she’d fall for the line.

The brick wall stopped her progress. Should she run? She wanted to, but she also wanted him to catch her. Without another thought, she took off away from the street. She didn’t want some Good Samaritan or the cops interrupting them.

A surprised growl rumbled from her werewolf as she left him in her dust. If he didn’t chase her, she’d go back there and kick his ass for being a dweeb.

He didn’t disappoint, though. The pounding of his running shoes followed her.

Racing around the corner, her boots slipped on loose gravel and she went down on her knees, scraping her palms as she fought for balance.

Rob caught her by the shoulders. “Are you all right?”

“Not the kind of hard chase I wanted to give you.” She chuckled and sat back on her heels, eyes level with his groin. He tried to assist her to her feet, but she shook off his hands. “I’m happy here.” She’d spent the afternoon regretting letting him out of her grasp last night. Robert wouldn’t escape so easily this time. She reached for the fly of his jeans.

He startled at her touch. “Here? Now?” The shock in his voice only drove her more.

“Of course.” She undid his button.

“Esther.” Desire and uncertainty warred as he spoke her name. He glanced over his shoulder. Here was the unsure gentleman she’d met last night, the one who stirred her devilish thoughts.

“We’re definitely doing this now.” She unzipped his fly, happy to find him already erect.

He gasped as she kissed his tip, running her tongue in slow circles until she moistened his head, then she blew over the area. She sensed a slight shiver course through his body.

"I'm not letting you get away this time."

Slipping him into her mouth, she heard him whisper, "I'm not going anywhere."

It was hard to grin with a cock in her mouth. With a slow pace, she slid him deep in her throat and withdrew, dragging her tongue over him. After a few strokes, Rob's breaths became irregular and he moved his hips to her rhythm. She loved the power he allowed her to have over him. Not demanding anything from her and taking what she offered with enthusiasm.

Esther ran her hands under his t-shirt, over his abs, and around to his lower back. Digging her nails into his skin, she increased her speed and sucked him hard.

A groan resounded around them as he grabbed her shoulders as if needing the support.

The taste of his excitement dripped on the back of her tongue. She pushed him harder, faster until all she heard was his labored breathing.

"I'm going to come." He tried to slip out, but she only pulled him closer, deeper. "Oh God."

She felt his muscles tense as he came in hot spurts, his cries echoing in the dark alley as she swallowed him. His knees wobbled, and she steadied him with her hands as he slipped out of her mouth. "Easy." She stood and wrapped her arms around his waist, a smug smile plastered to her face.

He hugged her close and buried his face in her hair.

"Let's go back to your place." She nudged him.

"Yes, that sounds good." He placed a kiss on her neck, his hands traveling along her body. "Crap. I can't. Not yet." His warmth faded as he released his hold on her and zipped his pants. "I need to take care of a problem first."

"Maybe I can help."

"This is a pack issue. I need to take care of it myself." He touched her face. "Why are you following me, Esther?"

"I wanted to apologize for taking your wallet. I remembered your address and went there this evening. That's when I saw the women." The lie came so easily to her lips. As a mistress of deception, the pain it caused surprised her. She blinked, unsure what to do next. Confess? What good would that do? Rob would leave her, no matter when she told him the truth. Better to live with a lie for a while and have him for as long as she could. "I got angry and followed you to the bar."

"So jealous you wanted to shoot me?"

"Nothing's more dangerous than a woman scorned." She took his hand. "What's your problem?"

"I have a pack member stirring trouble. A lot of trouble, especially for me. I need to take him down a peg or two."

"I know some things about werewolf packs. Shouldn't your alpha be disciplining the troublemaker?"

“Sure, if he was in town. It’s up to me while he’s gone.”

“You’re the beta?”

He frowned at the shock in her voice. “You sure know how to make a man feel good about himself.” He let her go and stuck his hands in his pockets. “I need to go.”

“Wait.” She grabbed his elbow. She was screwing up everything and really didn’t want to lose him yet. “You always catch me off guard by not being who or what I expect.” Standing in front of him, she blocked his path. With his unnatural strength, he could have knocked her out of the way, but he didn’t. “I’m not good with surprises, but I like that you’re different. Not like most of the men I know.”

“You’ve known a lot men, Esther?” His tone softened.

“Yes, but none of them compare to you.” She chuckled. “I’ve definitely never stalked any of *them*. Let me drive you. When you’re done, we can continue where we left off.”

“That would be nice.” He placed his arm around her shoulders and drew her closer. “I hope you realize I don’t have anything worth stealing at home.”

She gave him a small punch in the flank. “That’s not funny.” How could she blame him for that joke after her pickpocket routine? Robert was going to break her heart, she just knew it, yet here she was offering it like a sacrifice.

He flinched but laughed. “Just needed to clear that up.”

“Fine. We’ll go to my hotel room instead.”



## Chapter 5

"You're from out of town?" Robert glanced at Esther as they walked out of the alley onto the sidewalk by the club. His strong arm gripped her shoulders, pulling her closer.

"I'm in transition." She never stayed anywhere too long, but given the right incentive, she might relocate here. "We'll take my car."

"Fine by me." He shrugged. "So, what do you do for a living then?"

"I hunt vampires."

He laughed and squeezed her shoulders. "Good thing I'm a werewolf." He totally missed the truth and thought it a joke. She swallowed her disappointment.

"Yeah." Yet, she carried silver bullets in her gun tonight. Wasn't she a bitch. "Here's my car." She unlocked the doors and got into the driver's seat. "Where to?"

"Take I-Ninety. We're going to a biker bar where my problem likes to hang out and see if he's there."

"Good, I could use a stiff drink." She started the car and pulled out. "Are you going to fight him?"

"Probably. Can you stay out of it if I do?" He twisted in his seat to face her.

"Umm...if he's going to kill you, I'll need to shoot him. Otherwise, I'll stay out of it. I understand the whole dominance games packs have to play."

"Who *are* you, Esther?"

She glanced at him as he stared at her profile as if memorizing it.

"You kiss me, steal my wallet, shoot at me, follow me, then give me a blow-job almost at gunpoint. You're either an escaped mental patient or someone really interesting."

"I'll opt for the interesting someone. And I shot because you were in beast form and I didn't know who you were. Not to mention, you scared the crap out of me."

"You weren't that scared." He tapped his nose. "Good sense of smell. What aren't you telling me? Not every girl I meet pulls a thirty-eight out of her waistband."

"You know your guns." She took the on-ramp to the interstate. "I'm not the only one with secrets, Rob. I saw the way you moved when I pulled the trigger. You're no-run-of-the-mill beta. Why does the Vasi pack need warriors?"

"You know the pack's name?" He leaned in closer and sniffed.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Just double checking and making sure you're not a werewolf masking her scent." He cleared his throat. "Pure human."

She weaved through the scant late night traffic. Their silence stretched. "So, are you going to answer my question?" The air in the car grew warm, so she kicked on the AC.

“Let’s agree to keep our own secrets for now.” He played with the vent, angling the air to hit him more directly. “Esther?”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t trust you.”

She gripped the steering wheel tight. “I don’t blame you.”

God, he was getting under her skin. She wanted him to trust her. Shit, she wanted to enter that fucking bar and blow away his problem too. What a mess. She’d already decided to not take the contract on the Nosferatu. To accomplish such a task she needed to be in the game one hundred percent. Not have her head in the clouds over a werewolf and her heart dangling on a thread.

“Take this exit.” His voice deepened, and his eyes shone with that inner light werewolves got when their beasts were close to the surface of shifting.

“You all right?” She took the exit. If he shifted in the car with her, she’d probably crash.

“I’m fine. I’m in control. Just getting ready.” He rolled down his window and stuck his face into the wind. “Make a left at the light. It should be two blocks down. It’s called the Twisted Tire.”

She took the turn and made it past one block when Rob leaned his torso out the window in a sudden jerk.

“Damn, can you stop?”

“Did I miss it?” She pulled over and parked along the deserted street.

“No, I smell someone I know, and I need to talk to him too.” He opened the door and leaped out, then spun around. “Wait here for me?”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

He grinned and ran down a side street.

Shaking her head, she leaned it against her steering wheel. He smelled someone? What an odd thing for her to just accept, or would be if he were human...which he wasn’t. *Esther, what are you doing playing chauffeur for a werewolf and also not taking a contract that could take care of you for life?* She groaned. Could Rob be worth it? Something in her gut told her he would be.

\* \* \* \*

Robert jogged around the building next to where Esther parked. He watched the rooftops until he saw who he smelled.

On a four-story building a set of huge boots dangled over the roof’s edge. Not too many men had feet that size, and Daedalus liked a place with a view. Even if he fell, nothing would happen to him. Was it coincidence he sat here so close to where Talon hung out? Robert didn’t think so.

Climbing the fire escape, he reached the roof easy enough. “Hey.” He hopped onto the surface and trotted to the vampire. Sitting next to him, he leaned on his hands. They could see Lake Michigan as a big flat, black spot dwarfing the city’s edge. “Nice view.”

“Yeah.” Daedalus continued to stare at the city, an aura of dark foreboding surrounding him.

“You waiting on Talon?”

"I was, but I started thinking about Sugar." He shifted his shoulder, then glanced at Rob. "She okay when you left?"

"Sam took her to the movies."

He nodded. "You're good friends. She deserves the best."

"Go home, Daedalus. She should be back soon. Surprise her with something." Two more days before Eric and Spice came home. They would know what to do. He needed to keep the pack and his small family together for that short amount of time. Should be an easy task but everything wanted to fall apart.

"I've got nothing left to give her, Robert. She can't accept what I am, and I can't watch her grow old and die. No matter what, I'm headed for heartbreak. It's like watching someone cut off a piece of you. It would be better to do it quick and fast. Leave now before the pain becomes unbearable."

"That's stupid." The moment the words left his mouth he knew he was a dead shifter. He did a backward somersault and avoided a slap to his noggin. "Listen before you decide to beat me to a pulp, D."

"D?" The Nosferatu twisted.

"We're buddies now, right?" He grinned at Daedalus who only stared back at him as if he'd grown two heads. "Don't make any rash decisions."

"I'm not," he shouted. "Ever since I asked Sugar to cross over and become a vampire things have been heading this way." He turned his back on Robert. "I've never *asked* a woman to cross over. Part of me wishes I'd just gone ahead and had it done. At least, I'd have the rest of eternity to make it up to her instead of a few decades wishing I'd done it when we first met."

"She never would have forgiven you." Robert didn't want to sit on the edge of the building anymore. It would be too easy for Daedalus to shove him off. He might survive the fall, but it would hurt like hell, and the vampire was in an ugly mood.

"Time heals all wounds. Trust me on this one."

"Then why haven't you done it?"

"I don't know. Maybe that's why I'm off my game. I—I care too much. It's not a good habit, take my advice on this, Robert."

"You want her to want this." Robert ran his fingers through his hair, trying to yank a solution from his head manually. "You're both so stubborn. You remind me of my parents, believing so much in your own ideas you're willing to let it tear you apart."

Daedalus rose from the edge and faced him. Anger radiated from him in waves.

Yet Robert's mouth kept on its suicidal path. "I'd give anything to experience what you and Sugar have. There's a solution, you just need to think outside the box. Isn't there some other way for her to live longer instead of becoming vampire?"

"I don't know," Daedalus snapped. "Never thought about it." He crossed his thick arms over his chest. "When did you get so smart about women?"

Robert chuckled. "I'm not. Just ask the crazy one following me tonight."

"You've got a girl with you? And you're up here?" The vampire leaned over the side of the roof and glanced at the street, then waved. "You call *me* stupid. She's hot. Nice leather. Didn't take you for the dominatrix liking kind."

"Never mind her." He edged to the side and watched Esther rush to the car. Great, the vampire spooked her. "Sugar still has a few decades before you need to make a decision."

"You say that like it's a lot of time." A frown pulled at the corner of his mouth, increasing the darkness of his expression. "It's not fair to her either if she won't cross over, Robert. She should find herself a human mate. Maybe she could have children."

Rubbing his forehead, Robert tried to wish away the pounding in his temples. "Don't leave. It would kill her." God, he didn't want to have to live with a falling-apart Sugar. It would be like living with his mother all over again after his father left. "If you want, the three of us can sit down and discuss options."

The surprised bark of laughter drew Robert's attention from staring at the roof surface. Daedalus grinned. "You want to mediate? It's a love affair, not a contract."

"Bullshit. Love is about give and take. What are you willing to lose in return for what you want? Once both of you figure out the answer to that question, then we can negotiate."

Daedalus raised a non-existent eyebrow.

\* \* \* \*

Esther stared hard at the silhouettes on the roof. She didn't need night vision goggles to see who stood with Rob. The bald head and pointed tips of his ears were all the evidence she required. Her equipment sat in her trunk a few feet away. Temptation warred with logic.

And she knew fate had played a hand in this too. Twice in two days she'd run into Daedalus, and she believed in destiny. She'd also met Rob.

Her gut twisted as her cellphone beeped. Glancing at the message, her fate was sealed. They doubled her fee to take the contract.

The vampire leaned over the edge of the building and waved as if daring her to take the shot.

Racing to her car, she yanked her keys out her pocket and pressed the button on the remote to open the trunk. She had minutes to do this. It would probably be her only chance. Damn Rob and his connection to the Nosferatu.

She snapped open her long flat case and pulled out her miniature crossbow, then grabbed a wooden bolt, the next best thing to a stake. She ran across the street, knelt, and aimed.

Rob stood next to Daedalus, waving his hands in the air like they were arguing. *Damn, look at him standing up to that monster.* Pride swelled in her chest. She could really use a man like that in her life, someone with enough balls to confront her when she was making a mistake, like now.

The vampire stood inside her scope mounted on the crossbow. With a steady hand, she pulled the trigger.

## Chapter 6

“Look, you love Sugar and she loves you. That’s the important part. Maybe getting an objective view point on your relationship would help.” Robert extended his hands out to Daedalus.

“You want us to see a therapist? Who the hell deals with vampires, Robert?”

“Okay, not a therapist but you’ve got friends. Maybe Spice can help. She became a werewolf for Eric.”

“Fucking rub it in, man.” If looks could kill, Robert was a dead shifter walking.

“Is that it? Spice choosing to be part of the pack? Is that why you’re all twisted in knots lately?”

“Wouldn’t you be if you were in my shoes? Sugar won’t make that kind of sacrifice for me. If I could become human, I’d do it in a heartbeat. I’m not feeling the love. She doesn’t get what I am, and now she’s trying to control how I feed.” He shook his head. “When she came back for me, after the whole Ayumu fiasco, I thought I could take whatever she offered and be happy but not anymore.”

“Fuck.” A hole formed in Robert’s gut as he listened to Daedalus pour his heart out. “Does anyone else know how you feel?”

“No. *I* barely understand how I feel.”

“You need to tell her. Now.” He pulled out his cellphone and stepped closer, offering it to the vampire. A soft twang caught his attention. He twisted to face the street and a sharp pain pierced his chest, knocking the air from his lungs.

He gasped, but it only made the pain worse. Staring at his chest, he couldn’t believe what he saw. An arrow stuck out of him. An arrow? Who the fuck used arrows? The world spun, and he heard a rush of words from Daedalus but couldn’t understand what he said. His knees gave out and he fell.

And kept falling. Shouldn’t he have hit the roof surface by now? Seemed a long, long way down.

\* \* \* \*

Esther watched Rob fall off the roof. Her heart stalled, and she couldn’t get it to start again. The world compressed around her, making it hard to breathe let alone move.

Rob clutched the bolt in his chest. The one *she’d* shot. It was meant for Daedalus, but the split second she squeezed the trigger Rob stepped forward and took the hit.

The clatter of her crossbow hitting the sidewalk shattered her nightmare state. What the fuck had she done?

Her gentleman werewolf flipped mid-air, curling around his wound, and landed on his back with a loud *thud* that she felt through her boots.

She was halfway across the street at a dead run before her brain caught up. “No, no, no...” The word skipped like a broken record. Something warm stained her cheeks. Wiping it with her hand, she found tears. She hadn’t cried in years, but then she’d never killed an innocent before.

His body lay in the dented, cracked concrete. Blood formed like a big amaryllis bloom on the front of his t-shirt. Each shallow breath sent a gurgle of blood from his lungs.

Kneeling at his side, she didn’t know what to do. Her hands fluttered over his chest, knowing she needed to stop the bleeding but afraid to touch him. She couldn’t get past the fact she’d hurt someone she actually liked.

“Rob?” She brushed her fingertips over his cheeks, her hands trembled so much it made them difficult to control. “What have I done?”

“What do you mean?” An iron strong grip grabbed her shoulder and yanked her to her feet.

Her eyes met the black, soulless glare of Daedalus, a Prime of the Nosferatu clan. The Infernal Champion of the Brotherhood, Vile Butcher of Babylon, and Subjugator of the Accords, to name a few of his titles.

As if a bucket of ice-cold water had been dumped over her head, her terror and shock transformed at the sight of her target. She snapped back into herself and met his stare. “It was meant for you, Bearer of Ill Will.” With Rob dying at her feet, she didn’t deserve to live. Her only salvation was if the vampire finished her before she had to witness Rob’s last breath.

The Nosferatu dropped her. “What?”

Before she could respond a clash of raw power penetrated her mental shields and entered her mind. Any human could keep a vampire from their thoughts if they bothered to learn how. Daedalus proved too strong for her to block even with her years of practice.

He raped her mind like a savage and flipped through her thoughts as if reading a book.

Frozen and helpless, she watched from a dark corner of her head until he tore her identity from her grasp. She cried out, the sound echoing down the street.

“A slayer?” The vampire stumbled from her and leaned on the brick building behind him as his gaze darted to Rob. “That bolt was meant for me.” He knelt beside the werewolf. “Robert?” With a gentle shake, he repeated the question. “Come on, buddy, open your eyes. You need to shift.”

Buddy? They were friends? The heavy despair in Daedalus’s voice only confirmed it. She stared at the Nosferatu, a killer of thousands, as a tear slipped from the corner of his eye.

All this time she thought the vampire used her naïve Rob. It didn’t appear like that at all. She took a deep shaky breath. “Shouldn’t I call nine-one-one?” Her cellphone trembled in her hand as she held it out.

“No use. There’s too much damage.” He shook Rob harder. “Robert, let’s go. Time to wake up, we’ve got miles to run.” The snap in his command came with practiced ease.

Rob’s eyelids fluttered open with a weak groan.

“Listen to me.” Daedalus hovered over his face. “You need to shift. The change will heal the damage.”

Her werewolf blinked. “Esther?”

She crept closer until he could see her.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

Fuck, he didn’t know she’d shot him. “Yes.” A sob wracked her chest. “Shift, Rob.” She wiped her nose with her hand. “Please.”

“Can’t—” His eyelids closed and his chest shuddered with an exhale, then he didn’t move again.

“Rob!” His name tore from her raw throat. “I’m so sorry.” She glanced at Daedalus and regretted it.

Death stared back at her.

She shrank away and got to her feet. “It was meant for you, asshole. Why’d he have to move at the last minute?” All her stakes were in the trunk of her car, so she palmed her thirty-eight from her shoulder holster.

He mirrored her movements and moved around Rob’s body. “I’m going to make you suffer, slayer, and listen to you beg for the mercy you never showed him.”

*This* was the monster she hunted, not the one who just shed a tear. “You might have played nice vampire for him but I know who you really are.”

“I am many things, but to you I am Pain.” He moved so quickly she sensed his body more than saw it.

Only her keen reflexes kept her out of his grasp. She spun, aimed, and squeezed the trigger, but she may as well have used a spit ball straw for all the damage the bullets did. She knew the bullets caused vampires pain, but Daedalus didn’t even grimace.

He stormed toward her and clutched her throat before slamming her into the building. Her heels tap danced against the brick as they dangled, and she tried to draw breath, but his vise-like grip wouldn’t let the smallest amount of air in.

“This is just the beginning, Esther.”

With the lack of oxygen, her vision faded yet she did hear a faint growl of surprise to her right. She glanced and saw the blurred outline of Rob in full beast form getting to his feet. Bipedal, he stood well over six feet tall, covered in a glossy chocolate brown fur. He flexed the long claws extending from his fingertips, and the ears on top of his wolfen head folded back.

Her heart soared, and she heard the angels sing.

He lived.

And she was about to die.

A furious cry shred the night just before Daedalus’s grip was torn from her throat and she fell to the ground. Coughing up a lung and dragging in a breath thick with air, she tried to stand. Her knees didn’t think it a good idea though. She leaned on her hands and blinked her vision clear.

Rob, in beast form, grappled with the Nosferatu, keeping his body between her and the vampire. The fool was defending her.



With a twist of speed, her werewolf pinned the ancient vampire under his clawed hands. Teeth bared, he snapped at his friend's head.

Daedalus held off the attack. Barely. If Rob finished her task and killed the Nosferatu, he would never forgive her once he found out the truth. A lead ball of certainty sank in her gut.

Never.

"Rob, stop!" she shouted. "I'm the one who shot you."

He stopped mid-bite, with Daedalus's arm sandwiched between his sharp teeth. They stared at each other for a moment before the vampire nodded. Rob opened his mouth, and Daedalus slipped his arm out, then wrapped the werewolf in a bone-cracking hug.

"Dumbass, you hooked up with a slayer." The vampire released Rob and rose from the ground.

The beast swung around with a sharp glare. It almost sliced her in half.

"You stepped in my line of sight. I was aiming at him." She pointed at Daedalus, suddenly feeling like she was back in grade school.

Rob tilted his head, ears folded back as he stalked around her. A low growl emanated from his chest.

"You're either very good at what you do or very stupid for taking a contract on my kind." The Nosferatu examined his arm, bending it with ease.

"I'm not feeling very smart at the moment. I refused the initial contract." She pulled out the phone from her pocket. Both males tensed as she moved. "Take it easy, boys. I'm not deadly with a *BlackBerry*. Look at the messages. They doubled the cash out."

Daedalus pocketed the phone without reading it. "Grab her. My car is around the corner. We'll finish this at home."

Without any effort, Rob lifted her in his arms gently.

"For what it's worth, I'm really sorry." And she was. Even though he'd never believe her, she needed him to hear it. "I don't think I would have been able to live with myself if you'd had died." The emotional roller coaster of the last half hour made the truth easy to admit. She leaned her head on his shoulder, the soft fur a small comfort. Her strength disappeared and with it her desire to fight.

Rob lived.

What was wrong with her? She never made rash decisions where marks were concerned. What made her grab her crossbow without a plan? The money would have been nice, but if it were the driving force she'd have taken the contract in the first place.

It almost seemed like fate grabbed her by the ass and turned off her brain. The target so easily accessible and the shitload of payout dangling like a carrot. She'd fucked it all up though. No kill and worse, no Rob.

They approached a two door black sports car. Daedalus held open the passenger door. He folded the front seat down so Rob could squeeze into the backseat with her.

The drive didn't take long with the vampire's heavy foot on the accelerator. He parked close to Rob's brownstone. "I'll get you some clothes. We don't need to cause trouble if one of the neighbors is watching, and I don't need any more grief from Sugar." Daedalus slammed the driver's side door shut.

Rob melted back into his human form next to her, his glare never left hers as his eyes changed from bright amber to sharp green.

The transformation fascinated her. All these years in her profession, but until yesterday, she'd never been this close to a shifter as he changed.

"For fuck's sake, Esther. A slayer?" The contempt in his expression hurt. "Is this why you've been after me? Using my friendship with Daedalus to get close enough to kill him?" The car shook as he punched the front seat.

She shrank back. The moonlight gleamed on his bare skin and waves of fury emanated from his body. "I didn't know you were friends. I thought he was using you, like most of his race does."

The dark glance he shot at her brooked no belief.

"When I approached you on the street, I'd hoped to follow you so I could find his lair but—but..." She swallowed with a mouth gone dry. "You kept surprising me. You never do what I expect. Like now, why am I still alive? You should have killed me by now. I'm all unbalanced around you, which is a terrible thing in my profession."

He tapped at the fresh scar on his chest. "No shit."

"I've got good aim." She glanced out the window. "You should be careful dealing with vampires, Rob."

"Not everything is what you think you see, Esther. You're a human looking in from the outside and only gazing at the surface. There's a whole ocean of stuff under the stories humans are told."

She blinked. "Like how you could heal the way you did?"

"Yeah, well, that was a surprise for me too. It's why my pack needs Daedalus. We've lost too much knowledge over the centuries." He watched the Nosferatu return with a pile of clothes. "I won't let you kill him." He directed his stare at her, making his deadly intentions clear if she crossed that line.

## Chapter 7

“I get the message.” Esther frowned at Robert.

He doubted she did. Chances were pretty good she’d take another crack at Daedalus if the opportunity arose. Then he’d have to kill her. Wouldn’t it be his luck his first kill would be a woman he liked.

The car door opened and she startled. Daedalus tossed some clothes at Robert then gripped the slayer’s arm, yanking her out.

Betrayal left a sour taste in Robert’s mouth. “Store her in my bathroom while I gather the others.” The order slipped from him. He noticed Daedalus do a double take, but he escorted Esther without question.

Nothing like being on the brink of death to give a male perspective. He’d been ready to tear the vampire’s throat out for Esther. The most shocking thing was that he’d almost accomplished it. Sometime in the last twenty-four hours Esther had become his. What the hell was he going to do about that? She’d used and abused him.

His beast writhed inside. It wanted to storm up to the second floor, break into the bathroom, and mark her...or spank her...or both. Taking a deep breath, he sat back and went through the calming exercises he used to control the beast. Thankfully, it also worked on the raging erection under the pile of clothes he held in his lap.

With a shake of his head, he dismissed both beast and Esther to the back of his mind. Tonight he needed to be the pack’s beta. One more day before his alpha got home. One. More. Day.

He got dressed in a pair of nylon workout pants and a green t-shirt that read *Never Moon a Werewolf*. Reflexively, he reached for his glasses, but they must have smashed on the sidewalk when he’d fallen from the roof.

He jogged over to the brownstone. No one would have guessed he’d had an arrow in his chest and internal injuries less than an hour ago. Eric needed to know about that shifting trick. It hurt like hell to heal that fast though, and it took a lot of energy. He needed food, a truck load of it, to build back his reserve.

As he opened the door he expected to hear his roommates arguing inside but silence greeted him.

Daedalus descended the stairs. “I wedged a chair under the doorknob. She’s not going anywhere.”

“I’ll go wake up the others if you get Sugar.” Some nights they stayed awake late and hung out with the Nosferatu, but it was a weeknight. Day jobs awaited Tyler, Katrina, and Sam. Only Eric and himself made their own work hours. They tended to be night owls anyway. Maybe that’s how this odd camaraderie with Daedalus developed from trainee to friend?

“Let them sleep. We’ll talk first, then you can decide what to do.”

*He* had to decide? Watching the vampire disappear into the kitchen, Robert did a little what-the-fucking before following. “So, what’s going on? Why is Esther trying to turn you into ashes?”

Daedalus stood bent over, digging inside the fridge and tossing food onto the counter. “For money, it’s the nature of her profession.” He organized the bread, sandwich meat, cheese, and mayo next to each other.

Drool dripped from the corner of Robert’s mouth, to his horror, and he quickly wiped it away.

“Vampires have been hunted by slayers since we’ve existed. They get better weapons and the rules shift, but nothing else changes. They try to kill us and we do the same.” He glanced at Robert. “The real question is who hired her? And traditionally, I’m supposed to kill her.”

“No.” The word was out of his mouth before his brain registered it but there laid the truth. He’d fight Daedalus again to protect her, and maybe for the sandwich he was making. “If I’m letting Talon live, I’m keeping Esther.”

Lifting his head, the vampire cocked a non-existent eyebrow, then slid the best looking double-decker sandwich Robert had ever seen toward him. “Keeping her?”

“I mean keeping her alive.” He grabbed the sandwich and resisted the urge to gobble the thing straight off the plate.

“Slayers are dangerous, manipulative people. I peeked in her head. She’s good at what she does.”

Robert finished his snack in wolf-sized bites. “Shit.” He ran his fingers through his hair. All his emotions were tangled. “My head is saying she’s playing me, but my heart—beast is jerking me around. Did you see anything in her mind about me?”

“I didn’t take the grand tour. You were dying at my feet.” Daedalus held up the meat. “Another?”

Robert’s stomach flipped and the acid rose. “No, thanks.” Crossing the kitchen, he opened a cabinet and pulled out the antacids.

“You’re popping a lot of those lately.”

He snorted and almost choked on a damn tablet. “I wonder why?”

Tyler shuffled into the kitchen, his red curly hair sticking out at all angles. He and Katrina shared a bedroom in the basement next to Daedalus’s man-cave. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes. “What are you guys doing?”

“Nothing.” Robert and the vampire echoed each other like the twins, Sugar and Spice, did at times. Sugar was Daedalus’s human lover, and Spice the pack’s female alpha.

“I thought we’re not supposed to keep secrets from each other. Isn’t that some kind of unspoken law after all the crap we’ve been through?” They’d fought side by side as pack to protect each other. “You’re both sneaking around the house like a bomb might go off. Spill it.”

Tyler was right. They couldn’t hide Esther in the bathroom forever, and he couldn’t just let her go.

“A vampire slayer tried to kill Daedalus tonight.”

The remains of sleep vanished from Tyler’s eyes. “Wow. What did you do with the body?” Shaking his head, Daedalus gestured to Robert. “He has a crush on her, so he won’t let me finish the deed.”

“The slayer’s a woman?” He glanced at Robert. “That’s kind of hot.”

Robert couldn’t help but chuckle. Tyler had that effect on everyone.

“I think she likes him as well. She seemed pretty distraught when she *accidentally* shot him.” Daedalus glanced at Robert. “Instead of escaping she stayed to help you.”

“She shot you?” Tyler’s voice rose.

“Shush, you’ll wake everyone. He’s all right now.” Daedalus stood between both werewolves, glancing back and forth like at a tennis match.

Robert turned all his attention on the cornered vampire. “Which brings me to the question of how did you know I’d heal if I shifted?”

“You didn’t know?” Daedalus tilted his head to the side as if surprised.

“No.” Really, how would they? One didn’t receive an instruction manual when they became a werewolf. Most packs, present day, believed in trial and error, something his alpha was trying to change. New recruits needed a mentor. “Never been shot before tonight. Makes me wonder what else we don’t know.”

Daedalus rubbed his bald head. “Me too.”

“You shifted and your injuries healed?” Tyler’s eyes grew wide.

“It was the coolest thing.” Robert stepped forward. “I fell from four stories with an arrow in my chest. When I woke up Daedalus told me to shift and my beast took control.”

“An arrow? Like in Robin Hood?” They tripped over each other’s sentences.

“She used a crossbow. The bolt is like a wooden stake, and she could kill vampires without having to get close, like an assassin.”

“So she’s smart as well as deadly.”

“Excuse me.” The Nosferatu cleared his throat. “Let me interrupt your excitement from almost *dying*. She’s a killer. Nothing romantic about that.”

“You’re a killer.” Robert’s retort hung in the air. “What’s the difference? You kill those you think are evil, so does she.”

“I don’t get paid, and I do it to survive.” His gaze narrowed. “And I’m not evil.”

“Anyway.” Tyler dragged out the word. “What do we do now?”

“Keep her until Eric and Spice get home, then we can decide.”

Daedalus rolled his eyes. “She’ll escape by then.”

“Afraid she’ll get you?” Robert shot back.

“A little, especially with you mooning over her. I didn’t get this old by being careless. You’re going to get me killed or worse, she’ll get to one of the others in the house.” He plucked her phone from his pocket and scrolled through the messages.

“What are you looking for?” Tyler leaned in.

“I want to know how much I’m worth.” He stopped and hit a button.

Tyler let out a low whistle. “For that much, I’d kill you.”

The vampire elbowed his skinny friend. “This means trouble. Esther is the first to try, but others might come.” He scratched his chin while examining the email. “I can’t tell who sent this.” Tossing the phone to Robert, he stood and stretched. “Can you do something with it on your computers?”

Fumbling the phone, Robert finally got a grip on it. “I’ll try. It might help to know who you’ve pissed off.”

“The list is endless.”

“What about all those security people you used to have at Pal Robi Inc.? Can’t they help?” Tyler suggested. Daedalus used to run the security company when they hired him to teach them how to fight. It felt like ages ago. He’d quit when he moved in with Sugar.

“They report to my clan. If word gets out I’m being hunted they may call me home.”

“Aren’t you some kind of boss? Uh—the Prime?” Robert never wanted to pry in Daedalus’s past. He’d rather be ignorant of the things the Nosferatu had done.

“Prime does not translate into King. There are many Primes. We’re more like police. Chicago is in my jurisdiction, but eventually the council will question my absence.” Daedalus shrugged. “I’m running out of excuses to remain here.”

Now Robert understood another reason to Daedalus’s desperation to turn Sugar. He’d have to go home one day and she might not follow as a human. His stomach clenched at the thought of gentle Sugar surrounded by vampires. He crunched another antacid and met Daedalus’s stare.

“Yeah, you got it.” The vampire stood and crossed the kitchen. “I’ll be in the bedroom until dawn if you get any more information out of that message.”

Nodding, Robert walked Tyler to the stairs. He went to the second floor and his friend to the basement. Once inside his bedroom he paused by the bathroom door with a chair jammed under the knob. He pressed his ear to the wood and listened. “Esther?”

After a moment of silence, she answered. “Yeah.”

“You need anything?”

“No. Have you decided my fate?” Her voice sounded amused, but he could smell her fear. He didn’t like it and leaned his head against the doorjamb.

“No.” He sighed. “But I’ll make sure nothing bad happens to you, okay?”

The sound of shuffling came through the wood as if she drew closer. “Why? I’ve been nothing but terrible to you.”

He laughed, but there was no mirth to it. “I know. I guess I can’t help being a schmuck.”

“Are you going to let me out?”

“Not yet. I’ve got something to do first.”

## Chapter 8

Stars blanketed the night sky outside of Rob's bathroom window. Esther kept the light off so she'd see them better. There were worse places to be imprisoned. She had water, a toilet, and if she got bored she'd take a hot bath.

Cool air blew against her face through the open window, hinting that fall was on the way. The chill soothed the ache around her neck where Daedalus had tried to strangle her. It wouldn't take much effort to pop the screen out and climb the rainspout to the ground. Not much effort at all.

She tapped her fingernail on the sill as she considered the possibility. If she left that meant never seeing Rob again and *never* was a really long time. The thought left an empty pit in her stomach. Since when did she let her heart rule her life?

Her turning point was the moment Rob melted from his beast form to human as he pinned her to the car. Hunting her down and outthinking her had changed her perspective of him from some cute geek to someone she respected. And wanted. Bad.

Damn, he could have taken her against the car or in the alley at the club, but he always needed to be a gentleman and be dutiful to his pack. *Let's not forget the fucking vampire.*

How did Rob get mixed up with the Nosferatu? He said she only saw the surface of things. Maybe she did, but she couldn't learn to see more from in here. What was Daedalus telling him? He probably wanted to kill her. That's how things rolled between their kinds.

She should have run the moment the arrow struck Rob. Just the memory made her nauseous. He'd come so close to dying. The world would have been worse off without Rob in it. God, she loved everything about him.

Leaning her forehead on the window, she closed her eyes. She recalled the first time they'd met and how shy he'd been, acting as her protector. Silent and strong, he bore his responsibilities with such seriousness.

She banged her head on the glass and listened to the rattle. Now or never. Choose a life filled with what-ifs or take a fucking leap of faith on a werewolf who should hate her.

His possible rejection kept her at the edge of escaping. Her fingers traced the screen. Ah shit, if he broke her heart she'd just gut him.

The sound of a chair scraping against wood outside the bathroom drew her from her debate. As the door swung open, Rob stood in a halo of light cast from his bedroom lamp. "I need your help."

"And if I don't give it?" She turned from the window and faced him. The desire to help and the fear of being vulnerable twisted her stomach to the point she thought she might vomit right there in front of him.

He shrugged. "Then I close the door."

A shiver ran down her spine. The step she took toward him appeared normal but, in her reality, it was the hardest thing she'd ever done. After all her lies she needed to prove her sincerity somehow. "I'll help." Her voice sounded strained even to her own ears.

"Are you okay?"

"I...I..." *Want to tell you how sorry I am.* "I'm fine. What do you need?" She'd apologized enough.

He gestured for her to follow him. They left his sparsely decorated bedroom and crossed the hall to an office. A long table-like desk lined the wall with two computers side by side with wires running along the edges. On the closest screen was her email sign-in.

"Your account is pretty secure." Rob sat at the desk and offered her the chair next to him. "I could break in, but that would take time. I want you to sign-in."

"Why?"

He quirked an eyebrow. "Don't play coy. It doesn't suit you."

She crossed her arms over her chest. His comment stung. "You won't be able to trace the emails from this account. They come from a third party."

"Let me try."

She sighed. It was a test and one she needed to pass. Not for Rob but for herself. If she was going to give herself to him, she would go all the way.

"Fine." After typing her ID and password what remained of her resolve faded. She'd been bribed and hunted in the past for information about her contacts and never gave anything over. Apparently, kindness and trust were her Achilles heels. Not like she was giving him her contacts or anything. All he could do was read the emails, even replying didn't work.

Rob opened the email offering her twice the usual fee to kill Daedalus. He switched programs and began transferring codes. The computer ran through numbers with a counter at the bottom.

He twisted in his chair to face her. "I designed this myself. It's not your run-of-the-mill tracer." He grinned at her pointed stare. "I like computers. The numbers and codes make sense to me. Everything is black and white, there's no gray area like people seem to have." His direct stare bothered her.

Not knowing where to look, she glanced at a collection of encased *Star Trek* figures on a shelf. She smiled. "My mother was a Whovian."

"What?"

"Dr. Who. When I was young I was allowed to stay up until one AM on Saturday nights to watch it with her on PBS." She cleared her throat. "I still like to watch it. You?"

"I've seen it, but I'm not much of a fan."

"Really? Are his concepts too advanced for you?" She leaned forward and grinned as his eyes narrowed at her challenge.



“The show jumps through time, rotates characters and actors, and they interact with historical figures. You have a ship disguised as a phone box, a sonic screwdriver, and a hero who can’t die. The rules of reality don’t apply to Dr. Who. Where *Star Trek* is a known quantity. It’s set in the future. You have the laws of physics, the crew, and Star Fleet. They visit planets and solve problems in an hour. It’s linear. There really is no comparison.” A satisfied smile crossed his face. “Most of the technology and gadgets we enjoy today were first seen in some form on those early Trek episodes. Cellphones, iTouch, PDAs. Not so much for Dr. Who. The technology of the TARDIS falls into ‘science so advanced it is indistinguishable from magic’ area.” He chuckled and a blush covered his cheeks. “Is my geek showing?”

She laughed and threw back her head, wincing at the sharp pain from the bruises around her neck.

Leaning toward her, he tilted her chin to the ceiling. “Let me take a look at that in better lighting.” He took her hand and guided her to his bedroom.

For a lack of a chair, she sat on the edge of his bed while he went into the bathroom.

He returned with a cool wet cloth and knelt in front of her.

The cold soothed the ache of her ligation marks. “Of course, the only real sci-fi show worth watching is *Babylon Five*.” Her comment brought him up short.

“You’re full of surprises. I love that show too, but don’t tell my housemates. They’ll start calling me a traitor.”

She laughed again, and it made her feel free. Nothing about being with Rob was forced. Being with him made her act like, well, herself. Maybe that’s what attracted her to him the most. He made her real. She’d been acting most of her adult life and almost forgot who Esther was.

“You have a wonderful laugh.” He smiled at her as he stood and rolled his shoulders as if working out some knots. “The computer program will take a few hours to run. We should get some sleep.”

Patting his twin-sized bed, she winked at him. “Looks cozy.”

“You can sleep here. I’ll take the floor.”

She frowned. “I’m not proposing marriage, Rob, just me to keep you warm. I’m much more comfortable than the hard floor.” Lying across the comforter, she cleared her throat as it went dry.

Her werewolf stared at her with hungry eyes. The amber color of his beast had returned, and a low growl rumbled in his chest. “I bet you are.” His voice had grown deeper, and she got wetter between her thighs.

Undoing her jacket, she tossed it to the floor, never taking her gaze off him. The drumming of her heart filled her ears. She scooted farther up the bed as he slowly crawled over her. Ever since they’d met, she’d wanted this. Anticipation was such a bitch.

With a tug, he hooked his fingers around the waistband of her pants and released the button, then the zipper. From under him, he appeared much bigger, stronger than she’d thought.

In a frantic move, she tugged her t-shirt over her head.

“Slow down, let me do this.” He took her eager hands from her pants and placed them over her head. Peeling her leather pants from her legs an inch at a time, he followed their path with a trail of kisses. Each caress dragged her closer to the edge.

“Rob?” Her voice shook.

The leathers joined her jacket and t-shirt on the floor. “Hmm?” He ran his canines along her hip as he removed her thong.

“Oh, shit.” Her breaths became desperate.

“You like that?”

“Yes.”

He placed a light kiss on her bikini line, which sent a tremor down her legs. If he went any slower her bottom half would go numb from need. Rising onto his elbow, he lay on his side and unclasped the front of her bra, setting her breasts free. His gaze was so intense it almost seemed like he stroked her skin.

More, she needed a lot more. She arched her back, inviting him to touch her.

With an unsure slide, his hand traveled from her lower abdomen to her chest, then finally to her breast. The brush of his fingertips over her nipples set them on fire.

Never one to take the backseat when it came to sex, she wrapped her arms around his neck and yanked him close, pressing a frantic hard kiss to his thin mouth. He tasted of scandalous mischief and forbidden cravings.

If a rescue had busted down the door and interrupted them to set her free, she’d have found her thirty-eight special and shot them between the eyes. Nothing was taking her out of Rob’s arms.

He leaned to the side and pulled something out of his back pocket. Maybe a condom? With a strong grip, he gathered her hands from his neck and placed them above her head. He pressed his clothed body on top of hers and kissed along her neck.

Something cold and metallic snapped around her wrists. She yanked reflexively at the cuffs, which he’d secured to one of the headboard’s wooden slats. “What the fuck? Where did these come from?”

“Eric, my alpha, left them in our office. I can’t take any chances with you. Then again, with your history, you could probably strangle me with your thighs.” He set the key on his bedside table. “I’m naive, not stupid. Fool me once...” He let the old saying fade, the meaning very clear to her.

Too bad he didn’t understand she never wanted to fool him again. When she watched him fall off the roof her heart had chosen to run *to* him instead of away. She’d made her choice, and she’d stick to it until the end. “Fine, I didn’t have plans on going anywhere.” Relaxing into the bed, she stretched her body along its length. “I’m game, then.” She writhed her body under his, grinding her hip against his hard cock.

The feral glow returned to Rob’s stare, and the carnal hunger that came with it reminded her of what exactly she taunted. It only made her want him more.

His tongue flashed as he licked his lips. "I wish I could trust you." The regret in his voice broke her heart, but then he gave her mischievous grin. "I can at least return your favor."

"I don't want payback. I want—"

He scooted down between her legs, lifting one over his shoulder.

"Oh, if you insist." She gnawed at her lower lip and shifted her shoulders so she could lift her head.

Meeting her stare, a fine blush rose on his cheeks again. He cleared his throat. "If I'm doing something wrong, tell me." He gave her a devilish smile. "And if I'm doing it right, let me know."

Her breath caught in her chest. "Is this your first time?"

"No." He placed a kiss on her inner thigh, working his way north, and she'd forgotten what she'd asked. "But I'm not a player like most shifters."

He couldn't have said a more perfect thing, and she was laying claim on his werewolf ass. Nosferatu be damned. No one would chase her off.

She expected his first lick to be hesitant, but once again he surprised her.

With a sure, steady stroke between her nether lips, Rob paid back the blow-job she'd given him. She never considered it a favor. She'd wanted to taste him and to let him know her desires.

Resting his lean body on the bed, Rob looked like a man settling in for a good long time. Each lap got deeper and longer as he began to explore her inner secrets.

God help her, she moaned and leaned her head back on the pillow, resting her cuffed wrists on the bed. He took his time and brought her back to the edge of ecstasy. Her breaths became ragged as she fought against her release.

Running his tongue around her clit sent a jolt of pleasure straight to her brain.

"Rob!"

He latched on the area, sucking as he thrust his fingers into her pussy.

She clung to the edge, not wanting to go over just yet, needing this moment to last as long as it could. It might be the last time he ever touched her.

## Chapter 9

The bright, late afternoon sunlight drilled its way into Robert's consciousness through his eyelids and woke him. Its warmth spread over his body, but as he stretched he realized the heat didn't come from the sun but from the body pressed alongside him. He cracked open an eye.

Esther lay plastered across his chest, one leg thrown over his and her only free arm around his neck. Her face was turned up toward his with her lips parted. A sweet temptation. Her taste still lingered in his mouth. She'd cried out his name as she orgasmed last night over and over.

He'd released one wrist from the metal cuffs afterward so she could sleep more comfortably and was relieved she didn't pressure him for more than he was willing to offer her. When it came to Esther, he walked a tightrope of indecision. Part of him wanted to believe her sincerity, the other part thought he should have handed her over to Daedalus.

Any threat to the pack should be dealt with swiftly and without mercy. He ran a fingertip over her lush bottom lip. But was she a threat? She could be, but she could also be an asset. These last few days without Eric at his side showed him the pack lacked enough warriors.

His beast stirred. All she needed was one little bite or a nice deep scratch from him in his beast form and she could be his forever. The pack instinct would keep her from being a threat.

She moaned and pulled him closer, rubbing her face into his t-shirt.

It was nice fantasy, but he'd never do it on purpose. His conscience would eat him alive if he did. If she stayed at his side, he wanted it to be her choice.

The sharp ring of the pack cellphone startled both of them upright in bed.

Esther yanked at her restraint. "What the hell?" Brushing the hair from her face, she blinked and watched him crawl off the bed and answer the call.

He glanced at the caller ID and stifled a growl. "What do you want, Talon?" Robert sat on the edge of the bed with a very naked and soft Esther laying down in a daze next to him.

"We need to talk. Can you meet with me?" Talon replied.

"Yeah, I'll be at the pack's gathering hall in an hour."

"Fine." Talon disconnected the call.

The delicate touch of Esther's fingers searching under Robert's wrinkled shirt made him jump.

"Why such a serious face?" She inched closer, hooking her fingers in his jeans. She looked perfect in his bed. Sleep tossed hair formed a dark halo around her face and the thin sheet gathered around her waist, her exposed breasts drawing his gaze. Her heated blue stare was full of come-hither-and-ravish-me. Nothing would have pleased him more than to spend the day buried inside her.

But—there was always a *but* with Esther—he couldn't trust her. Not with something as fragile as his heart. A woman like her probably ate men like him for breakfast. He rubbed at the dull ache in his chest.

The action caused her gaze to drop, and she released her grip on his clothes. "Is there anything I can do to make things right between us?"

"Probably not. I'll always wonder if you're being sincere or just playing a part to get what you want."

She pulled her cuffed arm, and the metal rattled against the wooden headboard. "I want *you*. Fuck, I screwed things up so bad. I wish—I wish..." She turned her face away.

Those heartfelt words almost tore apart his resolve. But—he sighed and got a fresh set of clothes. There wasn't time to shower.

"Where are you going?"

"I never finished last night's mission. My troublemaking pack mate needs to be taught a lesson."

"You're not going alone."

He chuckled at the command in her tone. Naked and cuffed to a bed yet still thought she was in control. He could really fall in love with a woman like Esther. "I don't have much of a choice. It's too early for Daedalus to rise, and most of my roommates are at work."

"Most. Who's home? Take them." She pleaded with her eyes. "Hell, take me. Cuff me to your wrist if you have to. I can still use a gun with one hand."

He changed clothes in the same room. She'd seen him naked before. He felt her gaze roam over his body. "My friend, Sam, is still here. He'll watch over you." He pinned her with a glare. "I'll be very upset if anything happens to him while I'm gone."

The handcuff clanked as she tried to cross her arms over her chest. "Damn it." She flung her hands to her sides. "I'm not going to hurt anyone."

He raised his eyebrow and wished he could believe her.

"You should take me along. Don't go by yourself." She slid to the edge of the bed. "Please."

Lifting the key from the bedside table, he approached her.

She grinned and offered her restraint.

After unlocking the cuff, he grabbed hold of her waist and carried her to the bathroom.

"Wait! What are you doing?" Strong and agile, she squirmed in his grasp.

Dumping her on the cold tile floor, he pointed at her. "You want to earn my trust. You. Stay. Here." He ran his fingers through his hair. His thoughts flickered to the antacids in the kitchen cupboard. "I have enough problems, Esther. Do me a favor and don't add to them."

He gathered her clothes and tossed them in with her. Closing the door, he heard her grumbling under her breath, using his name in vain. With a shake of his head, he jammed the chair under the doorknob using his supernatural strength to ensure it stayed there. Bathrooms were meant to lock people out, not in.

Cutting across the hallway, he checked on the computer tracker's progress. It had finished tracing the email from Esther's account to a third party's account, but the kicker in his programming tracked it to the original sender.

The results made him slump onto his chair. What the fuck? It had to be wrong. He re-typed in the codes again then re-ran the program. It should be finished by the time he got home. The results didn't make sense.

Taking the stairs two at a time he descended to the basement, hoping Sam didn't have someone sharing his bed. It would be difficult discussing a prisoner in front of a stranger. He knocked on the bedroom door and it swung open.

Sam stood in only a pair of workout shorts. A set of free weights lay scattered around the room, and the buff werewolf pulled out his earbuds as he turned off the MP3 player at his hip. "Hey there, Sleeping Beauty. Get some action last night?" His voice dripped in sarcasm.

Robert barked out a laugh. "Why would you think that?"

"Tyler told me everything about the slayer you're hiding. I peeked in on both of you when no one showed up for breakfast. I needed to make sure she didn't try to off you again." He winked. "You both looked nice and cozy in that narrow bed of yours. Too bad she's a killer." He reached over and smacked Robert across the head. "What are you doing? She should be locked in the bathroom."

"Hey." Robert ducked the next swat and grabbed Sam's wrist. "I need you to keep an eye on her, dickhead. She's locked in the bathroom now." Releasing his well-meaning friend, he sighed. "And for the record, she shot me by accident and I haven't fucked her. Okay?" He glanced down the hallway at the vampire's man-cave where Daedalus slept during the day. "Make sure that's locked. I can't promise she won't try to kill Daedalus again."

"Sure." Sam's brow furrowed. "Where are you going?"

"I need to get—something from the corporate office. I'm falling behind on work."

"All right, I'll keep things tight here." Sam offered up his knuckles that Robert bumped with his own.

"I'll call and check in." Robert sprinted up the stairs, grabbed his keys and ran out the front door. On the stoop outside, he hesitated. The door had been unlocked. They always kept it secured. He glanced around, locked it, and then shook his head.

\* \* \* \*

Esther yanked on her leather pants and shoved her feet into her boots. What did Rob have against accepting help? She bet he didn't tell anyone from his pack what he was doing, let alone take one of them along.

Stomping to the window, she popped out the screen with an expert's ease and set it on the floor. She didn't have much time before he got to his car and drove off. The drainpipe held her weight as she shimmied down to a well-manicured garden.

How could he think she'd sit quietly in that bathroom all day while his life was in danger? Dread squeezed her heart with its sharp claws. He probably thought she *didn't* care.

No matter what happened she needed to make sure Rob was all right.

The brownstones all shared their side walls. There wasn't any way to the front except through the house or around the back alley.

She snuck to the sliding glass door on the stone porch. Pressing her body to the wall, she glanced into a large kitchen. The coast looked clear. She scanned the yard and ran to the toolshed. After finding two flat head screwdrivers, she returned to the glass door panel and popped it off the track enough to stress the latch lock mechanism. She shoved it open and squeezed inside, then shut it.

Taking one silent step at a time, she crept to the front. When Daedalus brought her into the brownstone last night he'd tossed his keys on the front entrance table. She spotted and grabbed them. Two male voices carried from the basement. Her heart skipped a beat and froze for a second before she unlocked the front door. Hurrying to Daedalus's sports car, she opened the door and got inside before Rob saw her.

She got behind the steering wheel and watched Rob hesitate at the front door before locking it. He jogged to a sedan, pulling out a few minutes later.

Following at a discreet distance, Esther kept the car within sight. They traveled to the interstate, then to an industrial park. The area appeared deserted, making it difficult to follow him. She needed to pull off the road before he recognized the vampire's car.

The move made her lose him. She drove around the park trying to figure out where the fuck he disappeared to. Hitting the steering wheel, she began to circle the warehouses hoping he parked in back of one.

At the third building, she found the car next to a blue Jeep but both were empty. She parked and jumped out, automatically reaching for her thirty-eight special, but the Nosferatu had disarmed her last night. Popping the trunk open, she prayed to find a tool chest filled with weapons but only found a tire iron.

Rob was around here somewhere, however, so was Talon.

## Chapter 10

The warehouse door swung closed behind Robert. It echoed inside the empty building and shut out the fading sunlight, leaving him entombed in darkness. He flipped the switch, and the neon lighting came on.

The Vasi used to gather as a pack here. Now, they met at a bar owned by a member in the downtown district. The warehouse held too many bad memories. When the Ayumu held Chicago the place was utilized for challenges and punishment. Frequently.

Those things didn't happen often anymore. Robert paced around the empty floor where Eric, his best friend, had taken a huge risk by facing the old alpha in combat. Eric had killed him. Continuing his tour down Nightmare Avenue, Robert passed the empty bleachers. He'd accompanied Eric that night into the arena as his beta, but he didn't know what that responsibility had entailed at the time.

Tonight, he finally got it. He needed to do the things to protect the pack no matter how it affected his conscience.

Talon wasn't leaving Chicago, and Robert needed to take care of this problem before Eric got home, for the pack, for himself, and for his best friend.

Glancing at his phone, he considered checking on Sam and reminding him to offer Esther a meal. When he got home later this evening he'd probably need to wear some armor before confronting her. She'd been pretty pissed when he dumped her in the bathroom, and she didn't like him meeting Talon alone or at least, she acted like it. Who knew with Esther? She may have been looking for an escape when she offered to accompany him.

The sound of a click made Robert spin around. Talon stepped into the warehouse holding his hands out to his side. "Hey, Bob."

Robert sighed at the name. So Talon would choose the hard way of dealing with him. No truce would be found tonight. "What problem do you have with me, Talon?"

"Not you specifically, runt, but the whole damn pack is turning into a bunch of pansies because of you and the Omegas. How long before some other pack comes in and takes over this city?"

"Only if you consider law abiding as weak."

"We're not human, Bob." Talon crossed the room and confronted him. "Why should we follow their rules?"

Robert hated the skip of his heartbeat as he met Talon's glare. Fear had a distinct smell, and if his pack mate caught a whiff of it he'd think he won.

According to Daedalus, a healthy dose of fear kept most warriors honorable, especially if doing wrong made them afraid. The fearless needed to be watched since they corrupted easily.



Talon never carried the scent of fear.

“I never said human laws. We follow the Accords like our ancestors did.”

A sneer emerged on Talon’s face, a werewolf of few intelligent words.

“If you called me out here for a challenge, then we’ll need some witnesses to make it official. I beat you once, I can do it again.” Robert kicked off his shoes and removed his t-shirt. Clothes became expensive when his beast tore through them every time.

“I brought witnesses.” Talon whistled. The warehouse door opened, and two werewolves Robert recognized stepped in. They’d been chased out of Chicago last year for not conforming to the new laws and alpha.

“Hey, Joshua and Charles. Long time no see.” Robert eased away, trying to assess the area for an escape.

They spread out, blocking the only unlocked door. Each began to strip, a bad sign.

His gut clenched. Three against one seemed like old-fashioned Ayumu strategy. “Eric would never consider you as a beta by using these tactics. Stop being a coward and challenge me properly.”

Laughing, Talon removed his clothes as his companions transformed to beasts. “This isn’t about becoming a pack beta, Bob.” He grinned. “This is a message to the Vasi. The Ayumu didn’t die with Michael. We’re gathering.” With this statement Talon transformed.

Robert didn’t wait for an invitation. He allowed his beast free reign and it exploded forth, tearing out of his body. This fight required speed and agility, not controlled change like he was used to. The pain of the sudden transformation almost blinded him.

Someone tackled his legs from the side, and he hit the concrete floor like a sack of potatoes. His head rebounded off the hard surface and Tweety Bird paid him a visit before he got twisted into a pretzel on his back.

A set of teeth tried to clamp around his neck, but his reflexes saved him by tucking in his chin and rolling. With teeth and claw, they attacked him as a group.

All those sparing sessions with Daedalus beating the crap out of him finally made sense.

He never heard or saw the door open, not a footstep, or even a shadow. The first Robert knew of Esther’s presence was the sound of a skull getting cracked.

Movement in the room stopped for a split second as the males counted heads and stared at one mean looking slayer wielding what looked like a—tire rod?

She didn’t hesitate as she hit Joshua on the back swing with cold professionalism.

Speechless by her appearance and inspired by her courage, Robert found the strength to heel kick the swaying Joshua, then roll onto Talon. Blood oozed from a multitude of wounds on Robert’s hide. He’d already lost a great deal when Esther wounded him and the healing had taken a lot of energy. One good night’s sleep and a sandwich hadn’t replenished his reserve, yet he still pinned the mangy mutt to the floor.

All of Robert's reluctance about killing disappeared as he watched Esther defend herself against the two other werewolves who'd recovered from her attack. He needed to keep her safe. With a roar, he launched himself, placing his body between them and Esther. He couldn't bear it if she got hurt, and every instinct in his DNA cried to protect her.

As their opponents circled them she placed herself at his back. "Stay close," she whispered.

They fought, attacked, and defended as if they'd been partners for years. Her speed and aim complimented his strength and agility. Together they weaved through their lethal dance, her with a tire rod and him with claws. Swing, thrust, block, and pierce. Their bodies knew each other, sensing the other's next move until only Talon remained.

Joshua and Charles had deserted him and Talon turned to follow.

Robert watched his female block the door with her slim, fragile human body. Pressure squeezed his chest as his heart stopped.

Legs apart, Esther took a swing at Talon's head as he sped toward her.

With unnatural grace he managed to duck and caught her around the waist. Twisting, he pressed her back to his chest, pinning her arms to the side. The clang of the tire rod hitting the cement echoed. Heavy breathing became the only sound to fill the silence as Talon glared at him. The fiend bent slowly until his intentions became clear.

Esther screamed and struggled, unable to break free. Their eyes met, and for the first time Robert saw terror in them.

No amount of speed or magic could have gotten Robert there in time, but he tried. Damn, he tried.

Talon bit her shoulder.

The scent of blood filled his nose and her cries of, "No, no, no—" filled his ears.

It made his soul cringe knowing that pain didn't cause her shouts but her awareness of the infection Talon gave her. Robert reached them before Talon could make the kill, grabbed his jaw, and pried it from her flesh.

Wrestling to the floor, Talon's claws dug into Robert's back, a spur of force driving him as he pinned Robert. Suddenly Talon slumped against his body, a dead weight crushing him.

He shoved the beast off and saw Esther looming above them, a bloody tire rod back in her hands. Robert shifted to his human form and scrambled to his feet, then removed the blunt weapon from her clenched fingers. "Esther?"

"The—the bastard bit me." She kicked the unconscious Talon. "Rabies filled cocksucker."

"I'll take you to the hospital. I heard that General is offering an experimental vaccine to treat the infection." He dressed in his discarded clothes.

\* \* \* \*

Watching Rob pull his shirt on inside-out and cram his feet into his shoes, Esther's distress eased. Things like this happened. Getting turned into a monster was one of the many risks slayers faced, but most died when it happened, some at their own hand. She owned a special bullet to use in this type of emergency, but watching Rob made her doubt she'd need it.

She removed her jacket and glanced at the wound on her shoulder. Blood seeped into her black shirt, leaving a dark wet spot. No way would she avoid being infected. The punctures were too deep.

Crap.

"Let's go." Rob picked her jacket off the ground, wrapped her in it, and lifted her in his arms. Worry lines creased his forehead.

"He bit my shoulder, not my legs. I *can* walk." If he got any sweeter she'd get a cavity.

He shoved the door open using his elbows and knees.

"We're just going to leave Talon here?" She tried to get a glimpse of the inert werewolf on the floor before the door closed.

Rob stomped toward his sedan when he did a double take. "Did you take Daedalus's car?"

"Yes."

"Better not take you home after the hospital. He's going to skin you alive."

"No, he's not." A familiar male voice spoke from behind them. "You've both been busy bees while I slept. Theft, assault, breaking and entering... Anything I'm missing?"

The vampire looked less than pleased, and Rob only clutched her tighter.

"Oh yeah, I forgot stupidity. What the hell is going on?" Daedalus planted his feet firmly on the pavement and crossed his arms over his chest. His pupils dilated, making them appear black. "I smell blood."

"She's injured. I'm taking her to the hospital."

The vampire stared at her, and for a split second she feared she'd be getting a second bite. He shook his head as if coming out of a dream.

"You're hungry." Rob made it a statement, not doubting what they'd both witnessed.

"Robert?" Esther used his full name for the first time and finally got his attention. "I'm not going to any hospital."

"Esther, you're in shock. You're going to at least get—"

"I'm not getting used as some lab rat." She raised her voice. "Put me down."

He blinked, then set her feet on the ground as if she were made of glass. "What about the virus?"

Her gut clenched. She pictured the special bullet she kept just for this occasion, then stared into Rob's concerned gaze. "I'll deal with it."

He frowned yet nodded. "Okay." Rubbing his chin, he glanced from her to Daedalus and back. "How did you both find me?"

Daedalus shrugged. "Easy. I have a tracer on my car. What I'd like to know is how Esther stole it. I have every security device known to man on it."

Quirking an eyebrow at him, she couldn't help but be impressed. Not many vamps his age converted to modern tech. "I took your keys."

"Well, I'll be damned." He grinned, flashing fang.

"Last I checked you already are." She faced Rob. "I do this for a living, remember?" Then she poked him in the chest with her finger at each word. "You always take back-up." She dropped her hand. "They would have killed you."

He stared at her, his expression softening. "You could have left the city or gone after him." He gestured to Daedalus.

"I know." She cleared her throat. "But I already watched you almost die once. Couldn't stand the idea of Talon finishing the job." Her gaze roved the ground going from discarded gum to pebble to crack until she felt a set of strong arms wrap around her. She lifted her face to find Rob close, his piercing green gaze boring into hers, then she winced as he tightened his grip. Searing pain shot through her shoulder.

"Sorry." He loosened his hold.

She touched under her jacket, and her fingers came out covered in blood.

"Fuck." Daedalus's fangs extended and he spun away, pacing as if caged. "Take her home already."

The door to the warehouse opened and Talon in beast form filled the space. A growl rumbled from him as he rubbed his head.

Rob shoved her behind him. "Talon, I'd like to introduce you to my buddy, Daedalus." He gestured to the hungry vampire. "Daedalus, I'd like you to meet dinner."

The Nosferatu's ears perked up. "Really? What happened to no killing?"

"I changed my mind." Rob turned to face her. "Let's go home."

## Chapter 11

The hot water from the shower stung as it cascaded over Esther's head and trickled into the bite mark on her shoulder. She stood still with the bar of soap grasped in her hand and her eyes closed.

She was a werewolf.

Losing her humanity had never seemed an option before today. She'd always kept a spare bullet to put through her head if she got infected. Rob changed everything. Now she had something to live for.

Who was Esther if not a slayer?

Daedalus had better take his time draining Talon dry and make him suffer for what he'd done to her. She tossed the bar of soap against the tiled wall.

The bathroom door creaked open. "I brought some fresh towels." Her uncertain future tied her soul in knots, but Rob's voice, filled with promises, melted something tight inside her chest.

Alone most of her life, Esther never understood how forlorn she'd been until meeting Rob. Even her dreams held a seat for one. How empty her life appeared, a big void of violence, money, and casual sex, which never touched her heart or her soul.

"Esther?" The shower curtain slid over. Rob held a folded thick, white towel and still wore his fucking shirt inside-out.

God, he was the most precious thing in the world. With a sudden sob, she hid her face in her hands, unable to stop the emotional onslaught that shook her shoulders and back.

"Oh no, Esther— Please, no." He shut the water off and wrapped her in the towel. Carrying her in his arms, he spoke gentle words that didn't penetrate the dark cloud of despair around her.

She didn't make much noise as the tears burned her cheeks. Her throat was out of practice when it came to crying and it got sore from the effort. She wiped her cheeks while the sobs faded and realized she sat on Rob's lap as he leaned against the sink cabinet.

"This is all my fault." He stroked her wet hair.

Pulling the towel tighter around her chest, she rested her head on his shoulder. "I don't remember you biting me."

"No, but I had the chance to kill Talon the night we met and I chickened out."

She lifted her chin to gaze at his face.

His thin lips frowned, regret filling his eyes.

"Well, if we're going to play this silly game, then I can be at fault too. I didn't need to follow you or try and block the door." She turned his face toward hers and placed a chaste kiss on his mouth. "Your turn."

He rewarded her with a small, crooked smile.

She grinned back. “What now? I mean, how long does it take for me to—to change?”

“Everyone is different. It all depends on how much virus transferred into your system. Usually, it takes a week to a month before you can shift shape.” He looked at the floor and cleared his throat. “There’ll be nightmares. It’s how the beast develops, and you’ll be on probation for a year, living with a mentor so you stay in control.”

She blinked at him, her mind gone blank. A mentor? Live somewhere else? What about her apartment in New York?

“If your beast takes over completely and you kill someone, no jury in the world will have mercy. They’ll destroy you. Having a mentor is important and non-negotiable with the Vasi.”

Overwhelmed, Esther nodded and stared at him, unable to ask the thousands of questions racing through her mind.

He must have sensed something, because he looked up from the floor at her. “If you want to be part of a different pack I’m sure my alpha can make arrangements. Don’t feel like you have to—I mean, I’d—we’d never force you to stay.”

Stay? Rob kept her safe, he understood her. Why would she go anywhere? “Can I stay?”

Relief flooded his expression. “Yes, of course.” He hugged her. “You’ve got time to adjust. It’s a big change, but we’ve all been through the same process. You’re not alone.” He squeezed her. “I’ll be there for you.”

Those five words were the nicest things anyone had ever said to her. She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him back. “Can you be my mentor?”

Stroking her hair, he leaned away and gave her a shy smile. The same one he’d given her the night they met. “I hoped you would ask. You’ll have to live here with us. I can move into the office across the hall, and you can have my room.”

“Your room? But I want...” She couldn’t finish her sentence. No matter what she did he wouldn’t ever trust her.

“What do you want?” Pushing some loose strands of hair behind her ear, he gazed into her eyes.

“You.”

\* \* \* \*

Robert released the breath he’d been holding. The drumming of his heart was the only thing he could hear. It made him lightheaded. “You say and do all the right things but...” There was always a *but* with Esther. Could he live with *buts* complicating his life?

Vulnerable, she clung to him, pleading with her eyes, not even trying to defend her actions. He didn’t think many people ever saw this side of Esther, his hardcore slayer.

He didn’t want a difficult relationship. “Are you going to break my heart, Esther?”

“What?” The shock on her face appeared genuine.

“I could fall in love with you.” He cupped her beautiful face within the palms of his hands. “I’m willing to take that leap and place my faith in you. Just—answer my question honestly.”

She placed her hands on his. "I'd never hurt you. Not on purpose, not even if *you* broke *my* heart."

She was going to become a werewolf. Her life would change, which meant no more slaying. She'd come to his aid when it was a three-to-one fight. Maybe he should trust her now.

He tossed his doubts out of his heart and mind. Esther belonged to him and he to her. As she developed into a werewolf their bond would grow and he'd have a true mate. Something he never considered possible. He grinned as he drew her mouth to his.

Dropping her towel, she draped her limbs around him.

The sharp flavor of mint greeted his tongue as he slipped it between her lips. A thousand pounds of responsibilities, anxiety, and stress dissipated with her taste.

With an aggression born of her nature, Esther tore at the buttons of his jeans.

Groaning as his erection strained in their confines, he removed her hands, not wanting their first time having sex to be on the bathroom floor. In a few hours Eric would be home and nothing short of the end of the world would take Robert from Esther's side.

When he stood, she clung to his hips and ground her pussy to his hard, needy cock. It pulsed. Damn, he would so fuck her senseless.

She squirmed in his arms while he hurried to the unmade bed, her soft, warm flesh inviting his hands to explore. With his knees, he hit the edge of the bed and he set her down.

Lying back, she stretched along the mattress in all her glorious nudity.

Robert stared. Words didn't exist for the gratitude he felt toward the odd series of events that led them to this moment. He undressed, then crept over her body.

Skin slid over skin. Her hard nipples traced along his chest, and she arched her back with a low moan.

He loved the way she reacted to his touch. It nurtured his confidence and hell, boosted his ego. She'd climaxed for him last night and called out his name. Tonight he would make her beg for it to never stop. Although, with the way she stared at him at the moment, it was possible he might end up being the one on his knees begging.

Cupping her breast in his palm, he brought her tight nub to his mouth and sucked in hard draws.

She grasped his shoulders, digging her nails into him. Her breaths came quickly.

The sharp pain aroused him more. It called to his beast who recognized the act as possessive. He growled his approval and worked her other firm mound. The scent of her arousal grew stronger. Dipping his hand between her thighs to her wet pussy, he slipped his fingers into her hot velvet.

Her moans grew louder, more desperate, while he thrust his digits inside. With his thumb, he searched for that special spot, the elusive clitoris. Her sharp cry signaled his discovery and he massaged the spot, taking it for a test drive.

Her hips rolled in an inviting manner. Rotating and grinding, she helped him stimulate her pleasure point.

The beast and human side of Robert shared his body equally, both wanting Esther. Instinct became logic as her new scent carried the innate flavor of pack, and more importantly, she smelled like his. He nipped the bud he suckled with his teeth, experimenting with the fine edge of pain and pleasure.

The muscles in her pussy clenched around his fingers, wetness soaking his hand. Her moans became higher in pitch as she achieved her climax. The first of many, he hoped.

As if melting, Esther's body molded to the mattress and pillows. Pride swelled his chest as a lazy smile graced her face.

He finally understood why some wars were fought over women. Nothing would take her from him without a fight. His cock pressed against his abdomen, demanding attention.

Esther spread her knees. Glistening and slick, her nether lips were flushed the same shade of pink as her cheeks. "Do you need a written invitation?"

"Anxious?"

She gave a deep laugh. "Damn right I am. I've wanted you since the day we met." Reaching between his thighs, she stroked him with a feathery touch.

A shiver shook his body. He closed his eyes, resting his forehead on her shoulder while he growled his approval.

"Three days is a long time to wait, Rob." Esther's advances grew more aggressive. Stroking with both hands, she showed no mercy and milked his cock.

Of their own accord, his hips thrust in time. He gripped the bedding and tried to catch his breath. By some miracle he kept from coming, even though her hands felt so fucking great. After a few more strokes he noticed his erratic breathing, and he sat back between her bent legs and removed her hands.

She was perfect for him, driving and challenging him in life and in bed. He grabbed her ass and lifted her pussy to meet his cock. The heat of her cream slipped over his tip and he rubbed his stiff rod at her entrance, barely penetrating.

It drove *her* wild.

And she drove *him* over the edge. He shoved inside of her to his balls.

His name left her lips and she dug her nails into his ass, pulling him even deeper.

Everyone in the house must have heard her. He grinned and thrust harder, faster, so she'd do it again. Once he started pounding inside her, he didn't care if she shouted out the alphabet backward. Secret muscles squeezed him like no hands ever could. Smooth and soft, her pussy enveloped him as he burrowed deeper.

He wanted more, needed to spread his scent all over her so every male would know she belonged to him. His momentum drove Esther to the headboard.

To avoid getting a concussion she sat and grabbed his shoulders. She wrapped her legs around his waist.



Unbelievably, he sank even deeper. From the shocked expression on her face he knew his eyes had changed color again. She always seemed taken when they became his beast's amber. The transformation was close, only a fraction of will kept him and the beast from merging, but he'd been this close before and knew how to control his change.

Esther's gasp rewarded his efforts as he channeled the beast's size into his cock.

"Oh shit, Rob." She flung her head back, exposing her graceful neck.

Bracing her back to the wall by his bed, he bit her shoulder. Thrust after hard thrust, sweat beaded on her smooth skin and some trickled down his back. The springs of his bed squealed, and his wall creaked from the abuse.

Esther's cries of encouragement kept him going. They changed in pitch all of a sudden. Her pussy grabbed hold of his cock as if made of iron, leaving him at her mercy until his seed poured into her. A howl tore from his throat.

Silence blanketed the room after his declaration. Robert kneeled and gathered his Esther into his arms. The next year would be tough on both of them. He'd just witnessed Spice's adaptation with Eric as her mentor and he knew what to expect—a lot of chaos.

Esther's blue eyes met his.

He'd love every second of it.

The front door closed and Eric's voice shouted, "We're home. What'd we miss?"

Robert glanced at the pack cellphone on his bedside table. He'd keep it and give his alphas one more day of rest. There wasn't a problem out there he couldn't handle.

## About Annie Nicholas

[http://www.lyricalpress.com/annie\\_nicholas](http://www.lyricalpress.com/annie_nicholas)

From my Vermont home, I create paranormals with a twist. Finding the right kind of twist for each story proves to be a challenge, especially in a series.

I struggled to find the right woman for Robert. All the month of August 2010, I wrote and wrote from his point of view trying to find the core of what I wanted. Ten thousand words later, I hit delete and erased it all. With a new start, I met Esther. Hard-ass killer, confident, and competent, the total opposite of my hero. A perfect match. A perfect twist.

Annie's Website:

[www.annienicholas.webs.com](http://www.annienicholas.webs.com)

Reader eMail:

[annienicholas@ymail.com](mailto:annienicholas@ymail.com)

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