



8

DEE TENORIO

TEMPTING
the ENEMY



Detective Pale Rysen, an Alpha, is determined to secretly rebuild the Wolf packs from the ashes of genocide. When a killer starts picking off young females looking for sanctuary, it's his job to protect them. Forced to work with a hated enemy, he fears his cover will be blown.

Jade-Scarlet's membership in the powerful Order of the Sibile has always been controversial. A half-wolf, Jade's unstable psychic powers are a disappointment to her mercenary handlers. So when the Oracle commands her to work with Pale, Jade must prove herself...even if it means challenging the enigmatic shifter.

Yet Pale triggers more than her curiosity. He sends her into Heat, and the intense sexual attraction could mean losing control of her gifts—something she can't allow. As the number of victims rises, so does the danger. A murderous darkness wants them both dead. But even if they stop the killer, how long can they fight each other?

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Tempting the Enemy

Dee Tenorio



For Alisa Rowley,
longtime friend and the person who first believed there
was more to this story than even I imagined. (Incidentally,
also first to demand I go find out what it was.)
Thanks for everything.

Prologue

Shae trudged through the snowdrifts, her feet sinking nearly to the knee with each step. Cold seeped into her bones, but she didn't dare stop. Holding the bundle high against her chest, she pushed harder. It wasn't far now. Another mile through the trees. Maybe less.

If only she knew what chased her. It had been following, though she couldn't say how closely, since she left the road. That she knew of. It could have been following since the last checkpoint, even, and only revealed itself now. Sparing another fearful glance over her shoulder, she looked past the mist of her own breath on the night air for some sign of the person, maybe even the thing, that had come with her into the forest.

Nothing.

But she sensed it... Just because she couldn't smell it or see it in the shadows of the black trees or hear it crunching through the white snow didn't mean it wasn't there. She could feel it. It was nothing good.

She gave a shriek as her foot suddenly dropped deeper into the snow, throwing her off-balance onto her hands. The bundle at her chest wriggled desperately. Gasping, she gathered it close, peeling back the blanket layers to check the baby's face for signs of pain.

Once again, she wondered if this was the right move to make, but the second-guess was gone almost before it formed. The baby would have a better chance this way. Freedom was the only gift she could give to her.

Thankfully, the sleeping infant was more startled than hurt. She settled again when Shae made shushing noises. It took time, precious time, but she got the baby back to sleep, tightening the straps that bundled it to her chest before finding her footing again.

She made it five more steps before the first sound scared her nearly out of her skin. An angry hissing roar that echoed in her ears long seconds after it passed. If she didn't know better, she'd swear the sound had circled her, inches from her face. She had only time to gasp, her throat preparing to scream, and it was gone.

Panting, adrenaline rushing like an overflowing river through her veins, Shae did the only thing she could think of. She ran.

Arms tight around the baby, she skidded, crunched and sloshed through the snow, barely finding solid ground before she rushed to the next step.

Too much noise.

She wanted to obey the Instinct, but fear ruled her. This hunter was no pack of lustful wolves. Not even a death squad determined to end her. She didn't know what this was, but it was toying with her. She lurched backward at another hissing threat from between two trees, already changing direction.

South. Head south.

Half a mile. That was all. But Shae could feel the truth in her soul as the terrifying noise struck her spine, the sensation more frigid than the snow, nearly overturning her again. She wouldn't reach the last stop on the Underground, wouldn't have the chance to plead with the new Alpha she'd heard about. The one rebuilding the packs. To have come so far, escaped being caught over

and over again because the dream of safety—a future for her child—kept her going despite the dragging hunger and exhaustion, only to know she'd never had a chance to get there tore the few remaining pieces of her soul.

She pulled the strap at her shoulder, loosening the bundle. There wasn't much time left. She was almost to the cottage. A few hundred yards more and the Alpha would hear her if she screamed. He'd hear, but not with enough time to do anything about it. The animosity she tasted in the air wouldn't end in anything but death. Her last seconds, though, would be spent ensuring that the only death would be her own.

She pulled the baby free, spotting a small gap between two roots of a nearby tree. She yanked off her wrap and added the layers around the infant. Her bag joined the small, pitiful pile. It would have to be enough. She didn't take even the time to say goodbye. She simply ran.

The sounds, ricocheting like echoes in a cave, nipped at her heels, pelting her like stones. Still, she ran. The pressure came from the left, then the right, broadsiding her with force enough to send her spiraling into the snow. She didn't care. As long as it followed her, the baby had a chance. Instinct demanded she roll onto her knees, scramble forward and move again. *Shift.*

She considered it. The Instinct was never wrong, but it was striving to keep *her* alive. If she shifted, she might outrun this hunter, but who knew if she'd be fast enough to circle back in time to save the baby from his wrath. No. She remained in human form.

Icy air surged in and out of her lungs, burning and sharp as blades in her throat. *Is this punishment?* she wondered in the back of her mind. For not wanting the

child that had been forced on her? She'd done her best; it wasn't good enough. She was weak and couldn't protect the pup.

She crested the last hill, able to see a cottage in the distance. Smoke rose from the chimney, steady and dark. Relief surged through her.

No, not punishment. This was a chance to save the baby. The last gift she'd been given in this harsh existence she'd known. The Alpha would make sure her daughter knew a better one.

Before she could take another step, something grabbed her arm, spinning her around. Her eyes went wide in horror at the sight in front of her. She'd known it wasn't human, but she'd never imagined *this*.

The scream that tore from her lips was not from fear. Her body jerked at the impact of the bones in her chest breaking, sinews and flesh tearing in a single, vicious strike. Blood speckled her lips, dripping from her chin even as life left her eyes.

Her body fell in a discarded heap. The snow beneath her turned dark, melting under the heat of the still-warm flow. Moments later, half of her heart dropped to the ground, forgotten.

Chapter One

“They’ve called in the Sibile.”

The words silenced what had been a bustling roomful of homicide detectives for a full second. Someone at the back of the squad room swore amidst the sudden rush of groans and whispered objections. The crashing sound of a heavy folder being tossed haphazardly to the desk scraped Pale Rysen’s ears almost as much as the news.

If there was one thing he didn’t need right now, it was one of those damn witches underfoot.

He shook his head and sighed, closing the file he’d already read countless times. Complaining wouldn’t do any good. The higher-ups resorting to the Sibile—basically robbing him and the rest of the Violent Crimes Unit of their case—wasn’t much of a surprise. A Sibile with the right kinds of “gifts”—sometimes psychic, sometimes just fucking creepy—could crack a case in seconds flat. With the killer’s sudden acceleration, part of him had expected it. Dreaded it, but it was only a matter of time before the city’s political leaders became desperate. He couldn’t even blame them.

But he could sure as hell resent them.

“When?” he asked, attempting to sound unconcerned but his gruff voice still cut through the increasingly pissed protests. No one had seen a real bed in three days. Just parts of dead bodies, countless people in the area of the body dumps, and rivers of shitty coffee. Jake Kennison, the captain Pale liked about as much as an itch on his ass,

had been on duty just as long, getting by with naps in his office chair every twenty hours or so.

“Sometime tonight. Any minute, really. But don’t give me any shit about it, they didn’t ask my opinion. I just work here.” At least Kennison didn’t seem to be looking forward to it either. But Pale figured at least one part of the man’s unease was the knowledge that the woman existed at all. In that respect, they were on the same page. “The chief offered to let her come in the morning, but apparently she prefers to work nights. Whatever the hell that means.”

“Maybe she’s too ugly for daylight,” Jorgensen called out from the back of the room, refilling his coffee by the sounds of it.

“Like that ever stopped you.”

Laughter drowned out any response Jorgensen could have made, not that Pale paid more than cursory attention. His mind stayed on the incoming Sibile.

Why would she prefer nights? Unless she was stronger at night, which didn’t make a whole hell of a lot of sense. Phases of strength meant phases of weakness, and the Sibile didn’t admit to having those. Rumor had it the weak didn’t live long in the enclaves.

Kennison’s gaze darted in Pale’s direction. The captain didn’t like him much as a rule. His near-smile didn’t bode well. “Since you’re already on point for this case, Rysen, you’ll be her liaison, reporting to me directly. Understood?”

Well, fuck. Not that he gave the captain more than a lazy shrug.

Kennison’s eyes narrowed. He hated it when Pale pulled that shit. Of course, he’d hate it a hell of a lot more

if Pale gave in to the urge to show him which of them was truly the dominant, so Pale didn't bother with guilt.

"This is the Woodsman's third victim," Kennison continued to the room at large, still bristling. "We've got nothing but three unidentifiable bodies, and the bastard knows it. We need help if we're going to stop there from being more. The Sibile might be our only chance so I don't want to hear a goddamn word out of anyone in this unit but *please* and *thank you* when she gets here."

Only an idiot would put being rude to the Sibile high on their to-do list. Not even shifters liked to mess with mercenaries trained to be powerful, vengeful and remorseless. Still, the guys in the VCU weren't exactly on good terms with the formality the Sibile were so dedicated to. They could accidentally offend her just by offering to shake her hand with sticky fingers.

That alone could get Old Carter killed. Jorgensen would probably hit on her at least twice because the man was a compulsive womanizer. Graves and Henlen would probably be okay. They were married so at least had a clue how not to talk to women. The kid, Tallson, could be a tossup. For himself, Pale knew right away he'd be offensive as hell. He didn't have it in him to kiss a Sibile's ass.

"Anything she wants or needs, you do and you give with a smile. Pissing off the Sibile in any way is an automatic suspension, without pay. Am I clear?"

More grumbling filled the room, but the captain took it for the agreement it was and headed back into his office. Not for the first time, Pale wished he could head into a room with walls and a door too. It wouldn't do, though.

"Hey, Rysen!"

Pale rotated his chair so he could eye the new kid silently. Victor Tallson had only been on the squad for four months. Young, fairly smart, if a little too interested in women to concentrate hard enough on his cases. He'd grow up. At least, Pale hoped he would. One could never say for sure in a place like Moonridge.

"You ever worked a case with one of the Sibile before?" the kid asked conspiratorially.

"No." Proof that luck failed everyone eventually.

Victor made a disappointed noise.

Belatedly Pale realized the kid was probably more interested in the fact that any Sibile outside the enclave had to be female. Would it even help to warn the kid that pretty faces and red robes generally hid nothing but treacherous souls and selfish intentions?

Not likely.

After a few seconds, Victor was back. "You think she can really help?"

Probably. Pale could hate them, hate every last one of them, but even he couldn't claim they were ineffective. "Depends on what she can do."

"They're a bunch of fuckin' gypsies," Carter, the oldest of the squad, offered just as Pale felt a strange tingle down the back of his neck.

Not the bad kind, where his hair stood on end, but some kind of warning all the same. He turned his head toward the open double doors across from his desk, inhaling a deep breath. A new scent drifted to him, distinct from the usual grime and wear inside the department. Warm honey. Cloves. Citrus soap under the light salt of sweat. *Female.*

He narrowed his eyes, forcing himself to remain still. That scent. It grew stronger, more intoxicating. Drugging. His body went rigid in response, a hunger he didn't allow himself to feed roaring to life.

No, not just female. Shifter. Wolf.

A female *without* imprint.

The scent was causing the warning and not just because she wasn't imprinted. The driving surge streaking down his spine came from something else on her scent, the musky tang so faint but hypnotizing to any male Wolf who came within a mile of her.

Good God, she was in season.

He almost preferred the thought of the Sibile. At least with one of them, he had a minute chance to avoid detection. But with Heat filling his senses, hiding his Wolf nature was practically impossible. Much longer and it would hit rock bottom on his list of priorities—everything would come second to claiming her.

He reached for the cell phone clipped to his belt. She needed transport. *Now*. He stabbed the autodial. It only rang once before his brother picked up. "I've got a stray," he said quietly, knowing Aaron would hear it far easier than anyone in the squad room.

"I'm due in court in ten minutes."

Shit, Pale knew that. In his haste, he'd hit the code, dialing Tate instead. Or his hands were shaking, an effect of the female moving closer. "In season."

"I'll call Aaron. Try not to breathe." Tate rang off, his ridiculous advice as useless as it was sobering. A stray female without imprint should be celebrated. Protected. It was what they'd all been working toward for fifteen long years. Someplace safe, where shifters could be free, where a female had a chance. A *choice*.

What they hadn't worked toward was the idea that one would find him in the Moonridge police station, threatening all they'd built by being a walking, talking, shape-shifting grenade. How the hell had a stray even found him *here*?

Reason finally cleared his mind, gave him room to breathe again. No way a stray was there *looking* for him. She couldn't even be searching for the Alpha. She might just be in custody. Or simply looking for help. In either case, she had to be young. Fourteen or fifteen at most to still be unmarked. Even inebriated by Heat, he was a better Wolf than to forget that.

Still, the scent beckoned, growing stronger. Richer. He shuddered in his seat, fighting to keep his mind moving. She had to be coming closer. Up the stairs, maybe. All the way to the third floor. But the scent wasn't right. Muddled. Covered by something else. Something...*other*.

Instinct rode Pale to find her. Taste her scent right from the source and claim her as quickly as possible. As thoroughly as possible. Until neither of them could move. His vision blurred at the thought, imagination superseding reason. Pressing deep into wet depths, losing himself in the sweat and the scent of her, silken thighs and womanly groans...

He kept his seat—and control—by the skin of his teeth, reminding himself this would be no passionate adult, eager for his touch. This would be a terrified child, fleeing from rape, who would most likely be horrified by the sight of him.

The growl from his throat escaped before he realized he'd even meant to make a sound.

Carter, far enough back, didn't hear it over his own tirade. "A Sibile ain't no guarantee we're gonna catch this guy. For all we know, the city just paid out the ass for some ugly bitch who has to touch the guy to tell if he's guilty. What's she gonna do, give a hand job to every unlucky bastard she meets?"

"Well, there goes *my* surprise for the night," came a feminine dose of disgusted sarcasm from just outside the doors, tamping down the male chuckles like a fire extinguisher. She walked out of the shadows from the hall, dressed head to toe in black, no humor at all in her stunning face.

Pale's senses began to ring, zeroing in on her.

That *is no child*. He sucked in a breath, the tightness of his body turning painful at the sound of her husky voice. A woman, fully grown, untainted by the scent of a male embedded in her skin. A *beautiful* woman, ripe and incensed, the room all but vibrating with her presence. Her Heat...

In this day and age, he'd have said it wasn't possible. But there was no mistake on the scent. Honey, cloves and Heat. Sweet, mind-numbing Heat. But even as he separated the flavors of her, he knew there was something more. Something he hadn't scented in years... Confusion warred with Instinct.

She smelled like a Sibile, he realized, recoiling inwardly.

His stomach clenched with irrational anger. How could *she* be the stray? Her hair, bound up in those strange braids and that weird bowl-shaped thing at the back of her neck, should have been a giveaway. But it hadn't. Because he'd been getting drunk on her scent.

Because he'd been so busy looking for a child, expecting a flowing red cape to only interrupt his search.

How the hell was he supposed to deal with a stray who happened to be *Sibile*?

"Which is really unfortunate," she continued, oblivious to how closely she courted danger by moving any closer to him, "because I was just thinking how much I've been looking forward to sexually servicing an overweight, over-aged, loudmouthed fool." Her golden gaze swept over Carter—noting his lined face, receding hairline and widely expanded middle—and clearly found him lacking. "I suppose I'll learn to live with the disappointment."

Someone dropped a pencil, someone else brought his dropped jaw back into place with a clap of his teeth and, unwisely, Victor Tallson began to snicker. The solid slap sound Pale attributed to Carter smacking the back of Tallson's head in retribution. Voices started again, meaning the squad had shifted to business as usual rather than deal with the newcomer.

Her gaze darted from man to man, a frown drawing her fine brows together. She was searching for something. Him, most likely, given the tension in her stance. Or any male Wolf she deemed worthy. He drew a deep breath, no longer concerned about the drugging effect. He'd need a hell of a lot more than Heat to consider imprinting a *Sibile*.

Pale eyed his phone briefly. Aaron would need to be called and rerouted. But this wasn't the place for those instructions.

She wiped her brow with her sleeve, bringing his attention to her flushed cheeks and the fine sheen of sweat

on her face. She tugged at the high-necked collar of her knit sweater, nearly panting. Despite the snow outside, she looked as if she were burning alive. Was it the effect of the Heat? Or had she come from a fight to defend herself? His revulsion gave way to unwilling concern. She didn't look damaged, no scratches or bruises. Could she have traveled here on foot? Unprotected, in this state?

Instincts he was more familiar with demanded he check the perimeter and see that she hadn't been followed, hadn't attracted one of the few other Wolves in the precinct. It wouldn't be unreasonable to expect an ambush in place as she left, even if another male picked up on the Sibile flavor to her scent. Hell, in a Heat situation, another male might not even notice it.

This just got worse and worse.

She scanned the room as he scanned her, taking advantage of his advance knowledge. Thinking clearer now, he had no question in his mind that she was a Sibile. Power radiated off her like a solid force. Ten feet away and he could feel it pushing against him almost as hard as the scent pulled. A scarlet in Wolf's clothing. What would be the point? Did her precious Order even appreciate the danger she was in?

Probably not. The Sibile were too damn arrogant. They'd learned nothing from the Cataclysm.

This one, though, tempted him to teach her a lesson she'd never forget. Snug black pants and a turtleneck hugged a small but compact frame. Lushly curved with strong lines from head to toe, including the sleek calf-length black boots. Black hair, thick as his own, slicked back into intricate braids from either side of her head, disappearing into that large bowl-shaped clamp at the back of her neck. Fair skin, light as the moon, a heart-

shaped face with a pert chin and a slim nose. Brown eyes, so light they could only be called golden, glittered with intelligence. Anger.

And they'd settled on him. "Hoping for a strip search?"

Damn. Caught and he hadn't even noticed. Pale met her gaze, arrested in a completely new way. She didn't startle. Women always started around him, even his own kind. Especially his own kind, though they'd come to him for help. All she did was cross her arms and give him a mutinous lift of her chin in challenge. Interest flared brighter in his gut.

She definitely had no idea how precarious an edge she stood on.

Her red lips trembled as she glared at him, her eyes narrowing and her power pushing harder against his skin. No, not a tremble. One side lifted in a feminine snarl he had to focus over the din of his heartbeat to hear. She was *growling* at him.

She probably meant to be threatening, but the effort only struck him as...cute.

Tate would never let him live it down if he found out Pale had even thought such a word, but there it was. The supposedly frightening and deadly Sibile was about as menacing as a newborn pup. He leaned his head to the side, trying to decide what to think of her beyond the instinctive desire to drop her to the ground and mark her.

Her beauty was a given, the Sibile's stock in trade, but there was something hotblooded to her fine features that appealed far more than the perfect symmetry. Her lack of prissy decorum set her apart the way nothing else could. The color in her cheeks, the faint parting of her

lush lips, the flash in her eyes. Every aspect of her face expressed frustration and defiance. She'd never pull off that haughty façade the Sibile were known for.

Too much temper, he decided, surprised to note his own appreciation. Next to the tilted, glittering eyes, he liked her upper lip best, just the tiniest bit fuller than the bottom. He noticed something peculiar then. Tips of her teeth were peeking out near the corners.

"You *can't* be talking to Saint Palentine." Jorgensen's oh-so-appealing remark interrupted their mutual stare, leading to a loud laugh that grated on Pale's eardrums. It also reminded him there were others in the room, something the female seemed to remember as well, because she blinked suddenly and glanced around.

Her gaze returned to him, though, with a questioning squint as she looked him over again.

A chair wheeled backward with a squeak, which meant Jorgensen was on the move. A little older than Pale, a lot friendlier and apparently everything women found attractive, Jorgensen rarely had to work to grab a woman's grateful attention, so Pale knew it wouldn't take long for this Sibile to become equally captivated. He waited to be relieved. All he felt was a decidedly strong desire to tear out the other detective's throat and lay it at her feet for a gift.

"Lady, you're barking up the wrong tree. No one around here is even sure this guy's human." Jorgensen winked at Pale as he passed in front of him to get closer to their visitor.

Pale gave him the finger.

The other man stumbled, surprised, but he quickly turned from the gesture, regaining his composure in the blink of an eye. "He's on the clock, which means you're

not registering anywhere on his radar as anything other than animal, mineral or vegetable.”

The oversize blond man circled the desks, hand extended toward the Sibile. There were better reasons to hate a man than disliking his success rate with women, but in that moment, it was a good enough excuse. Damn Heat.

“On the other hand,” Jorgensen added, deepening his baritone, “*my* radar sees you just fine.”

The Sibile stared, taking Jorgensen’s measure as he came closer, pointedly ignoring his hand. Eventually, he got the clue and put his palm back in his pocket. Pale felt something in him thrill at the rejection. Not a good sign.

“I’m Detective Chris Jorgensen.” The introduction rang hollow without the oozing charm. “You must be our Sibile.”

Her gaze flickered with dislike, whether for the idiot or his casual reference to her race, Pale couldn’t be sure. She edged away from him like a bad smell. “I’ve been instructed to report to Detective Palen Rysen.” Her gaze sought Pale again, this time from the corner of her eye.

A muscle ticked in Jorgensen’s jaw, but the man admitted defeat easily enough, with a casual sweep of his hand in Pale’s direction. “Looks like you’ve got your man then.”

Her hot eyes locked on Pale, her scent seeming to bloom around her in a burst, pulling at the leash he kept around himself with a near-vicious tug. If he didn’t know better, he’d even swear the whole room took on a fine red haze, spiking his need. Just like that, his defenses to the pheromone pull cracked.

This had to be some kind of game the Order was pulling. A trap.

For a heartbeat, he couldn't dredge up the ability to care.

She moved like silk in water. Smooth, rippling with possibilities. She'd be strong enough for him, he could tell. She wasn't fragile, wouldn't break. Those long legs were made for wrapping around his waist, holding on tight while he feasted.

The Instinct all but roared, pounding in his ears like a chant. *Take her.*

His blood thickened, his body already hard and heavy with need. He could almost taste her, and his teeth ached to test her nubile flesh. The ways he would bend her, drive her to satisfaction, flashed in his mind.

Claim her, it demanded without mercy, each thought textured with sensation until he almost swore he could feel her wrapped around him in every way a woman could.

The Instinct had no care for the pains he took in public to build his life or the people he protected with it. For the vow he'd made long ago to never take a female's choice from her. It saw a fresh young woman, ripe and ready to take his seed.

Make her yours.

He strained to keep his hands spread on his desk as she came closer, each step measured, each breath heightening his senses until they arrowed to a point set firmly on her. Then she stood there, in front of his desk, her amber irises taking in more than his expression. He could practically feel her tasting the air around him, scenting him for suitability.

Choose, he willed, not sure if he wanted to be found worthy or not. Sane thinking said no. But he wasn't exactly sane right now, not by human standards and, many would say, not by Wolf. A strong male in his prime should be stalking *her*. Taking her and any challenger fool enough to interfere. Pale only sat in his chair, perfectly still, waiting to be judged.

A long second later, she put out her gloved hand carefully, purposefully. "Jade-Scarlet." Her red lips parted to reveal even white teeth.

Except for the slightly lengthened ones, top and bottom, that he'd mistaken for slightly longer-than-usual incisors. Definitely not, he realized as her eyes turned sleepy. Inviting. Hungry.

Canines.

Her voice softened until only he could hear. "In case you were wondering, you can classify me as...*animal*."

Chapter Two

I hate Destiny. No, that wasn't it. She hated Jalla-Rouge's *interpretation* of Destiny. Or maybe she just hated that Jalla never shared the *full* interpretation, which would come in handy at times like these.

Jade was tired, sore, irritable. The day had started off much like any other in the enclave. Birds tweeting in the trees. Sunlight slowly creeping into her dorm through the French doors that led to their small balcony. Waking fully to the sound of her best friend and dorm mate, Sage, already talking in her mind. Sage's telepathy was of unimaginable strength and, unfortunately for Jade, at times completely inescapable.

Except this day Sage was scared. This day, the Tribunal had summoned Jade to their most sacred chambers.

Sage had been right to be afraid.

Even now, Jade could still feel the stings and aches from the "tests" she'd been put through, administered by the Magistrate herself. To make sure she was worthy of the assignment. Tests Jade still wasn't entirely sure she'd passed. In fact, the only thing she did know for sure was that Magistrate Verda-Rouge had taken far too much pleasure in her duties.

With little more than a piece of paper and a pack she'd filled in a few minutes, she was ordered to begin the journey into Moonridge. Well, a paper, a pack and a few final instructions from her mentor.

“Walk into the city without your robe,” Jalla said as they walked to the gates of the enclave together, her voice as serious as always. “When you enter, you must be a woman, not a scarlet.”

The three-mile walk from the enclave to town became nearly five, because the police station hadn’t exactly been built at the edge of city limits. The temperature dropped as Jade walked, so that her breath felt icy with each draw, but for some reason she was unable to make herself ignore the order that Jalla had given her.

She was a woman, all right. A woman who was cold and miserable and fed up beyond words. “Follow the pale light,” Jalla had said. As if everything hinged on finding it.

Unfortunately, knowing Jalla, everything did.

So Jade used her gift, opened herself to the colors she could see as clearly as one saw sunshine through the trees.

The signatures of hundreds of beings, some like stains, marred the walls in the station, the very air, one on top of the other, making her want to gasp and hold her breath at the same time, until she saw the beautiful, nearly solid streak of blue light, so subtle a shade it was nearly white. Like a psychic slap, it struck every other signature from her mind and there was no question of following it. The vivid blue streak somehow flowed around her, threatening to touch her, leading her up stairs and through halls without requesting permission—something she couldn’t remember ever seeing a signature do. As if it were an entity all its own.

Which made no sense. Signatures couldn’t move on their own. Weren’t sentient. But this one seemed to be,

and intent on luring her in. The closer it wrapped around her, the more parts of her felt as though they were coming awake from a long drugged sleep.

With every step, her body warmed from the inside out. Her blood turned thick, sluggish. Hot. In her belly, low and deep, something changed. The sensation was curious at first. Like rubbing fingers coated in oil together. Then startlingly, it grew into an ache that throbbed in her core. By the time she reached the doors of the Violent Crimes Unit, every hair on her skin sizzled with awareness, and the throb stung. Her head pulsed. And her power... She didn't know what to do with it all. It filled her, charged the air around her, flowed as if it were searching for something as well.

Desperate to clear her head, she closed her psychic eye, shutting out the signature that now blared too brightly. She felt tied in it, tangled by its strength and raw masculinity no matter how she tried to pull clear.

Not being able to see it only stopped the acceleration of the feeling. It didn't go away. Neither did the insistent throbbing in her head. Not when she snapped at the crowd of men talking about her in such crude terms, or when the large blond man, his smile so practiced and assuming, presumed to attempt to touch her. Especially not when she was pointed to the detective she'd been ordered to find. The one who'd been watching her so intently.

Actually, that was when it grew worse. The throb became her heartbeat, her headache blazed into a haze, and her body shivered while her belly clenched tight. All because she met those barely blue, ghostly light eyes and realized what he was.

Wolf.

Like lightning, her psychic eye opened on its own, and the aura of his signature almost blinded her. She stood in the tendrils of his color, wrapped in his emotional scent. It flooded her, stuttering her heartbeat and warming her blood like liquor after a rainstorm. Want. Need. Hunger like she'd never known.

Part of her questioned what these feelings meant, what she was supposed to do with them, but another part, that newly awake part, reveled as if stroked by a firm hand. The hypersensitivity rang her senses more, but nothing made it through the yearning she felt in her belly. She *needed* to touch him. Feel him, head to toe, skin to skin. To wrap herself around him until he was hers. Hers and no one else's.

He watched her, expressionless behind the thick black beard that covered most of his face. His firm bottom lip made her mouth water but the intensity of his stare made her burn. Ebony hair fell in artless hanks, some right into his eyes, shrouding him in shadow. But she could still see him, a predator watching and waiting patiently for his prey to move closer. To come within reach.

Rational thought intruded for a second, wondering why she was so suddenly ready to devour him when, only seconds before, she'd been ready to claw him for daring to stare at her. The way she felt, the urge to run her teeth over him and mark him, were these his wants or her own? His strange signature seemed to be melding their thoughts and feelings and she lost track, but recklessly, she didn't care. She *wanted*. It felt so *good* to want.

She crossed the room to him, their gazes locked the entire time. The closer she came, the stronger the need.

Images flickered in her mind, blue and midnight, impressions of her own body, twined with his. Her thighs open and clamping around surging hips, her head thrown back while he licked at her flesh. Bit. *Feasted*. Intense pleasure, satisfaction...and *heat*. Like fire everywhere, leaving her parched, making her shudder. That was when she knew for sure it couldn't be her own desire.

She'd never *known* desire.

She stopped in front of his desk, taking in his steady gaze, his rigid control evident from the way he splayed his hands flat to the desk. Strong hands. Huge. Powerful. Without a doubt, they could destroy her. But she couldn't remove from her mind how they would fit over her hips, how they would mold over her body.

Jade stretched out her gloved hand and introduced herself. She couldn't risk touching him skin to skin, but she wanted to feel his warmth. His strength. If he crushed her, he would pay dearly. But he didn't. It took long seconds, but he finally took her hand in his, rising to his feet as he did. Unfolding his massive frame, he forced her to stare upward as he rose above her like a dark god.

"Follow me." The deep voice made her quiver inside, in places that had definitely never quivered before. Her breath shivered through her lips, even as he pulled his hand away and moved with predatory grace out of the squad room.

It didn't leave her much choice, but his movement did give her a chance to try to regain her bearings. To try to shut him out. Ignoring the others, who were no doubt watching avidly, she tightened her hands into fists and strode after him, pulling her power in as she went.

Tromping down countless stairs behind the man, she grew angrier with each step.

Wasn't *he* the one imagining her body bent in ways she'd never known it could? Wasn't *he* the one pulling her into his hunger? Why was he acting angry at *her*, not saying a word? He hadn't even looked over his shoulder to make sure she was following. He simply assumed she'd come after him because he'd told her to. If she didn't need him for the case, she'd draw the light from one of the bald overhead lights and throw it at the back of his head. Since she couldn't, she had to settle for a few panted breaths to pull herself together.

Strengthening her resolve as he led her into the bowels of the building, she reminded herself that as a Sibile, she could maintain control no matter what he threw at her. She'd keep her hands knotted and her questions locked down, even from herself.

It didn't leave her much to think about other than the length of the hallway and its complete lack of access to the outside. As decoration went, the Moonridge Police Department could only be described as depressing. Dark green walls brightened only by gray stone or the occasional pair of exposed fluorescent tubes affixed to the ceiling. She didn't want to identify what occasionally scuffed or smeared the walls. So she was back to him.

Detective Palen Rysen... She considered his name, testing it in her mind. Was he the one the Magistrate feared she'd find before they could see her properly bred to a Sibile male? Were her hormones simply responding to the pheromones of a strong male? Why not a controllable human male instead, like the one who'd greeted her?

No. She curved her tongue around her left fang with instant distaste at the remembered sight of Chris

Jorgensen. The signature coming off him almost made her sick. He'd been a mishmash of colors, all shades, as if he'd been rubbed on by several different people before coming to work. The word *unclean* came to mind. If he'd managed to touch her, she'd have burned a hole through his hand. Just for a start.

It had to be because Rysen was a Wolf. Since she didn't feel like going stupid with his lust again, she kept her mind's eye closed, but the urge to see his colors tugged at her. Even with his anger clear in the arrow straightness of his spine, she wanted to touch it again. Feel *him* again, his strength and vitality as pure as a drug in her blood, taking her over effortlessly.

Reason kept intruding on the urge, keeping her from giving in. Why was she so drawn?

He looked nothing like the males she'd been introduced to at the enclave. No thin, prettyish boy with a nervous smile. She couldn't even imagine what he might look like if he did smile. Half his face was covered with a thick, bristly black beard, and the rest hid behind the black hair he took no pains to deal with. She wanted to push back the strands and see him clearly, but even then it probably wouldn't help. There was no telling whether his jaw was squared or round or pointed. Whether his upper lip was thin or full. He hid his face with an effectiveness she almost admired.

He couldn't hide his eyes, though. Milky-blue, with intensity radiating from them like a bonfire. He dressed nearly the same as the other men on his floor—dress coat hanging on the back of his seat, button-down shirt, but instead of slacks, he'd donned supple denims that clung to his legs, showing muscle shifting as he walked. She had a

feeling the difference in clothing wasn't expressly permitted. And that he didn't particularly care.

Desire hit so strong, it clenched her insides and she bent slightly in response. She hungered to taste him, so much her teeth actually began to feel longer, sharper.

What's happening to me?

Logic. She stretched for logic. Clear thinking. She'd read every book in the Order's extensive library on the subject of Wolves, most of it unpleasant but informative. Could this be something the Order hadn't warned her about? A side effect or a mutation?

Before she could decide either way, Rysen opened a door and strode into what appeared to be an interrogation room. Peering inside first, Jade noted only the gray walls, a table, three chairs and a camera mounted in the upper corner. Nothing dangerous.

She entered, but her sense of safety didn't last long. Rysen yanked the camera plug from the wall, turned in place and came at her. Without even time to gasp, she found her back pressed to the door, slamming it closed with the force of the impact.

His large hand pulled her head back by her *flos*, the decorative cover for the braided bun at her nape, leaving her throat taut and exposed to his satisfaction. She flailed her hand between his arm and his torso, pulling the light from the room and shaping a small dagger that glowed in the sudden darkness. She even pulled it back, ready to slice into his side, but...he didn't attack.

He waited for her breathing to still, staring down at her, a grim expression hardening his stark gaze even more. She refused to yield her weapon, but he didn't seem to care about the light blade in the slightest. Instead, he

searched her face for something, his stare lingering on her fangs until the throb in them grew painful with wanting.

Wait. How could she still want him? He was holding her completely at his mercy, effortlessly stifling any physical struggle she could give. But she wanted him. More so *because* of his domination.

No wonder the Order considered her an abomination.

She waited for the shame to fill her. But there was simply no room for it, not with the flood of sensation coursing through her veins. Her heart fluttered and, deep in her belly, liquid desire softened her defenses further. His heat seeped into her through their clothes, spiking her temperature even higher. The pressure of his hand on her back, his broad chest rubbing her suddenly sensitive nipples through her sweater gave blessed relief to the wanting that crawled over her skin.

It wasn't enough. She wanted him closer. Wanted to taste him. Wrap every limb around him. Feel him everywhere, even inside, where the want had become a hollow desperation to be filled. She watched him warily, ignoring the needs snaking through her as best she could. Either he'd give her what she needed or not. The choice, she realized as she stopped pushing him, had never been hers.

Slowly, not lowering his guard, he pressed his face against her throat. She felt his deep inhalation, shuddered at the warmth of his lips, then quaked as his beard grazed up along the excited ends of her nerves. Heat flash-flamed inside her. The moisture between her thighs increased. The sliding sensation of her own legs shifting felt so much like a stroke, her entire body jerked.

The light blade dissipated, bringing the room back to its normal brightness. Maybe brighter. She wasn't sure

because her lids slid closed at his long, hot lick over her pulse.

“What *are* you?” Rysen growled into her ear.

She melted against her will, those deep vibrations strumming her senses even more than they had upstairs. She felt as if she were dissolving at her very bones. Molding to him.

He growled again, and this time his fangs grazed her pulse point, as if he couldn’t help but allow himself another moment of satisfaction before pulling away. “Tell me, little Sibile. What game is the Order playing this time?”

“Not a Sibile,” she replied, her breathless voice alien to her own ears. His hold stiffened when she brushed her belly against his, relief from the contact flooding her along with her own moment of satisfaction when she felt the ample evidence of his interest. More than ample. “Not entirely.”

“There’s no such thing as a half-breed,” he said, voice a moist whisper across her ear. He rocked his hips against hers, searching. Was he as helpless to this as she? Did he feel as desperate to be touched? She undulated into him in response, gasping when he pumped harder. The light flared behind him, haloing his dark hair with fire.

Caution glimmered in the back of her mind.

He pressed closer, turning her head to face him again. He glared down at her from half-lidded eyes, their glow heated and still...angry. “Answer me.”

“You d-didn’t—” She gasped when he tugged her head again. Not to hurt her, just to rattle her. Her indrawn breath this time was swift with fury. Over his shoulder, the light bulb began to make a cracking sound.

She didn't dare shift her focus, but she heard it. *Control. Remain in control...* She focused on her answer like a lifeline back to sanity. "You didn't ask me anything, Wolf."

A growl rumbled against her chest. Warning, pure and simple. "What. Are. You?"

He could tug all he wanted; she wouldn't be intimidated by him. It took effort, but she managed to lift her chin. "My father was a Wolf. My mother ran away to be with him. The Order took me in when they died." Not technically a lie. "Just because you've never met a mix doesn't mean we don't exist."

But the answer didn't satisfy him. "The Sibile would never accept a Wolf in their midst. What are you playing at?"

"Let me go, Detective." She didn't have to try to make her voice cold now. She knew far better than he ever could what her people thought of her.

"Do you have any idea of the danger you've put yourself in? Coming here, smelling the way you do. Are you trying to lure me out?" He pressed his face to her throat again, inhaling deeply. "You have me now, though, don't you?" His hold tightened again, but it was his bite—heavy teeth pressing against the cord in her neck, his tongue caressing her skin—that started the overload.

Behind her eyes, power flared like a star. Emotions, thoughts not her own, racked her, rich with sensation, scent and sound. The shock of it all made her clasp his sides, her sharp nails cutting through the leather of the gloves, sinking into his skin as blue visions took over her senses completely.

Her own body, bare, still against the door. His hand covered her breast, kneading, while his other hand

gripped her hip, guiding her down onto him. He filled his palms with her bottom, a growl of pleasure vibrating through his chest when he penetrated her completely. Her hands wound over his shoulders, her head thrown back as her body began to rock. He ground his fangs into her neck, thrusting against her. Soon their bodies were pressed tight, their motion slow, deep. Perfect.

Moans in her own voice, husky and new, met his approving rumbles. His hands smoothed over her skin, stroking, grasping.

Claiming.

Jade's heart galloped wildly, the vision overwhelming. She'd be shocked if she could think clearly past all the images and feelings bombarding her. She could sense her own muscles squeezing tight around *him*. Drawing him deeper, demanding more. Could even feel his pride in knowing he was pleasing her.

He could give this to me, she thought, shuddering when the mental pace increased and his thoughts lost all coherent meaning. They became merely sensations that washed over her in drenching waves. Desire, spinning the whole world red. Sweat and the sounds of her own voice crying out in release. Wet skin, burning with heat, riding against smooth flesh, a deep wet slide...indescribable bliss. Sweet, devouring pleasure...

She cried out, her body jerking against him again, quakes vibrating from her core outward, leaving her gasping in their wake. He held her the entire time, until she sagged limply over him, her head lolling in his hand. She stared up at him, seeing the fire that burned in his gaze now, the flush of red at the top of his cheeks. He looked savage. Strained. She wanted to touch his lips, feel

them soften for her. Feel everything he'd just imagined, all over again, but *real*.

"You're telepathic." An accusation.

"No." She tried to straighten, tried to find the bones in her legs. Belatedly she realized he held her completely off the ground, his arm a vise around her waist. She pushed at his shoulder for release. Not a millimeter of give.

"If you're not, then what the hell were you doing in my head?"

"I wasn't!" *Not exactly*. It had to be his signature, serving as a direct conduit. She pushed harder, confused by the conflicting sensory barrages of his wild passion and icy rejection flooding her at once. He needed to stop touching her; his feelings were too hard to shut out.

"Don't lie to me." The whisper was silky. Threatening.

"Stop trying to intimidate me." Anger helped her fight him. She pounded on his chest. "Let go."

"No. I want answers. What are your gifts, scarlet? Why did your Order send you after us?"

"They didn't. Let me go!" Her fist came off his shoulder like rain bouncing pointlessly off hard stones. She pulled at her other hand, still trapped between his arm and his torso, yanking desperately. She felt her gift rising but she didn't care. She wanted—no, *needed*—to be free.

"You'll only hurt yourself this way," he said, his voice calm, the last trigger to fire her temper.

She glared up at him, meeting his stare for the flash of a second before giving it rein. "Wanna bet?"

His face registered surprise, then shock as he no doubt felt the burning under his hands. He released her so fast she dropped to her feet, losing her balance and

slamming back into the door. That quickly, her gift slipped out of her grasp.

She tried to pull it back, to stop the force of it, but she yanked it too fast. Like a live thing, it snapped in backlash, exploding between them with a burst of light and heat, sending the man in front of her flying backward with a roar.

Chapter Three

Wolf eyes stared at her, stunned. Enraged. “What the *fuck* was that?”

She regarded him carefully, hand at her throat, trying to tamp down her heartbeat and her wild breathing. Neither settled. He’d crashed into the table, shoving it against the back wall and upending the chairs on either side. Even the hanging light over their heads swung back and forth, pitching shadows in a chaotic circle. This was not a moment to agitate him.

But despite the release mere moments before, her body still thrummed for more of what that vision had promised, and she deeply wanted him back against her. The disappointment that it wouldn’t happen physically stung, but she couldn’t risk letting him get the upper hand again.

Power crackled in her, then finally ebbed once more. She met his glare with her chin high. “A warning. I won’t be commanded by you.”

“Bullshit.” His tone was even but the menace around him grew. He sat up from his sprawl across the table, a lazily graceful movement she didn’t want to notice. “You’re lying through your pretty little fangs.”

So? “I’m here to help you, Detective. Why are you so sure that I’m hiding some ulterior motive?”

“Because I’ve dealt with you people before.”

She didn’t like the way he practically spat “you people.”

“There isn’t one of you who wouldn’t sell your soul for a shiny rock or a piece of gold, so just tell me what you’re really doing here. Are you bait?”

She forced herself to remain still, fighting the urge to tighten the straps on her pack where all kinds of shiny rocks clanked together in a sock. But if the entire enclave hadn’t made her squirm in twenty years of trying, this man certainly wouldn’t do it. “What would I possibly have to gain by that? Why would the Order waste their time?”

He shrugged one heavy-looking shoulder. “It wouldn’t be the first time they’ve done the government’s dirty work. Killing shifters isn’t a hardship for them.”

“If the Order wanted you dead, you wouldn’t have to wonder,” she said, despite knowing it wouldn’t do much good. “You’d just be dead.”

“I would have said the same thing about a half-breed, but you expect me to believe you about those too, don’t you? What’s next? Wood sprites and fairies?” Even with the beard to obscure his features, she could tell his lips had gone hard. “If you were truly a Wolf, even half, you’d have been culled like worthless chaff. Give me one reason why the Order would spare your life and I might do the same.”

“Might.” Not even a promise from those cold eyes.

“If you impress me.” The jerk managed to sound magnanimous.

“Would you be impressed if I killed you right this second?”

“Deeply,” he growled, a sound that did unwise things to her belly. “Of course, you’d die of a violent disemboweling and be left to rot on the gates of your

enclave for the crime, but if you crave martyrdom, by all means, give it a shot.”

The imagery did wonders to remind her that this man was not a lover she should welcome. Years of training, however, didn’t disappear in a heartbeat. He could kill her, of that she had no doubt, but she would not weaken her position further by showing a response to fear. She was practically immune to the emotion.

“Had I wanted you exposed, I could have done that upstairs,” she reminded him instead. “Were the Order inclined to reveal any of the shifters in Moonridge, they would have sent someone better suited to detecting you. I’m simply here to help, as *requested*.”

The reminder didn’t faze him. “If you’re here to help, tell me what your gifts are.”

“That’s not information you need, Detective.”

“I decide what information I need, not you. So why don’t you save me the secret-society bullshit and just spit it out?”

“So that you can *decide* I’m not useful and gut me where I stand? I don’t think so.”

His eyes narrowed before he shook his head, running his hand through the lengths of his hair. He swallowed as if he were desperate for a drink and she couldn’t help it, she watched his Adam’s apple bob, hunger sparking to life again.

“If you don’t want to be mounted, stop looking at me that way.” His voice rippled along her nerve endings, tickling until she had to fight herself not to rub the hairs on her arms. “You should never have come here pretending to be in season.”

She chuckled, despite the tension still straining between them. “I’m not in season.” She’d never had a

season in her life. The medics had seriously questioned if she were sterile.

“Like hell. You’re so ready even the humans are picking up on it.”

“Oh, now that’s not even possible.” She didn’t think.

Rysen kept rubbing his face, like someone trying to clear his senses and finding the view as foggy as before. He raised an eyebrow at her. “Let’s pretend I believe you about your heritage. How much do you know about Wolves?”

Not answering that one any time soon. “I think the safer question is how do you know so much about the Sibile?”

“Safer for whom?”

Smart man. “We’re pretending,” she reminded him in a purposefully soft voice. “If you’re going to pretend you believe me, I’ll pretend you haven’t already revealed the fact that you know far too much about my people to be considered safe.”

She felt his frustration rise, but he gave nothing else away. Heartbeats later—booming thumps he probably heard like a drum, even across the room—he nodded. “You’re right. I do know too much about you. I can’t tell you how much I wish I didn’t.”

The look on his face did nothing to smooth her worries.

“I was raised in an orphanage, not far from an enclave in South Dakota. Fairly common occurrence for my kind and it was a good place. The woman who ran it took in any abandoned child—human, shifter, it didn’t matter to her. Children were children and she loved us all as her own.”

A slice of jealousy cut through Jade, brief but strong. "Sounds idyllic."

"It *was*." His emphasis left no room for misinterpretation. "She ran it like a farm. We grew our food, sold our crops at the farmer's market for the things we couldn't make or grow, and there were plenty of us to do the work. We'd see the scarlets trudging back and forth from town all the time. We stayed out of their way, they stayed out of ours. I have no doubt they knew what we were, but they didn't much care about us, so it didn't matter. Except for one."

"She was young, got lost making her way back home in a snowstorm. We took her in. We were kind to her and she was kind to us. After that, she visited whenever she came past. For years we considered her a *friend*." His expression darkened, the last word a mockery of its meaning. "I was a teenager when the Submission Act was passed. Remember that one?"

Jade thought back. Human law wasn't a huge part of the Order's education. "Something about shifters making themselves available for census?"

"That was the party line for it. It was the brainchild of a senator named Thompson. Made his career off it, too, the bastard. He'll probably be president one day because of it." His upper lip lifted with disgust. "They told everyone it was just about finding out how many of us there were left, how we could be helped. By submitting to a census, our businesses could be eligible for federal subsidies. We'd be setting the public at rest that we weren't dangerous animals, especially if we allowed ourselves to be studied. If we *proved* that we were human, we would be opening the doors to peace and understanding. Bringing an end to social unrest. I always

liked that media-friendly little term, social unrest. Sounds so much more palatable than genocide.”

“You have to be human for it to be considered genocide.” That qualification had given her nightmares after she’d started reading books on her heritage.

Rysen’s growl somehow conveyed his sarcasm. “Maybe we should have appealed for protection under the Animal Rights Act?”

Jade pursed her lips. “You were saying...”

He raised his eyebrow, appearing somewhat amused for a second. “The poor bastards who signed up disappeared almost immediately. The ones who didn’t get killed right away were tagged for study. They stick a little tracer under the skin in the back of the neck, like they do for dogs. I hear you never even feel it go in. Lets them figure out how the shifters live, where they go, before the death squads come and take them in the night.”

Jade flinched. She knew what that felt like.

“If they were lucky, they were killed right away, but most of them ended up in labs. Dissected. Then the killing got really easy, since they didn’t have to worry about all those stupid superstitions bringing us back from the dead. But they still had trouble finding us all. Knowing where to shoot us didn’t matter if they couldn’t tell we were shifters. They needed help. So, the government applied to the Order. I can’t imagine what they paid, but I know this. More shifters died that year than in any other since the Cataclysm.”

That hadn’t been in any of the histories she’d read. As far as she knew, the Cataclysm—the discovery of shifters back in the 1890s which began the eradication of shifters the world over—was the bloodiest time in shifter

history. The unrestrained executions had led to the unveiling of the Sibile Society, transforming them in human eyes from quiet religious communities to creatures too dangerous to be challenged. For shifters, the Cataclysm was a horror. For the Sibile...it was a rebirth.

"The last time our *friend* visited," he continued, perhaps sensing her thoughts had drifted from his point, "she came in the night. By the time we realized why, she was already whispering."

Whispering. His meaning wasn't lost on her. His friend must have been a sanusaddo, a scarlet gifted with power over sound, particularly her voice. A strong enough one could turn a whisper into a blade...or a wrecking ball. Jade closed her eyes, guilt swamping her even though his past had nothing to do with her.

"My mother and seven cubs died that night when the house exploded." His gaze had no trace of heat now. Only icy cold hatred. "So you can understand why I don't want your particular brand of help."

Yes, yes she could. He'd never be able to turn his back on her. Never for one second believe that she wouldn't return someday and betray his secret, whenever it might benefit her. Which explained his "might." He had zero intention of letting her live. Still, even recognizing that particular truth, she couldn't stop the question on her lips from escaping. "If she did all of that, how did you stop her from killing *you*?"

"Simple." A smile spread across his lips, arctic and vicious enough to finally make her truly afraid. "I ripped out her goddamned throat."

He didn't often think of that night, even if the shadows of it directed the path he'd taken ever since. He could still

see her, Vayere-Scarlet, on the ground beneath the peach tree, her red cape spread wide, her blood drying on his claws. A scarlet in all her glory, every finger, her arms, even her face, adorned with gold and jewels. He'd felt like a grave robber, removing each piece before burying her where she'd fallen, but to protect the rest of the children, he'd done it.

To keep them all alive, he'd do worse.

His gaze fell on the woman still leaning against the door. Her golden gaze met his, not as much challenge in her now, but no less spirit. She knew what he meant to do, but she didn't waste the energy running away. She wrapped her pride around herself like armor and met him head-on. If she were really a Wolf, she'd be everything he'd hoped never to find. The kind a Wolf would bond to, not just imprint. Killing a woman like her would be no easy feat. Unlike with Vayere, he wouldn't be in the desperate throes of self-defense. He'd have to coldbloodedly snuff out her life.

The worst part was knowing he'd do it.

"You still need me for your case, Detective." For someone who was scared to the bone, a fear he could taste like a film of rust on his tongue, she kept her poise perfectly. No betraying quiver to those full lips. No submissive tilt to the rounded point of her chin. So beautiful to look at. If only she weren't lying to him with every breath he took.

"I can find him without you." And there would be one less witness to his vengeance when he did.

"If you could, the Order would never have been contacted."

The lady scores a point.

Pale eased off the table, wincing at the sting in his ribs. The cuts were no longer bleeding, already scabbed closed. By morning they'd be gone without a trace, a benefit to his nature he valued more often than he liked to count. Rolling his shoulders, he grabbed a chair and dragged it over to her. With a look, he indicated she could sit.

With a twist of her lips, she told him what he could do with his courtesy.

Pale fought an unwelcome urge to chuckle. Damn shame she was an enemy, because he could see himself liking her in other circumstances.

Of course, he'd liked Vayere too.

His humor died.

Kicking up the other chair, he positioned it so he could sit with its back between his open knees. Only when he'd settled did she deign to follow suit.

"The way I see it, you're stuck with me, whether you like it or not." The intimate pitch of her voice made his ears twitch. He liked her notes. They would sound even better next to his ear, wrapped in a sated sigh.

"Once a contract has been made with the Order, there's no option to cancel. The city won't get their money back. And they won't reassign anyone else in my place. The Praemonere has decreed that I'm required here. If you were to kill me, particularly without resolving your situation, you'd leave yourself open to investigation and exposure, to say nothing of Sibile revenge once I'm reported missing. There's no way out for either of us." Her words snapped him back to the unfortunate fact that she was trying to tell him what to do. "Unless you're willing to leave the case, in which case we can both agree to simply pretend we never met."

And doing a pretty good job of it, now that his ears were translating her words instead of just melting in the pretty sound. He frowned. "I'm not leaving the case."

"Then I see no other options." She lifted an eyebrow and smiled. She had him cornered and she knew it. "If it's any consolation, it shouldn't take long. I can track anyone in hours, even trails so cold *you* couldn't find them."

"That's the gift you wouldn't tell me? You're a *tracker*?" Irritated, he stood up and began to pace. Everything—protecting his people, finding this killer and avenging the lost—hinged on a tiny woman who planned to do something he could damn well do himself?

"All the growling you do, I'm surprised no one knows your secret already." While he walked back and forth, she sat perfectly still in the seat, poised, prissy and patient, driving his senses completely out of his control, and she had the nerve to bitch about it?

"It's *you*." He forced his feet to stop moving, pulling in a careful breath between his teeth. Another. He stretched his fingers wide, retracting the claws that had begun to push through his skin. If he could just retract the wanting so easily. This female wasn't for him. Would never be for him. She was a *Sibile*. A traitor by nature, no matter what his senses tried to tell him. "If you'd drop the fucking Heat, it wouldn't be a problem."

Her cheeks reddened but her eyes blazed. "I'm *not* in Heat."

He put his hand over the erection she'd have to be blind to miss. "Tell that to my cock."

She blinked, glancing away from his hand as if embarrassed. "I would if I thought it had any more sense than your head."

Great. Threatening her life didn't seem to faze her, screwing her senseless in his mind only pleased her, but one verbal reference to sex and she turned into a grade-schooler. "I'm not going to be able to work with you this way."

"I don't see why not, seeing as I'm not *doing* anything to you." She tried to put on a prim expression but that wouldn't wash. For one, she was still a soft pink from ear to ear. For another, he'd already seen her shudder in orgasm. And God help him, he'd almost joined her.

"Because I'll do something to *you*." His teeth snapped at the end of the harsh words, remembering how close he'd been while feeling her as if she were real in his mind, hearing her and watching her fall apart in his arms.

She jumped, her lids fluttering with flustered blinks.

Pale closed his eyes and banged the back of his head against the soundproofed wall with a solid thump. He didn't need this. He didn't want this. But he *did* want *her*.

"Every chance I get," he added, quieter. With even the smallest bit of encouragement, he'd have her on her back, moaning in a heartbeat. The notion was tempting. So fucking tempting. "And if *I* don't have you, every Wolf for miles is going to come after you. I'll spend all my time in challenges, defending you until you're imprinted. It won't work. Having you around is going to get us both killed."

That subtle reminder effectively dimmed the temptation. Not the erection, unfortunately, but it cleared his mind enough to push away from the wall. He still had to call Aaron. No sense in him coming down the mountain for this one. Pale would have to find some other way to

deal with her. He pulled his cell phone from his hip holder and hit the speed dial.

"I can defend myself just fine, thanks."

He looked up from the phone, finding the suddenly feral girl glaring at him. "In the day?"

Her lips hardened and he could see those little fang tips deepening their dimples into the taut flesh.

"Favian." Aaron's deep voice interrupted the spell and Pale turned away from the seduction of her mouth.

"You don't need to come down."

"Don't tell me you lost her." Aaron's surprise wasn't unfounded. Pale never lost his prey.

He cast a surreptitious glance at the woman watching him so carefully. Their eyes met. Locked. "Not yet."

"You're not planning to keep her, are you?" Aaron's laugh chafed.

His senses might be blinded by Heat, but something finally clicked in Pale's mind as he stared into those amber irises, the color shaded with emotions he could identify effortlessly. Pride. Anger. Desire. Confusion. Frustration. Everything he expected except deceit. "I haven't decided yet."

Aaron choked. "What?"

Pale closed the phone, flicking off the ringer as he slipped it back in its holster. He stepped over to her, reaching out a finger to tip up her chin. She let him inspect, staring up at him, waiting for his decision on her fate.

"Tell me, did your precious Order think to train you in group combat before they literally threw you to the Wolves? Because most other males would take you on the

ground in the street if they got the opportunity. Ten at a time, if that's what it takes to get at you."

He felt her shiver, but she didn't back down. "I can't leave, Detective. No matter what I might want."

"What about what *I* want?" And how often he'd want it.

Not even a blink from those eyes. "You'll just have to deal with your inappropriate urges by yourself."

He almost smiled. She had no idea whatsoever what she was doing to him. What he would like to do to her. She couldn't fake this innocence, not to him. Somehow, she was telling the truth. A half-breed, hidden away in the Sibile enclave. Naïve. Dangerous. And, he accepted with a sigh, like any other female searching for safety, she was his to protect.

"Fine, you live. For now. And you stay on this case. But what about the other males? You won't be able to make them ignore your Heat."

She squared her shoulders, refusing to be intimidated. Confident. Determined. "I'll be careful."

Foolish. "And what about you?"

"What *about* me?"

"Females in Heat are unpredictable." He swept his gaze from her head to her toes and back again. A strong female's needs and temperament while in Heat drove a few of them to kill, especially if a male attempted to take what she wasn't willing to give. Whatever she was or wasn't, he knew one thing for sure. She was strong. "Deadly."

"Oh, Detective." The words carried a sensuality he felt like a lick to the underside of his cock. "You have no idea."

Chapter Four

“Now that we’ve settled whether or not to kill me, tell me about your case.” She stood suddenly, crossed to the table and pulled it from where it had dented the wall. She dragged it back to its original spot, all business, calmly neatening up the mess like a den mother. When she finished, tucking her chair up to the edge and dropping into it, Pale watched her fold her gloved hands—now torn at the tips—on the scratched surface. Her mouth settled into a soft bow of expectancy.

He eyed her, trying to decide if she was serious. She actually thought to bring him to heel like a well-trained pup? From her expression, you’d never know anything had happened between them other than a couple calmly walking into a room to talk. Only the already fading flush at her neck where his beard had chafed her remained to tell the tale.

He, on the other hand, had blood drying on the tears in his shirt and had no idea what the hell he was going to do next.

No, he knew what he was going to do. He just didn’t like it.

He dragged the second chair over and sat across the table from her, frowning. “What have you been told about it?”

She looked down, reached into a pocket on the thigh of her pants and pulled out a single sheet of white paper. She slid it across the table to him with one finger.

Pale picked it up, staring incredulously. The only thing written on it was a sentence directing her to him. "You don't even know what kind of crime this is, do you?"

Her first hint of unease began to show. "I assumed a kidnapping or a manhunt of some kind."

Because of her tracking skills. "This is a serial murder case." With eight victims to date, even if only three of them counted officially.

"D-dead people?" She lost half her color in an instant.

"That's what murder victims are, yes." Damn, he'd be babysitting in every way. "Are you not qualified for this kind of assignment?"

"Too qualified." Her color hadn't come back, but the shadows had. In her eyes, almost draping around her shoulders. "The assignment makes a little more sense now."

"Why's that?"

The look she sent him said she knew he was fishing for gift details. "Death is never comfortable for my people."

"The Sibile are sensitive about death?" The absurdity of that remark actually stole a laugh from him. An unpleasant sound, he knew, but she didn't flinch at it.

"Tell me, Detective, with your acute sense of smell, do you *enjoy* the scent of death?"

The sickly rotting of a body left too long without a soul? The fresh tang of too much blood and pain? No, he couldn't say he did. He hoped never to say he did.

"Then you'll forgive me if I'm not looking forward to that aspect of my job."

"What other aspects are you expecting?"

She sighed, shaking her head in tiny motions. "I'm not giving you a list of my gifts. Give me the details so I can decide which of my abilities will serve the case best."

His hackles twitched. "I'm not one of those pet males you Sibile keep on short leashes. I don't take orders from you. I barely accept them from the captain."

"We can't keep doing this, Detective," she answered after a long silence. "I refuse to spend the next few days fighting with you for control of every little thing. I'm not your subordinate."

"Honey, *everyone* is my subordinate."

Frustration tightened her jaws. "Is *every* male out here like you? Because if they are, I'll take my chances with the pets."

"Your chances? You say that like you haven't been around them much either." Which wasn't at all likely. Sibile females were as lusty as anyone else on the planet. If rumors about some of the visiting scarlets could be believed, a little more so.

"Not that it's your business, but no, I haven't. My experience with males has always been chaperoned."

"You've never been alone with a man?" *Son of a bitch*. He'd known she was untouched, but until she said the words, he'd thought that had been by choice. Hell of an impression he must have made for his kind. Taking her to a small room and grinding her into a door? He barely kept from scrubbing his face with his hand.

"The Order didn't think it was safe."

With her sensuality? "Yeah, no shit." She'd be a sitting duck.

"For *them*." She flashed her fangs, eyes narrowed with perceived insult. So that's what set her off. She could

do her Good Sibile impression when she had to, but the second she thought she sounded weak...*grrr*. Interest stirred in his belly again. Was it her Sibile side or the Wolf behind the aggression?

Part of him doubted this little female could do anyone any real damage, despite her light show earlier, though who she thought she was scaring by waving a little wand of light he couldn't guess. Then again, his ribs itched where the cuts she'd inflicted were healing. Definitely the Wolf side...

But how much Wolf was she?

Pale lashed out a hand, capturing her fingers. She yanked back but he held her easily. So, she hadn't inherited her father's strength. He parted the tears on her glove fingers, his thumb catching the tip of a sharp claw.

This time, the angry growl was hers.

He let her go and she pulled her hand to her chest as if he'd wounded it. For damn sure, he hadn't. "Why do you cover them? You don't hide your fangs?"

"I *can't* hide my teeth." Dissembling wouldn't help her and she seemed to know it. He had too many questions. If she planned to avoid some—he wasn't stupid enough to imagine she wouldn't—she'd have to choose her battles wisely. This one wasn't worth it. "This happened when I was fifteen. A partial change, but I have no control over it. Can't make it go back, leaving me like this. Never completely Sibile, never completely Wolf. But I have strengths of both."

He eyed the hand she still held clasped to her chest.

"I didn't say every strength." She tugged at the glove, pulling a small, fine-boned hand from the black leather. She fanned her fingers before him, turning them out for his inspection.

Pale forced himself to remain analytical, but her long fingers were so...feminine. Graceful. Delicate, but for the lethal-looking white tips. Even those, with the pointed claws curving slightly, didn't strike him as anything but elegant. Erotic, if he let his imagination flesh out the brief fantasy of her trailing one over his bare hip, up his back to where her slim ankle would be resting against his shoulder...

He coughed, concentrating on his own hands on the table. His claws, when extended, were black and could only be politely described as *destructive*. The not-as-polite tended to use the word *eviscerating*. Nothing erotic there.

"What else should I be aware of?" he asked, voice almost as tight as his jeans.

"The fact that I bite?" Her sugary tone did little to cut her sarcasm as she pulled her glove back on.

He grinned, flashing fangs that had lengthened again at her words. "So do I."

Her expression faltered, but he didn't scent fear. If he didn't miss his guess, he smelled a spike in her arousal. How much would it take to—

Bring it back to business, Rysen. "I need to know what you can do, Jade."

"Jade-Scarlet. One name. Only my family can refer to me without my title." Her gaze felt like fingertips sliding over his face, a tinge of longing in her eyes. She blinked it away. "I'm forbidden to reveal my gifts unless necessary to the case."

"You're forbidden to be seen without your red cloaks, too, but that didn't stop you coming in here

without it, did it?" Pale waited for her to squirm. It didn't happen.

"It was an order from my Praemonere."

"And your Praemonere can rewrite Sibile code that's existed for a hundred years?"

She took too long to answer, her lips making tiny movements, but no words.

He grinned at her. "If you can break one rule, then I don't see the problem with breaking another."

"Why is this so important to you?" Her eyes were glowing slits of discontent.

Because I need to know how to get past your defenses. "The more I know about what you can do, the better I'll know where to direct your attention." First to the killer, then to himself. "No one else will know."

She hesitated, her gaze penetrating. Finally, she lowered her chin in the slightest of nods.

It was enough to begin.

"The first victim was found eight days ago under a bus stop bench, most of her remains stacked like a woodpile, which is why the media started calling this guy the Woodsman."

Jade swallowed, stifling the urge to scrunch her nose in distaste. "Most?"

His disconcertingly steady stare met hers. Palen Rysen didn't have her sense of queasiness about the not-so-departed, it seemed. One probably didn't last long in a violent crimes unit if one couldn't handle a simple rundown. Then again, she was pretty sure no one in his unit had been through many encounters with their murder victims.

“All we’ve recovered at any of the sites are arms and legs. No heads, hands, feet or torsos have turned up yet. It’s why we haven’t identified any of them.” He paused, offering her space to question, but she was still processing the grisly information. “All we know about the victims is that each of them was frozen for some amount of time and they each had a triangle of skin sliced off their right biceps prior to their deaths. Incidentally, that is always the limb on the top of the stack. The triangle is equilateral, two inches to each side.”

Right biceps?

Pale’s gaze sharpened. “Does that mean something to you?”

That you’re paying too close attention. She shook her head. “Do you know the sexes?”

“Female, all of them. The second body was found behind a liquor store on Shaw, two days later. Same stack, same triangle cut. The third was found in front of a fountain in Graham’s Park by a groundsman coming on duty, just after sunrise this morning. All the victims have been found after two-day intervals.”

Sunrise. Was that significant? “These are all such public places.” That could make it harder to find the killer’s signature.

“Yeah, ballsy, isn’t he?” Rysen shook his shaggy head.

“You know the killer is a man?”

“It’s most likely, given the nature of the dismembering. According to the coroner, the cuts on the bodies are clean, single slices from a large single-sided blade. No hesitation marks, no sawing. Either the bodies

are cut by a machine, by a large man with an axe, or by a gold-medal female bodybuilder.”

“If there’s one thing you should understand better than the humans, it’s that females should never be ruled out by virtue of strength. Some of us have ways to equalize the equation.” She watched his handsome but stoic face for changes in expression. What would he look like if he truly smiled? Baring his teeth had been oddly arousing. A smile might just make her melt right off her chair. At least she sensed him relaxing. Murder apparently cleared even a Wolf’s mind of mating.

“Since the body parts were frozen, there was no excessive blood at the drop sites to mask a scent. I can follow one farther than most wolves, but even I can only track this guy a few feet. Then he just disappears.”

Which explained his surety of the sex, if nothing else. The thought perked her interest. “So you’ve isolated his scent.”

“Not exactly. Where this guy has been, there’s almost nothing. No sweat, no cologne, no soaps, not even from other people. You’ll think I’m crazy, but it’s almost as if the air was singed and it removes the scent of everyone who’d been there before him. There’s just a smoky smell that’s gone almost as soon as I pick it up. But there’s never anything burned nearby. The only explanation I can come up with is that the guy is wearing ashes to cover his trail. I just can’t figure out how he vanishes.”

Neither could she. “Maybe he knows there’s a Wolf in the police department. He might do something to mask his scent on purpose.”

He nodded, as if he'd thought of that before. "Which makes me wonder how much you'll be able to help if all you can do is track."

She had the sudden wish she'd dug her claws in a little harder. "I already told you. I can pick up trails you couldn't grab on your best day." Bright as life, too, not that she needed to brag. Tracking was merely a side effect of her gift.

"Explain."

"Every scarlet has a specific gift, most with a few related offshoot skills. Things we've learned to train it to do. For the most part, they all access them the same way. And don't ask, I won't tell you how they do it."

His beard shifted as he responded with a grunt.

"I'm different. Just like the rest of me, my abilities are an amalgamation. I don't have your kind of strength or sense of smell. I can't change into a Wolf, not even in the full moon. Likewise, my gift is not what the Order anticipated. I'm unique.

"I see emotions as a type of light or aura. I call them emotional signatures. I can follow them for miles, days after a normal scent has gone cold. A person can erase their scent. They can't erase their signatures."

His faint swear word whispered in the small space between them. Finally, she'd managed to impress him. Not that Rysen had a clue what this hunt might cost her.

"That's the only ability I'll need to find your killer. So the sooner we get started, the sooner you'll be able to arrest him."

"Not so fast."

She couldn't quite keep herself from rolling her eyes. How many reasons could he possibly have to keep her shackled in an interrogation room?

"We need to work out a few rules first."

Of course. Those reasons. "Rules about what?"

"It's obvious you know jack shit about Wolves. If I bring you out with me, you're going to have to do exactly what I tell you. *When* I tell you. Without question."

She laughed, which didn't seem to amuse him. "You're out of your mind."

"I'm also the only one you'll find who's willing to keep you alive without raping you."

Mirth died. From the look on his face, she could tell this was her only option. "I won't surrender my autonomy."

He stayed silent, waiting, for endless moments. She had a feeling he could outwait a glacier. This was definitely going down as her least favorite of his traits.

"When it comes to the case or to interaction with any other Wolves, fine. I'll defer."

Another grunt. It had to be assent, because he moved on to the next point. "No robe."

"I don't have anything else to protect me from the cold."

"I'll find you something. I don't want to see that thing. Ever."

If it would help him differentiate her from the scarlet who'd betrayed him, she could live without it. "Unless there's an emergency."

"*Ever*. The Woodsman could be watching. I don't want him to know there's a scarlet on the case. We don't know how he's choosing his victims, and a scarlet is a

definite threat. Keeping it off gives *you* the best chance for retaining all your limbs.”

He probably enjoyed driving that point home. “Have you *heard* of subtlety?”

“No. We stay together at all times. I don’t want you out of my reach.”

She almost snarled now. “I don’t like leashes any more than you do, Detective.”

“As long as you carry my scent, it’ll confuse the other males. It won’t fool them for long, but it’ll make them think twice.”

Wariness filled her. This man was no good for her temper. “How exactly am I supposed to acquire your scent?”

The smile she’d wondered about broke across his face. So much more than just an expression to establish dominance—seductive and dangerous on every level she could think of—it turned her insides to jelly.

“That’s not going to happen.” She hoped. Sort of.

He tilted his head, taking her measure the way one would size up a juicy steak. “I’m almost positive it will. Your Heat will get worse. At the least, I can provide a certain...relief.”

Jade’s breath slipped unsteadily through her lips. Unbidden, the memories of that relief made her belly clench. How much more *relieving* would it be if he did it on purpose?

But one thing she knew well, no one offered anything for free. “And what would I have to do for you in return?”

“Nothing difficult.” His voice rumbled with a growl that didn’t help her returning awareness. “Just stay close. Don’t test me and, if anyone asks...”

She watched his lips, the parts she could see anyway. “Tell them what?”

Sleepy eyes, brilliant and ghostly blue, caught her gaze. “Tell them you belong to me.”

Chapter Five

“You want I should roll down the window or something?”

Jade turned her gaze from the fascinating sights outside the car to the too fascinating one driving.

“You look like a puppy aching to get her face in the wind.”

She was. Probably because she hadn’t been in a car since her parents were alive. Vehicles had changed a lot since then, and though the speed had been startling at first, she’d quickly remembered how much she enjoyed the rush of wind and the bouncing on bumpy roads. Silly memories, she knew, but she had so few of her parents. It had been nice, for just a second, to find another one.

She pulled in a breath, her cheeks heating under his sarcasm. He seemed to find amusement in everything she didn’t know or understand. It wasn’t her fault the Order had sheltered her to the point of caging her. Even if they hadn’t, none but the scarlets or the Rouges ever left the enclave. What did he expect? Still, she half wished she had her robe while she straightened her back against the seat. There was nothing to hide her embarrassment behind. She couldn’t even flex her hands to unknot them or he’d notice.

“You’ve never been in the city either?” Rysen kept his eyes on the road. He drove the way he seemed to do everything else—patiently, with bursts of aggression that had her hanging on to the handle built into the door,

praying she was in safe hands. As soon as they'd left the interrogation room, he'd hustled her through the station without another word, leaving his chair spinning in his wake and his colleagues calling after him.

"No." She looked out again, watching the different buildings and lights go by in a blur. Reds, greens, stone, brick, concrete. Christmas decorations lit random buildings, probably homes, while snow of various shades piled near them. Cars filled the lanes and lined the sidewalks, but she didn't see a lot of people out. "It's very different out here."

"I bet." He slanted her a glance that felt like a caress on her cheek. "Probably a lot less shit on the ground in there."

She hoped he'd never get the itch to find out for himself. His casual coarseness would get him skewered two feet from the gates. "Farm animals get out from time to time. You'd be surprised what ends up on the ground, even in the enclave."

A deep rumble filled her ears and the corners of her own lips rose in response. It was a nice feeling to make him laugh, especially not at her own expense. "How big is this city?" she asked. "Are we going far?"

"Not far. The first drop site is another half mile east. The city makes a crescent shape around the southern end of the lake and spreads out through the valley. It's a good-size chunk of land, but nothing like what it used to be. Here on the west side, it's pretty seedy. Where we're headed, it's better. You won't have to worry so much."

She'd read about Baldwin Lake, how it had grown because of the manmade dams. Between the mountains, the snow and the lake, Moonridge should have been a booming city of tourism, and it was. To a degree. "What

do you mean, what it used to be?" Her books hadn't said anything about Moonridge losing any land or value, even with the crime that plagued it.

He hitched a shoulder. "This used to be Bear country. The humans even called it Big Bear for a while. Until the Cataclysm and they figured out that all the Bears were shifters."

She didn't need to ask what had happened. "Are there any left?"

"A few, here and there. Not many though. None dumb enough to expose themselves. That's a lesson you Sibile should have learned a long time ago."

"What? Why?" The Sibile were needed. Powerful. Feared. Why should they be concerned about exposure?

"Don't you ever wonder what humans will do when they're finished killing shifters? Where they'll turn their attention next?"

No, she hadn't once wondered about that. She doubted anyone else had, either. "Making us their enemies would be suicide."

"The Sibile might be more powerful but there's a hell of a lot to be said for having your enemy surrounded. Humans outnumber you, and sooner or later they're going to use that fact against you. Sooner, I'm betting, if they're keeping track of the scarlets coming and going every time they call. For all you know, they're getting tagged left, right and center."

That might not have occurred to her, but it would have to the Tribunal. They would never have left themselves so exposed to danger otherwise. Even they weren't so arrogant. "I'll take that under advisement."

“Sure you will.” He pulled the car to a stop, parking along a well-lit street. She’d been so busy looking at him, she hadn’t noticed the sudden change in the area. Here, the decorations glittered brilliantly, flashing on nearly every building, all perfect structures, not a trace of sagging or age. Music even filtered through speakers hidden in trees draped with nets of tiny white lights. It looked like a postcard of holiday delight and wiped her mind of his dire predictions in a heartbeat. No one could think of evil while looking at this. Jade knew her eyes had to be nearly as big as her face, but it was beautiful. She’d never seen anything like it.

Rysen shook his head at her. “You need to get out more.”

Let him sigh. “You’re just confused by joy.”

His brow rose, but Jade decided not to give him the benefit of responding to the unspoken reply. She pulled the latch on the car door, allowing it to pull her outward as it swung. It took her a second to feel stable again as she climbed out. The air, icy and still, stung her cheeks. She eyed her pack sitting on the floor of her seat, longing for the robe rolled tight inside. The pouch of focusing stones tempted her as well, but neither could be used. She’d have to rely on her abilities alone.

Closing the door, she shut her eyes, took a calming breath and reached for the light around her. There were thousands of tiny sources in reach. Taking the ambient brilliance into herself, she willed it into warmth. When she opened her eyes again, it was to find Rysen watching her from over the hood of the car. His eyes weren’t friendly.

“You’re glowing,” he growled.

Jade raised her chin, tempted to look down and see if he was right. She'd never tried wearing light before. "Better than freezing."

"Stop it, before someone notices."

She clenched her teeth together. "You said at the station you'd get something for me but you didn't, so I took care of myself."

"Don't make me tell you twice."

Perversely, she wondered what might happen and felt a quake deep in her belly.

His eyes narrowed. Did he know? How could he possibly know? "Consider this a safety issue."

Safety from what, exactly?

"Now, Jade."

She stifled a growl. The whole block illuminated to almost blinding proportions. *Uh-oh.*

Rysen looked overhead, then back, leveling her with an expression of disbelief. "Tell me you have a better grasp of your tracking skills."

"Would you believe me?" She crossed her arms tight, the cold air coming off the lake rolling through her sweater as if it were no more substantial than webbing.

The trunk of the car suddenly popped open. He tucked his keys into a pocket with one hand and pulled out a giant tan coat with the other. The fuzzy inner lining of thick lambswool almost made her groan in relief. He held it out to her. "Considering that, so far, you've burned me, blasted me, clawed me and given me a raging hard-on?"

She eyed the coat for a half second before snatching it and pulling it around her shoulders. Unbidden, his scent surrounded her. The tightness in her belly coiled almost to

the point of pain, and color suffused her cheeks. She pulled the coat closer so he wouldn't see. "Sounds like you have some masochistic tendencies you need to deal with."

He tilted his head. "You've given me absolutely no reason to ever trust you."

"Then why ask?"

Heat filled his gaze, going much further than his coat ever could to warm her blood. He leaned close to her, his beard brushing her cheek as he pulled the fabric out of his way. "Maybe I just want to hear you lie."

Jade jerked away. The picturesque lakeside street had suddenly lost its ethereal quality. All the sweetness and bright holiday cheer felt glaring and false next to Rysen's raw energy. She could feel him practically wrapping around her, drawing her closer. She swayed, just enough to feel his chest pressing against her shoulder while she turned her back on him. He stayed still, his breath a warm mist at her cheek. She could almost feel his lips graze her skin. If she moved just that last little centimeter...

"The scene is that bus stop bench there." He pointed his finger just over her shoulder to the covered and lit alcove directly ahead.

She stared, determined not to feel rejected, even if the sensation flooded her chest. Touching him had been a bad idea, one her mind hadn't actually spent any time thinking about. Instinct had pressed her against him. He might like to toy with her, but she couldn't let herself forget his opinion of her. Or what she was there for. Steeling herself, she looked at the target.

Open front and back, the construction was a long rectangle of glass panels, supports and green trim forming a friendly safe zone. Each section had two metal benches

end to end, coated in thick green paint. A thinly bundled young woman sat on one bench, a small boy next to her, wearing faded white mittens on his hands. Couples walked the sidewalks, families spilled in and out of businesses. No one else seemed interested in riding the bus.

“Shouldn’t this area be cordoned off?” It was what she’d been taught to expect for crime scenes. To preserve the evidence.

“This scene is days old. Tape only stays up until the forensics crew is finished. Tends to only be hours in public-use areas like these. Life goes on pretty quick around here.”

It made a sad kind of sense. Ultimately, it wouldn’t matter anyway. She’d be able to isolate the signatures no matter how many were there.

Opening her mental eye, her first thought was that something was wrong. Near-white light flooded her vision. But the emotional signature—dominance, strength, control—spread through her and she recognized it immediately. So much for being warm. She shrugged out of the jacket and pushed it behind her into the brick wall of man waiting there.

“I thought you were freezing,” came a dry grumble.

“I am.” Taking off the coat helped tamp down Rysen’s signature, but the man himself was still too close. She looked down at herself, not surprised to see that his color had looped around her like a living ribbon. She lifted her hand, watching the flows move around her forearm and reach gently for her fingers. Warmth of a different kind flooded her. “You need to move away.”

“No.” The streak of blue shot across her hand, its binds tightening at her middle, across her chest to wrap her from hip to shoulder in solid color. Possessive. Demanding.

“Move, Detective,” she growled, irritated. A minute ago, she’d have felt reassured by his unconscious desire to stamp her. But he’d made himself clear that he saw her only as something to play with. “You’re interfering with my senses.”

Despite all the people walking nearby, she was only aware of his silence. Finally, she heard a faint grunt and he moved. Four...five...six paces back. His signature around her loosened as well. But only enough that she could see through it again. It still twined around her in a thick band across her middle.

She fixed her gaze on the benches and waited.

The marks of people who had passed were the faintest. Streaks of color here and there. The pastels of children whose emotions weren’t as focused as adults. She moved closer, passing small blurs of color that didn’t strike her as important. Blues and greens of contentment. Purples of peace. The bright yellows and oranges of happiness mostly floated on the sidewalk where the tourists walked. Common browns of the serious or brooding floated in one corner. Probably someone’s regular spot, as the signature was so strong. The woman and the boy shared a hue, a loving blue, deep and rich. Trying not to be surprised at what she recognized, she ignored them, searching for the older colors.

Faint, mere whispers behind fresher marks. Nothing particularly stood out as unexpected. All more of the same. Except... A ghost of red, the slightest haze, at the back of the seating. Another Sibile had been here. Only

they had red signatures. She backed a step away, making sure not to come anywhere close to it. Where living humans left a mark, a hint of their emotions as they expended them, they were essentially harmless. She'd feel them as if she were a spectator. The Sibile, on the other hand, had power throughout. Too much to deal with if she touched theirs.

Refocusing, she searched for the victim. Finding that should be easy. The dead left imprints that were usually far stronger than the living. Overwhelming for the same reason as a Sibile's signature—intensity. Most people died unwilling to give up their lives. In the hopeless scramble to stay alive, they often left a mark that could take years to fade. There was none of that here.

"Are you sure this is the site?" She scanned again, but nothing lifeless, much less violent, stood out.

"Positive." She felt his color swirl around her again. Impatience threaded through it.

"There's no sign of it here." Another sweep. She shifted away from him again, but he followed her. "You're too close."

"Too bad."

She turned to snap at him, but the glow of his color shifted the shadows where they stood. Most of them. Stopping, she stared down at an inky blackness that didn't change. She reached her hand out, using the ribbon to shine a light directly on it. The glow disappeared into it. "My God."

"What? What did you find?"

"Nothing." Literally. A black signature. A void. Emotion so dark it was evil. Her power recoiled from it.

Rysen's color, though, remained brilliant against it. "This must be him."

"You need to start talking, Jade."

The order made her hackles rise. Rather than bite him as she wanted to, she flicked her gaze to the woman and the little boy. The child was all of maybe seven, his dark eyes watching them with interest. Brown hair fell over his rounded brow. He didn't need to hear them talk of death. "We have company. I'll explain later."

If she went only by Rysen's low growl, she'd think he was resigned to her decision. His signature promised retribution for her dissent.

Let him try.

Using his light, she spread her hand wide to the right. Then left. The signature didn't have the streak of movement. It was a near solid mass of blackness. As if he had stayed in that place for a while. But how? "This doesn't make any sense. He was here...but he didn't come from anywhere and he didn't go anywhere."

"That's not possible."

Did he think she didn't know that? She eyed the signature. She could learn more if she was willing to touch it. But opening her mind to the signature of a murderer? What if he wasn't human? Even if he was, she'd never touched the taint of evil.

She glanced at the boy again. He smiled at her, waving small fingers. She smiled back, watching as the bus pulled to a stop and the boy's mother tugged on his arm. They both rose, rushing to climb on. A moment later they were gone, leaving her with the detective in the shadows. "How many victims again?"

"Three."

She turned to him, surprised at the ripple she felt all around her. "You're lying."

His chin rose, his bright eyes reflecting affront.

Maybe this signature thing of his was better than she thought. She smiled, slowly. "There's something you're not telling me."

He made her wait. She sensed his implacability about saying any more.

"Fine, keep your secrets." She fully planned to keep her own. She turned back to the sphere of darkness. "It doesn't matter anyway. It was an unimportant question."

"Why?"

She sighed, wishing she could let herself off the hook. But three people had already been killed. More were going to end up that way. There was no choice. "Because it doesn't change the outcome of what has to be done." She pulled off her glove, flexing her fingers in the cold air. "If I start screaming, pull me back."

"Why would you start—"

Jade reached out and slid her fingers into the oily darkness. All at once, the world disappeared. No light. No color. No Rysen. Complete black. Frigid, icy cold. Rage without end.

And pain. She felt it like spikes of ice spearing through her body. It had to stop. *Please, God, make it stop.*

She yanked her hand back, but the taint came with it. Seeping into her hand. Climbing up her arm. She clawed at it, but nothing stopped the advance. "No. No, no, no—"

Brilliant blue light tore through the dark, wrapping around her arm and shredding the shadow from her skin. She cried out, the ripping sensation feeling as if it were

being pried from her flesh. A blink, half an instant later, it was gone.

She gasped, grappling for breath through chattering teeth, trying to find her bearings again. Surprisingly, she found instead that her feet weren't on the ground anymore. She looked down, her hands landing on the iron band around her ribs.

Rysen.

"I don't know what the hell that was." His voice was a lethal whisper in her ear. She could see his breath puff past her face and didn't kid herself that he wasn't furious. With her. "But if you ever put yourself in danger like that again, I won't lose a second's sleep leaving you to it."

No, he wouldn't. She didn't bother checking his color for validation. She could feel it in the absolute control he kept over her with one arm. "How long was I gone?"

"Three seconds," he answered, finally, when she shivered so hard her muscles jerked. "Maybe four."

Three seconds and that evil had nearly overtaken her. Her next shudder had nothing to do with the cold she felt all the way to her bones.

"Can you stand?" His question lacked the fiery anger she'd sensed at first. If she didn't know better, she'd think he was concerned.

Eyeing the ground several inches below her feet, she had to laugh. "I don't know."

He grunted—she doubted it was from any strain of holding her up—and lowered her. She expected weakness, but nothing was wrong with her legs or her body. Just coldness. Her blood felt icy.

She'd no sooner stabilized her footing than he spun her around, shrouding her with the coat again. She

couldn't help a small smile as he took pains to button her up. His warmth surrounded her. Then he took her arm and led her to the car. "Let's get you somewhere warm. Then you talk."

Chapter Six

The snow made a neat crunchy sound as Emmitt Crowe walked through it. He was still getting used to it, and to the boots the people at the last house gave him. They were too big, so Sarah had stuffed some paper towels in the toes, which was nice because his toes were really warm now. His fingers weren't, though. She'd slipped two pairs of her socks on his hands to keep them warm, but her fingers were freezing where they held on to him.

"Don't stomp, Em."

Emmitt looked up at his sister. Her skin was as blue as the snow. She'd put her hair up into a cap their mom had knitted for her last Christmas. He'd held the ball of yarn for her and she'd put his name on the tag when they wrapped it. He wished she wouldn't have done that. Sarah had pretty hair. Yellow, like Mom's used to be.

"No one can hear me," he mumbled, but obediently stopped crunching so loud. She'd told him like eight million times how important it was that he always do what she said. They weren't safe anymore. The bad people who had broken into the house could still be looking for them. If Sarah hadn't hidden with him under the house, they would be like everyone else in the family. Gone to Heaven.

Emmitt blew out his breath, making a little cloud in front of him. He missed Mom and Dad. And Joey. Even

Cora, even though all she ever did was cry and wake him up at night. But he didn't want to be in Heaven yet.

"Are we almost there?"

"Almost." Sarah looked behind herself again. She'd been doing that a lot. Since they got off the bus. She had that line between her eyebrows again.

Emmitt looked back too. Nothing there but the snow they'd been walking on, the road, black trees and the wall of the mountain across the street. He frowned, reaching with his senses the way Sarah had been trying to teach him. He could hear their breathing. Their heartbeats. Sarah's was faster than his. She started walking faster too.

"I think someone's coming, Em."

"I don't hear anyone."

"Neither do I." She was scared again. Like she'd been under the house, when she had both her hands over his mouth to keep him from making any sound. She tugged on his hand. "Get on my back, honey, we need to run."

Normally, Emmitt liked piggy-back rides. He was getting too big for them, though, so Sarah didn't give them as much. But she was starting to scare him. He grabbed onto her shoulders, locking his arms around her neck while she held on to his legs.

She took off, the cold wind cutting at his face. No one could run like Sarah. She flew. For a second, he forgot to be scared, forgot they were running away from something and got excited at how fast she was going. She never ran this fast—

Sarah stopped moving, but Emmitt didn't. He flipped off her back, soaring through the air before he landed in a heap and darkness swallowed everything but the pain.

Emmitt blinked.

The light of the moon above made his eyes water. He tried to move, to breathe, but everything hurt. He'd landed on the road. The roughness scraped his fingers as he felt around with his fingertips, finding only snow and rocks. He coughed, which hurt more.

"Sarah?"

Only the wind responded, whistling around the bend.

Emmitt curled his legs up, rolling to his side and groaning. His head hurt. He remembered then. Something had hit Sarah. Or tripped her. Fear shooting through him, Emmitt put his knees to the ground and raised his head. For a second, his vision doubled, but finally came clear. The road. The snow. The mountain.

But where was Sarah?

He got to his feet, trudging forward. Had they come this way? Or the other way? He looked behind him, but the trees didn't look any different, so he couldn't tell. Shivering, he brushed at the tears on his cheeks. This was not the time to cry. Crying didn't help, Sarah said.

But Sarah wasn't here.

And he didn't know where he was supposed to go.

"Sarah?" he tried again. He strained his hearing, reaching for anything that could be her. If she were hurting... But still, nothing.

Smell. He knew her smell. He wasn't as good at scenting as Sarah was, but he could find her that way. If she wasn't far. He pulled in a breath, the snowy wind so stinging he almost couldn't find a smell. But finally, he recognized it behind the wet wood and the mud. Her soap. She hated it, because it was so strong. Human soap, full of flowers. She always said a tracker could follow it for miles. But they'd needed to seem as much like humans as

possible. And he didn't need to follow for miles. Just enough...

He started left, but the scent faded, so he turned around. The crunching snow wasn't as much fun now. He walked slow, trying to be quiet. He found the spot where she'd stopped, where her feet had scraped the snow into a lump. She wasn't there. Emmitt looked around, trying to remember the lessons she'd tried to teach him. Sight, sound, smell, Instinct.

Listen for the voice, Emmitt. It'll never lead you wrong.

Squeezing his eyes shut, Emmitt made everything else in himself go quiet. He'd only heard that voice once, when the bad people crashed through the living room and it told him to find the special door his father showed him. He'd tried to hear it for Sarah before, but it never seemed to have anything to say.

"Please," he whispered, hands knotting in the wet socks. "Please help me."

When it came, it was only a whisper. *Footprints...*

Relieved, Emmitt looked around carefully. The snow was a smooth blanket, except for a smudge by a tree. Looking around for some sign of anyone—anything—he moved to the smudge. Blood droplets stained the white. Prints now, one set moving deeper into the trees. He followed them all the way to a clearing where the moon shone down between the leaves.

And that's where he found her.

"S-Sarah?" She lay still on the ground, her hands spread out like when they made angels the first night they'd seen snow. But there wasn't much here, most of it clumped on the branches over their heads. "Sarah?"

Emmitt didn't see the blood at first. It looked like part of her dark coat. But her hat had fallen off, her hair loose on the ground. Then he saw the hole where her chest used to be.

The world shrank in a heartbeat. She was gone. Like all the others. His knees melted and he fell. Numb, he simply stared at his sister. At her face, waiting for her to whisper that everything would be okay. But Sarah didn't move. Didn't look at him. Didn't smile or take his hand. Didn't...anything.

"...shouldn't...be...here..."

Don't move.

Emmitt hunched in his coat, holding in a gasp by biting his lips together. The voice behind him didn't sound like a person. A hiss, like a snake. But snakes didn't talk. Did they?

"Run, little boy."

Emmitt stared at Sarah, her face turning watery as fear made him quake. If he turned his head, he'd see whatever that thing was. And he didn't want to see. He didn't want to see.

"I said to *run!*"

Don't move.

Emmitt huddled deeper into the coat, shuddering from head to toe. The voice telling him to run sounded like it came from everywhere, even in his head, like the Instinct. But it wasn't the same. This was angry. The Instinct was calm. Urgently telling him not to move, but calm. The Instinct kept him alive. And that thing had killed Sarah. He tried not to sob. Wanted to reach out and take Sarah's hand. If this thing killed him too, he wanted to be holding her hand.

“No matter what happens, Em,” she’d said when they left Florida on the night bus, “we’ll face it together, okay?”

“Okay,” he whispered, reaching out his hand.

No! the Instinct roared, but Emmitt ignored it. He curled his fingers in hers. At the same time, a howl like he’d never heard ripped through the trees. Turning his face toward the sound, he saw what had come to claim him.

But when he screamed, he never made a sound.

Chapter Seven

The detective's idea of warming her up turned out to be a diner that put marshmallows in their hot chocolate. And whipped cream. Jade licked her lips, trying not to smile at the hint of cinnamon she tasted. He wasn't wrong, either. She was warm all the way through, she admitted, still huddled in his giant coat, both hands wrapped around an oversize mug.

Rysen draped his body across his entire half of the booth. Shoulders to the wall, one arm relaxed over the top of the padded seat while the other lay on the table in between them. He tapped an impatient finger on the rim of his more normal-sized coffee cup. "Three gonna be enough or do you need to suck down another one of those things?"

Another one would probably be ideal, but she didn't want to push her luck with him. He'd let her drink in relative peace, checking his phone once for calls he didn't seem interested in returning. His disturbing gaze remained thoughtful while she willed the chills to leave her body. "This is good, thank you."

He shook his shaggy head. "That's the twelfth time you've thanked me and we've only been here an hour."

"There's nothing wrong with gratitude," she replied stiffly.

"I can think of better ways you could show it."

She considered getting after him for complaining about his own libido—again—but she was too happy with her drink. She took another lick of the cream.

“What did you see?”

She looked up, startled. “What?”

“That signature thing. What did you see? Did it tell you anything useful?”

The cream soured on her tongue. She put the mug down carefully. “It doesn’t work like that. Usually,” she added, thinking of how they’d shared his thoughts through his color.

“Tell me how it does work, *usually*, because something sure as shit happened out there and I want to know what it was.”

She shouldn’t tell him, but she couldn’t bring herself to lie to him, either. “I can tell by sight, generally, what the strongest emotion is, by the shade of the color. If necessary, I can touch it and get a stronger...*scent*. It isn’t common that humans are strong enough psychics to leave an imprint that can truly affect me. I can see what they’re feeling without feeling it myself. There are times when humans can get through my defenses, but unless the imprinter has those kinds of abilities, the emotion has to be extreme. In this case...” She shivered again, remembering. “This killer’s signature is black. I’ve never seen that. Ever. Like he had no light in him at all.”

He shrugged. “When you do to people what he does, I wouldn’t expect there to be.”

“You don’t understand. Most signatures I see are transparent. Occasionally dense.” She thought of his, which had a light and life all its own; another mystery to solve. “This was opaque. Solid.” Evil, but he wouldn’t

appreciate such a childish description. "His anger and hatred is so strong it stains his soul and everything he touches."

"Is that what happened to you? It stained you?"

She looked down at her hand, once again safely ensconced in her glove, and pulled her fingers into a fist. It still stung, deep into her flesh. "It tried."

"Didn't the Instinct warn you?" He leaned toward her, hand flat to the table. Almost as if he meant to reach out and touch her. He kept his hand where it lay. "Why didn't you listen?"

Instinct? She shook her head. "I don't know what you're talking about."

He straightened in his seat, suddenly looking at her the way he had back in the interrogation room. As nothing but an enemy to be destroyed.

Jade felt the rejection in her heart, like a wound. It hurt, oddly, throwing her off balance. Or maybe that wasn't all of it. She realized her sense of him had disappeared, taking with it part of the warmth she hadn't realized had come from him. Had his color rejected her too? "What? I fail some kind of test?"

"Yes."

Well, at least he didn't make her guess. Much. "That's all it takes, then? I don't know the vocabulary, so now I'm expendable again? Thanks, thanks a lot." She wanted to throw the hot chocolate at him, but that'd be a despicable waste of ambrosia.

"You don't have to be taught about the Instinct. It's part of every Wolf. It's what keeps us alive." His voice had a little too much Wolf in it to be anything but angry. "Even you should hear it."

Hear. She thought back and sighed. Somehow, she didn't expect him to be reassured to know she understood. "You mean the Voice. The one that tells you what to do when you're scared."

His hackles lowered slightly.

Just wait, she thought morbidly. "I stopped hearing that years ago."

As she expected, he shook his head at her, looking almost reviled. "You mean you stopped listening."

A cardinal crime, apparently.

"I had to." The Voice and the Sisters who'd trained her to use her gifts were too often at odds. She'd never have survived if she hadn't learned to conform. "I'm a Sibile." As if that would explain everything.

Maybe it did. Rysen's cool gaze swept over her once, twice. "Why do you cripple yourself for them? When they'd end you without thinking twice."

"I'm not crippled!" But even as she said it, she knew it for a lie. The way his eyes narrowed, he knew it too. But she owed him no explanations. The way he turned on a dime, she had no inclination to give him any either.

Liar.

It wasn't the Voice, but she squelched it anyway. "You wouldn't think twice either, so don't presume to judge me."

In the ensuing silence, his finger tapped the table again. His guard came down slowly. When he spoke, his voice was soft. Almost comforting. "There's more to you than what the Sibile would have you think."

She knew that. Just as she knew without looking that his color was wrapping around her again, tighter than before. She could feel its tug.

“There’s power in being a Wolf too.”

“I don’t crave power.” She had plenty. She craved control.

His gaze remained speculative. “What I’m getting at is that purposely cutting off that part of yourself weakens you. You need to understand what makes you a Wolf just as much as you needed to know what made you a Sibile. Until you do, you’re vulnerable. In this world, that means you’re dead.”

He left unspoken that he included the people who raised her on the list of those who would take advantage.

But where would she go if not to them? Rysen offered her no security, not even from himself. He wanted her, a response he couldn’t shut off any more than she could, but not by choice. With every glance, she could practically hear him reminding himself she was Sibile. Even if she magically heard the Voice like foghorn, she’d never be Wolf enough for him to accept. She pulled her hands into her lap, folding them as code required. Then she met his stare as levelly as possible. “Where’s the next drop site?”

He watched her, unblinking and unnerving, but finally he seemed to accept her at her word. “You sure you’re up to it?”

Perversely, she wished he’d put up some kind of argument. “I’m sure I’d rather not know he’s killed someone else because I couldn’t handle the pressure.”

He swept the room with his gaze again, almost as if he did it without thought. Keeping an eye out for any possible threat. Did it count as irony that his cold stare landed on her? He pulled himself out of the booth with a single, powerful move. “People die, Jade. You can help

stop him, but there will always be someone else to take his place.”

She swallowed. “Which means?”

“It means you’re no good to me if you get yourself killed taking unnecessary risks.” He tossed a few bills onto the table, waiting with a somewhat bored air for her to get out of her seat.

“It wasn’t unnecessary,” she replied, her temper sparking. She remained planted. “Touching it was the only way to learn. I needed to know what that signature meant.”

“And almost lost yourself in the process.” He lowered his face until it nearly touched hers. His lip curled, revealing the sharp points of his fangs. “Never again.”

Her breath disappeared. His eyes held an icy fire and there was no mistaking the flood of possessiveness that surrounded her now. If she didn’t know better, she’d think he’d made some kind of claim on her. Something more than a promise of protection.

He offered his hand.

Jade knew she should get up on her own. Hold her head high and force him to understand that she controlled her fate, not him. But something inside her flared to life, something separate from the Heat. Her heart burned. On its own, her hand slid into his and she allowed him to pull her to her feet. And she basked in the flicker of satisfaction in his eyes.

Jade, you’re a stupid, senseless fool.

Which explained nicely why she didn’t balk when he kept her hand tucked in his as he led the way out of the diner.

Twenty minutes later, she had the sense that he wished he'd tightened that hand around her throat instead.

"What do you mean there's no goddamned victim? I watched them bag her up myself!" Rysen paced back and forth several feet from her.

"There've been at least a hundred people here since the analysts left the scene. Most of them are miserable, I might add." Including her. Just like before, she'd had to remove the coat to see the other signatures, and it was just as cold as it had been earlier. Worse, the liquor store was brightly lit facing the street, but here on the side, shadows hovered and streaked. Signatures of every kind flowed in all directions. She counted at least three Sibile signatures among them and took pains to avoid them. No death signature remained where Rysen said it would, and the shadows were ominous because she couldn't see where the killer's black sphere might be.

She was going to have to ask him for help.

It took several seconds for her to lift her lips enough to growl the request out. "Can you come closer?"

He stopped pacing. "How close?"

She ignored the hopeful timbre. His color hovered at her back, reaching for her, but the distance kept it off her. With her mental eye open, she'd be more open to his emotions and her own responses, but on this plane, only his light would reveal the killer. No choice but to deal. "Stand behind me."

He was there before she took her next breath. "I thought you said this distracted you."

She quivered, relaxing as his essence surrounded her. Bright light flooded the darkness, enveloping her in warmth and masculine strength. His voice warmed her

belly in completely different ways. How could a simple, graveled baritone make her insides quiver? Make the throbbing start again, until she wanted to drop her head and moan from it?

Instead, she cleared her throat, hoping it might clear her mind as well. Focusing outward, she raised her hands and arrowed the light forward. "You have your uses."

His answering growl made her smile. Until she found the sphere.

"There he is." Once again, the glow disappeared around the hard knot of rage. "He's still a sphere. No motion. He was here and he was gone. He never moved."

"You've got to give me more than that, Jade."

"That's all there is." She didn't mention touching it again. Not only because she didn't want to, but she knew his reaction wouldn't be worth provoking. Instead, she backed away, pressing her back to his front. Her skin practically vibrated at the contact and a sigh escaped before she could stop it. A hot hand settled low on her belly, pulling her closer. She didn't resist, her body turning pliant under that single palm. Pliant and aching. If he would just...*touch* her. The need would curb again, she knew it. But he stayed still, barely breathing, as if he were considering slipping those long fingers inside the waistband of her pants to give her some kind of surcease.

While she considered begging him to, a trill cut through the air, snapping her out of the trance.

Rysen backed away, picking up what she belatedly realized was a phone call. Shaking herself out of her stupidity, she reached for the coat before he got too far. She was still buttoning when he came back, expression black.

“What?” But she knew.

“There’s been another murder.”

“I would think a man who works in Homicide would be used to crime scene calls.”

Pale watched the black strip of road ribbon forward, hugging the mountain as he rushed the car over it. Rage because of another victim seared his blood, but much as he hated to admit it, the death wasn’t foremost in his mind. She was right, he’d grown inured to the call of lost souls. But he said nothing, not wanting to even address the female sitting blindfolded across from him until he had an idea what he was going to do with her.

The call wasn’t from central. No other members of the VCU would be trailing him, no one from crime scene processing would be collecting evidence. This was a Wolf death. No one in Moonridge would give a fuck, even if they were informed. Well, not about the girl, anyway. They’d sure as hell care why he was called to deal with it, though. And they’d want to know where the dead girl had been headed. Which made bringing Jade there a hell of a risk. Blindfolding her so she couldn’t navigate her way back to the cabin only negated one aspect. She’d want to know the answer to those questions too, and shutting her up wasn’t something he’d completely mastered yet. But he couldn’t leave her alone.

Unfortunately, he was also driving her directly into the path of two unmated males. Ty, if it came down to it, Pale knew he could take in a challenge. One on one, but it would be bloody for them both. Tate was the wild card. On the one hand, he fought dirty—Pale didn’t trust these men to watch his back because they were cute and

cuddly—but on the other, when it came to women, Tate usually never had to fight at all.

His claws burst through his skin at the prospect of Jade choosing another male, especially one of the men he considered brothers.

Her gasp, muffled and pained, had him darting a glance her way. She was sitting in that prissy Sibile pose, hands folded in her lap as though it had never happened. But he knew what he'd heard. "What's the matter?"

"You're angry." She tilted her head in a movement he associated only with shifters. As if she was listening with an especially keen ear. "Possessive."

He carefully retracted his claws, forcing the control that hadn't eluded him in more than two decades to return. "So?"

When she didn't answer, he risked another quick look her way before taking the next curve into the snowy darkness. He could practically feel her bristling against his skin.

"So it's bothering me."

He frowned, hands clenching the wheel for entirely other reasons. "I thought you said you weren't telepathic."

"I'm not." Her words had to be coming through gritting teeth. "I'm *empathic*. There's a difference."

"Are you using your ability on me?"

"I don't *need* to use it with you," she snapped, no small amount of growl in her voice. Which irritated him more because there was too much sexy about her when she rumbled at him, throwing off her Sibile training like the bad fit he knew it was. "You brood like a tidal wave, a rock could pick it up."

“You want me to stop *brooding*?” The ridiculousness of that request had him blinking. An unexpected urge to laugh strangled in his throat. He looked at her again, even though she couldn’t possibly know through the black towel he’d tied around her head—the one she hadn’t so much as blinked at before turning her back to him in silent submission. She was serious. Pale snorted. “You’re just gonna have to get *over* that shit.”

Did her lips curve? He couldn’t tell for sure without taking his eyes off the road again and he was already driving riskily on the mountain highway. But he was pretty sure she was. Strangely, that soothed him. He hadn’t gone out of his way to be kind to her because he still wasn’t sure she could be trusted, but that didn’t stop him from wanting to please her. Wanting her to be pleased with him. In all kinds of interesting ways—

“If you think that what you’re thinking is better than the brooding, you’re wrong.”

This time the laugh escaped. That made three times already she’d gotten under his guard. This female was definitely bad for his restraint. “What *am* I allowed to think about, your highness?”

“How about where you’re taking us? The lurching of this car is going to make me sick.”

“We haven’t even hit the hairpin turns yet.” Taking off the blindfold would probably help with the motion sickness. But it wasn’t wise. “How well do you know the eastern range?” He’d know if she lied.

“I don’t. My parents lived on the coast.”

And the Sibile had kept her locked away in the enclave until now. All there was around them were black birch and pines, snow and mountains. She’d be lost if she took so much as three steps from his side. That thought

brought a warm sensation to his gut. "Take off the blindfold."

"I'm fine with it." Which wasn't a lie either.

Irritation bloomed into anger. "What the hell kind of people do you live with that you're comfortable being defenseless?"

"I'm not."

"Comfortable?"

Her covered head turned his way. "Defenseless."

Against his will, his mouth curved at her complete confidence in her abilities. He'd yet to see her live up to it for a second, though. Sure, she'd blown him across a small interrogation room, but he had his doubts that it was on purpose. No, that temper of hers seemed far more responsible. "Take it off."

"Has anyone ever told you that you're fickle?" She reached behind her head and untied the knot. The towel came off, the soft moonlight gleaming off the braided patterns in her hair. "And the people I live with could kill me whether I saw it coming or not. It's a *secret* society, Detective. I understand the importance of knowledge and the value of trust. I don't have yours. I never will. The blindfold was necessary."

"Not anymore." What was it about her that when she told him the truth, it set his teeth on edge? So matter of fact. So...unimpassioned about her own life. Why didn't she demand his trust? He wanted to snap his teeth at her, maybe even shake her awake. But he had no reason either of them could accept, so he kept his hands and his teeth to himself. "Tell me something, little Sibile. You said something at the diner, it's been bothering me."

"I get the feeling everything bothers you."

She had no idea. “You made a distinction with your signatures. *Humans* have different colors for their different feelings.”

He couldn’t even hear her breathing. This wasn’t something she was supposed to let slip. “They do. All kinds of colors—”

“You also said you’ve been cloistered. When did you last see a human signature?”

“Before my parents died,” she answered softly. “I’ve always had this gift.” A trace of longing colored her voice.

“Does that mean the Sibile don’t?”

“This isn’t information you need, Detective.” Tight, prissy words again.

“You can tell the difference between the Sibile and humans.” The next obvious conclusion hit him like a shot between the eyes. “You can tell shifters from humans too, then, can’t you?”

She said nothing, staring forward resolutely. *Son of a bitch.*

He pulled over with a yank on the wheel. He reached for her chin, guiding her face his way so she had to meet his gaze. “Answer me.”

She tried to yank free of his hold, which she wouldn’t do if she had any idea how much control it took not to bruise her.

“*Answer.*”

“No.”

The determination in her made the hunger he’d tamped down flare to a greedy thirst. Even in the bluish light of the moon, her lips were red. Tempting. The color clouded his senses. He slid his hand to the side of her face, holding her jaw against his thumb, wanting nothing

more than to pull her against him and taste her again. Claim her. But his responsibilities cast a shadow on his thoughts, reining his desires as nothing else could have. He could feel her pulse against his palm, racing. Was it fear? Of him?

For the briefest second, he hated his place in the world, even knowing he'd created it himself. Knowing he wouldn't change it if he could.

Pale tightened his fingers at her nape, staring her down, demanding submission. "Do *they* know?"

She struggled, but she couldn't look away any more than she'd been able to break his hold.

He shook her slightly. "Don't toy with me. Your Order. Do. They. Know?" His voice had descended into little more than a snarl and his fangs descended in pure fury.

She lost her color, finally starting to realize her precarious position. "No." Her whisper had no defiance. Only hurt.

He lightened his hold, but he couldn't pull his hand free. Instead, he rubbed his thumb over the curve of her jaw, rustling the silky strands that swirled in front of her ear. To soothe. If he could have, he'd have lowered his brow to hers and promised her anything if she never looked at him that way again. Not the cards he'd been dealt, though.

"Why didn't you tell them?"

"I don't know. I should have." She lifted her gloved hand to his wrist. Gently, she pushed his hand away. "The Voice said it was wrong," she added, reaching for the blindfold.

The Voice. And she'd listened, even after she stopped hearing. She'd defended a secret when it might have given her power. He had no doubt that she recognized how much the Sibile would have valued that knowledge, but she'd protected a people she had never known anyway. He stared at her, wondering if she had any idea of her own strength. Strength enough to sleep with vipers, even as a child, and defy them. It was no wonder she had no compunction about challenging him.

Something in him shifted, like a stone falling into place. Acceptance. No, *decision*. He tried to quell it. Her actions convinced him at last that she was a Wolf, but trusting a Sibile with his life and the lives of those he protected? Could he do that? He didn't know. For a final instant, he fought the Instinct's demand that he bend to its will. But the rightness of it wouldn't be resisted.

Somehow, somehow, Jade-Scarlet—Wolf, Sibile, *woman*—would belong to him.

Chapter Eight

Cabin must be euphemism for *shelter*, Jade decided as they pulled up to what could only be a one-room log structure. Snow piled on the roof, which leaned near to the ground on one side, its ledge poking into a pile of the white stuff. A window glowed with faint orange light and the stone chimney gave off a steady wisp of smoke. Apart from the clearing in the trees and the dirt road leading to it through the forest, nothing else marked its existence.

Rysen hadn't said anything since his interrogation in the car, but his color hadn't been so reticent. She sat in the seat, spine stiff, trying to ignore the soft waves of his signature, no longer wrapping around her like a fist but draping itself around her like a sleepy cat's tail.

Yes, definitely fickle.

Which was the only reason she hadn't relaxed into its hold. God help her if she let herself be seduced by his kindness. His defensiveness she could understand. Could even be attracted to, even apart from the disturbing responses he evoked with his touch...or worse, his thoughts. But she'd rather he killed her as an enemy than as her betrayer.

"They won't hurt you," he said into the silence. "They're good men. But you should expect..."

"To respond to them like I do to you?"

"No." His clear eyes took on a molten glow. "No, the mating Heat might tempt a male to forget himself, but the

females never lose their autonomy. It's supposed to be up to them to choose the acceptable male."

"*Supposed to be.*" She turned her gaze to the door of the sad little building where she'd find not one, but three other men who most likely wouldn't appreciate a Sibile in their midst any more than Rysen did. What was *supposed to be* didn't apply to this day and age. It hadn't for a long time. Wolves had descended into rape and animalistic detachment and she'd be stupid to expect anything else.

"It still is for me."

Jade looked down at the warm hand that had reached onto her lap to grasp her fingers. When she looked up again, his eyes met hers levelly. Still molten, still hungry, igniting the same hunger in her blood. That quickly, the fullness in her breasts and lower body returned twofold, nearly making her gasp. Just a touch, a look, and her body almost wasn't her own. It was his, there for the asking. She wished the overwhelming sensations would go away, wished she weren't so vulnerable to him. And what if he was wrong, what if she was this vulnerable to every male she met? What if her body was taking her ability to reason away from her without her even realizing it? Who would save her then?

"On my life, Jade, they won't touch you." Finally, his stare flickered away. He pulled his hand off and opened the door. "Not unless you want them to."

The door slammed hard enough to rock the car. Jade took advantage of the few seconds he needed to circle around, drawing a breath to steady herself. It didn't help. Too soon, he was at her door, pulling it open and reaching his hand in to help her out.

She looked at that hand. It wasn't a gentle hand. It had scars, the calluses visible and rough. The strength

there, in the dexterous fingers, was unquestionable. He could hurt her in so many ways, the deadly claws he could wield being only the least of his strengths. But there was more to this man than brutality. Maybe her instincts lied, maybe they wanted him and would say anything to get their way, but she knew to her soul he wouldn't hurt her without cause. No, this was a man whose dying breath was already promised to protect, not destroy. She could trust in that.

She gave him her hand.

At the contact, pleasure—rich and masculine—draped itself around her, stroking her skin like a pleased caress. An invitation. Self-preservation kept her from moaning when he pulled her to her feet in the snow, only an inch at best from his chest, but she couldn't make herself move away. She couldn't even dredge up the desire to. She was almost exactly where she wanted to be. The only thing better would be right against him.

She just kept her fingers from reaching through the gap in his coat to feel his heartbeat. His warmth tempted her, making the snow inconsequential. She wanted it all over her. His heat, his scent, his touch... Need that could blind swamped her from head to toe. She had to touch him. Like a thirst of the worst kind. Her skin craved, her muscles clenched, her entire body swayed toward him. Eyes closing, lips raised—

She gasped when his hand steadied her at the shoulder. Against the car, setting her firmly out of any possible embrace even as he blocked the icy wind with his back. The touch could have been a stroke, despite the layers of his heavy coat around her, but it was clearly

rejection. He wasn't even looking at her, instead he glared over her head to the cabin on the other side of the car.

She stared at him, disbelieving, as pain rippled through her, seeping into her like water over a stone, inexplicably weakening, only to replace itself with anger. Humiliation. The sensations surged like an undertow, pulling her one way before dragging her under with the other, making her want to shriek with fury. She batted her clawed fingers at him, wanting to push him as far away from her as he could get, but the blasted man remained firmly in place.

Rysen defended himself simply by leaning his full length against her, cuffing her wrists on either side of her head with a gentle but unbreakable hold. She could feel her cheeks stinging red at the realization that he felt perfect there. That she was pressing back against him, instinctively reaching for more. Rage spiked, her hands taking on a glow that threatened to become a flame.

Rysen lowered his head to her, his lips grazing her cheek in an oddly soothing motion. "I'm not rejecting you. Believe me, if we were alone—"

"We *are* alone."

"No, we're not."

She froze, breath heaving in and out, cold and sobering. Someone was there? Watching her throw herself at him? Watching him control her with no more than a handhold and a whisper?

The light in her hands turned a dangerous shade of orange.

"Tone it down, Jade." The command in his tone rubbed her wrong.

"Let me go."

“And watch you blow up the cabin?” He shook his head, his shaggy hair falling into his eyes. “I don’t think so. Pull it back.”

With possible enemies to her back? Enemies she hadn’t sensed or heard or felt in any way. Vulnerability surrounded her, but he expected her to trust him anyway?

His eyes narrowed, his mouth firming into what she guessed had to be a hard line, Rysen accepted the silent reasoning. But he didn’t like it, something she didn’t have to be an empath to understand.

“We’ll talk about this later.” He let go of her hands, keeping her body in place against the car with his weight. She wouldn’t get out from under him without a winch if he didn’t want her to. “Do me a favor, highness. Don’t burn the place down, all right?”

His movement was deliberate, she decided, fighting to keep from closing her eyes at the pressure of his hips dipping against hers as he pulled away from her. Unfair Wolf.

“Having trouble with your stray, Pale?” a deep voice called pleasantly from somewhere nearer the cabin. She picked up the thread of tension there, though, as if the speaker were braced to spring. “I can take her off your hands. You know the pretty ones always like me best.”

Pale? She glanced at the detective. He kept both eyes on the person—people?—crunching their way closer through the snow. His growl this time was nothing but pure threat. And not at her. In fact, the absolute menace of it made her wonder if the snarls he’d sent her way before were anything but his version of a love note.

The crunching sounds stopped.

Turning carefully, Jade peered over the hood of the car to see two men in heavy sheepskin coats, nearly as tall as Rysen, half their faces shadowed. The halves exposed by moonlight weren't much more than deep scowls. Her hands still sphered by light, hopefully blocked from their view by the car, Jade backed into Rysen's rigid form. Strangely, she felt comforted. Secure.

Stupid Heat. These hormones of hers were going to drive her crazy. Or, she added, when Rysen's hand circled her waist possessively, fingers spread low over her belly, they could well get someone killed.

"Who are they?" she whispered.

"My brothers." Rysen's voice sounded more Wolf than man.

"They won't attack me?" They might want to, she finally understood. The two men weren't casually waiting for an introduction. Both of them were tense, breathing heavily. Much the way Rysen had the first moment they met. They were fighting the Heat.

"Not if they want to keep their entrails."

Well, that was...graphic. "What do I do?"

"She could say hello," the leaner shadow replied. Showing he could hear their whispered discussion?

Jade narrowed her eyes at him, irritated. Why was he being so purposefully aggressive? She knew nothing about Wolf interactions, but even she could tell he took his life in his own hands, talking to Rysen so blithely.

"This one is more interesting than the others, I think. More...delectable."

Which one of them was he trying to aggravate? Rysen's palm burned her already-sensitized abdomen as he pulled her tighter to his side. Almost as if he were trying to pull her behind him. Did he think she needed

protection? She had no doubt he could provide it, but it wouldn't do to let any of them get it into their heads that she required it.

"How many others have there been?" she asked across the expanse that felt smaller with each passing second.

The leaner one grinned, exposing too many teeth on what seemed to be a handsome face. "We had one just a few days ago, didn't we, Pale? A pretty little thing too." His smile faded as Jade's grew, accompanied by a hissing sound. The lean man shifted, swearing as he hopped out of what was quickly becoming a deep pool of boiling water. "What the *hell*?"

"Jade." Rysen's voice lacked any reproof. She didn't sense a flash of humor either, but her own enjoyment made up for it. "The loud one is Jensen Tate. The quiet one over there is Tyler Herrick."

The quiet man nodded, his hat maintaining his shadows. Jensen, though, had jumped into clear moonlight, still throwing an out-of-kilter glance at the melted snow. One look and Jade had to gasp, though she tried to tamp it down when Rysen stiffened behind her. Smooth skin, tilted eyes—sharp, like a hunter's—a bone structure that was both masculine and fine. He'd be delicate if he weren't so weathered. In a word, beautiful.

"You could almost pass for a Sibile." A lot more than she ever had, anyway.

Jensen scowled, burying his boots in a drift of snow. "I'm no one's pet, lady."

She opened her mind's eye, unsurprised that Jensen's color was blue. Like her father, like Rysen. As deep blue as the darkest color of the ocean. Except for the streak of

moonlight blue across his chest. She glanced at the other man, Tyler. Broader than Jensen, more heavily muscled. Surprisingly, his blue was the color of a summer sky, bright, inviting and content. He was about as dangerous to her as a teddy bear on a shelf. Especially when across his chest, from right shoulder to hip, swam a swath of pale blue.

"They're yours." She turned her head to look up at Rysen, relaxing in his hold. She released the light in her hands at the same time, trusting in that electric streak. Trusting in Rysen, she realized, unable to be concerned about that strange turn.

"My brothers." He eyed them over the car still, hostility evident.

Jade shook her head, turning to face him, indulging in the urge to press her hand to his hard stomach. He felt like steel, but she knew he was warm flesh and blood. Man, elemental. She roved her gloved hand in a circular motion, wanting to soothe. They weren't in any danger. The men might recognize the scent of Heat, but neither seemed truly interested in pursuing it. More likely, they weren't interested in challenging Rysen.

"No, *yours*. Loyal to you." That loyalty wouldn't be split by something so slight as a female. She searched his color, felt its life around her, but saw no trace of the other men's shades. She stared up, shocked. "You're their Alpha."

Rysen's scowl snapped downward at her and he gave a sharp shake of his head. "They're my *brothers*." The words brooked no argument, though she was tempted to give him one. At the very least, she conceded, thinking of the men watching with interest, this wasn't the time.

“If you say so.” Alpha law and all that, she mentally added, trying not to smile. He wouldn’t appreciate it. She pressed her face to his side, breathing in the cool scent of leather and man. “But would your brothers mind if we went inside? My legs are freezing out here.”

She felt him make a gesture of some sort, but it didn’t matter. She was safe. Safe and exactly where she needed to be. That is, until Rysen reached down and swept her up into his hold. Cradled in his arms, she opened her mouth to protest, but the hard command in his eyes kept her silent. Something...Wolf was going on and he needed her not to fight it.

She thought of her books back in the enclave. While the writers didn’t know much about Wolf politics or social cues, they did know that unspoken rules existed in the packs and dominance needed to be established and recognized at all times. If she was right and Rysen was the Alpha of this particular group, undermining his authority would be about as healthy for her as slashing her own wrists.

Besides, his arms around her felt good.

Still. “You know I’m allowing this, right?”

His mild grunt was matched with a slight squeeze around her thighs. “If you say so.”

So he knew when he was being pandered to. She shrugged and slid her arms around his neck, breathing him in and letting him have his way. She pulled a touch of moonlight, just enough to make her point, and let her palm heat against his neck as they passed the two other men. Not to sizzle, just to tease. She smiled into his shoulder when she felt his breath hitch. She brought her lips to Rysen’s ear. “Just so you don’t forget.”

Watching the two men converge in the snow, stopping to watch them from a safe distance while Rysen carried her into the cabin, she allowed herself a small second to indulge in the sense of rightness. It was only the hormones, she knew, but it didn't hurt anything. A moment's respite from fighting what her body seemed determined to do. The feeling glowed around her, a shade of yellow the men were no doubt trying to explain to themselves.

He pushed open the cabin door, stepping into a warm room scented with pine and the faint smoke of a strong fire. He lowered her almost immediately, barely letting her feet touch the ground before finding her mouth with his, taking what she'd offered earlier. Jade gripped his shoulders, nearly bowed over his restraining arm, thought of any kind evaporating from her brain.

He filled her senses, from the taste of him in her mouth and the feel of his beard tickling her face to the unyielding strength of his body and the surge of unmitigated want clouding around her. More than that, erotic visions formed in her head, images pushed her way on purpose. Scenes of the two of them entwined, somewhere soft and warm, nothing but sweat between their heated skin, in some places not even that. His body, driving deep into hers, the sounds of their pleasure blending and echoing in her mind along with emotions that rolled through her. Possession. Demand. *Perfection*.

Body and mind, Jade erupted into flames.

Rysen broke the kiss as abruptly as he started it, leaving her blinking, nearly boneless and ready to kill him. He inclined his head to the side, to someone behind her, his gaze never leaving hers. "So *you* don't forget."

Fingers tightening on his coat, she smiled, already rising on her toes for another taste.

He squeezed her arms lightly. "This is my other brother, Aaron Favian." A wicked glitter twinkled in his eyes when she made no motion to look at the man he'd indicated. "I have to go with Ty and Tate. He'll protect you. If anything happens and I'm not here—"

"I'll find you." The honest words escaped without permission.

His gaze bored into hers, as if he wanted her to understand something he couldn't say. "If I'm not here to protect you, it's only because I'm dead."

She found some of her balance again at his bald pronouncement. He was as serious as blood and the raw promise started her thinking. There were no other officers around. No one except for shifters. And, apparently, a body somewhere in the vicinity. The obvious finally clicked. "This isn't an official crime scene, is it?"

Rysen shook his head.

"You said there was another victim. Why aren't we there?"

"The kill is fresh. We're not sure the forest is safe yet." Meaning he didn't know if the killer was still near, waiting.

"I could help." The black trail would be impossible to miss.

He didn't even bother with shaking his head. "You will. When it's safe."

Jade scowled. As long as he got his way, he'd probably consider deep breathing a safety issue. "This deal of yours gets worse with every minute."

“Only from your end. Aaron, guard her with your life.” It was only when he turned and pulled open the door that Jade was able to release the breath of frustration. He either didn’t hear it over the rushing icy wind or he ignored it as he closed the door solidly behind himself.

“Jerk.”

“That’s one of the more mild names I’ve heard him called.”

Jade spun, having almost forgotten about the other person in the room. She had to blink at the golden brilliance of his signature—most definitely not a Wolf, but shifter of some kind—forcing her psychic eye closed before he started to hurt her.

Normal eyes found a ruggedly handsome man with thick dark hair and eyes a light shade of brown, leaning against the wall beside a flight of stairs leading downward. She looked around, finally taking in that the shabby exterior of the cabin from the outside was just a façade. The wood floor led to the relatively small confines of the four walls. The only way to go was down the stairs this Aaron person was blocking with lean but virile strength.

Like with the others, she could appreciate his looks but no mind-stealing waves of lust flowed through her. He could be another plain wall for all her hormones reacted. She frowned, wondering what precisely that meant, unsure she wanted the answer.

He stared at her curiously, head tilted. His hair looked lustrous, combed backward in short lengths that didn’t seem able to lie down all the way. A strong face, definitely, sharp featured. His skin was burnished, his face cragged, as if he spent all day, every day, in the sun.

“You’re not at all what I expected,” he said into the silence.

“Neither are you,” she replied honestly. She’d have thought Rysen would only trust a Wolf so completely. “What are you?”

“Not as complicated as you, I’d bet.”

Oh, fun. Someone with a sense of humor. Jade just kept from snarling at him.

He smiled, making it official that shifters were the most confusing species on the planet. They only seemed to like her when she was ready to attack them.

“Come down to the fire.” Aaron backed down the stairs, matching her progression step for step until they reached the underground floor.

Jade looked around, eyes wide. This was no one-room shack. The large, open space was broken into areas. A fireplace large enough to heat the entire level was surrounded by a U-shaped green couch, utilitarian but expansive. A large table dominated the center and an open-access kitchen lined the walls next to the stairs. Three doors took up the wall next to the dining table, all closed. The curious part of her wondered where they led, but the smart part silenced it. This place was already a surprise. She didn’t need to know its secrets.

“Couch all right?” Something told her sitting at a table with Aaron Favian was an invitation to another interrogation.

“Sure.” He followed, hovering a reasonable distance away, but her sensitivities prickled anyway. She already had a shadow, not to mention an overprotective Wolf deciding what she could and couldn’t do. She didn’t need a...whatever he was, waiting for her to attack the cabin.

She almost said as much, until she saw the form sitting on the couch already, covered in blankets, his little feet making little lumps in the covering. He didn't even seem to be blinking, his dark eyes staring forward without seeing.

Jade's defensiveness faded. She knew this boy. She'd seen him smiling at her earlier...at the bus stop. With a young woman. Wolves, both of them, a fact she'd accepted and deemed unimportant at the time. Less than three hours ago, they'd just been strangers at a stop. Now...

She stopped the thought, unwilling to think it.

Now that sweet little face was cold and colorless. Completely devoid of life. She moved toward him before she even realized she meant to do it. Sitting carefully beside him, she leaned in, but there was no response. "What happened to him?"

"We don't know," Aaron replied, his deep voice lacking the reserved amusement from a few moments ago. "We found him with the girl."

"Girl?" Jade turned to look over her shoulder at him. "What girl?"

"The latest victim." Aaron's gaze flickered, taking in her question with a decided frown.

"He was with a woman. In a hat." Or was he? She hadn't paid much attention to the female. Just the boy, his avid curiosity impossible to ignore.

Aaron shook his head. "Girl. Maybe seventeen. When we got there, she was already murdered and he was like this. A ghost."

Jade reached out to touch the little cheek. He was cold, despite the blankets and the roaring fire. "Must be shock."

“That’s what we figured. Until we brought him into the cabin. It was dark at first. He went crazy as a feral mountain lion. Damn near burst my eardrum screaming. When we turned on the lights, he went back to this.”

“Poor baby.” Jade tucked the blankets tighter around the small form. Smaller than she’d first thought. Either he was very young or very hungry. Maybe both. The blankets alone would never be enough to warm him. “You have to bring him out of this.”

“I’ve been trying. It’s like he doesn’t know I’m here. Hell, I don’t think he knows *he’s* here.” Real worry stained Aaron’s voice.

“Can you give me a few minutes with him?” The words, however unwise, were out. “I won’t hurt him, I promise.”

“What will you do?”

Something Aaron probably wouldn’t like. Rysen either, come to think of it, but since he’d left her alone, he didn’t get to complain. One by one, she slid off her gloves. “I’ll help.”

It took long seconds, but he finally nodded. He didn’t go anywhere, though, so she figured that was as good as it would get.

Taking a deep breath, Jade closed her eyes and focused. Unlike the times when her emotions built power, drawing on it by will was always difficult. Other Sibiles did so mentally, drawing on their abilities with cool logic and years of repetitive practice. By the time they were ranked as scarlets, most could access their power without thinking about it or even stopping what they were doing. Not Jade.

She could think all she wanted about her gift, but nothing would happen. For her, it wasn't a mental process at all. Most of the time, her power *happened* to her. Jalla was the one who helped her to realize that using her gifts required empathy. Once she'd stopped using her mind and started reaching with her heart, she'd been able to pass the scarlet trials, but only by the skin of her teeth. Something always seemed to get in the way, a blockage that hindered her from true control. She did her best with the trickle and now, putting her hands on the legs of the small boy, she felt it grow for him.

Warmth in her chest, in her heart, blossomed and spread down to her palms. Concentrating on that sensation, she focused on white light, pure and soft. Like a morning mist. She felt it billow around them, a cloud filling the room, healing and soothing.

Too soon, the power faltered, then slipped away.

Jade blinked, disappointed. The boy's expression remained unchanged. She'd hoped to give him more, but when she looked at his face, at least the scratches on his cheek were healed and his color seemed to have returned from the slightly bluish tinge. A touch to his cheek revealed warmth, which was really all she could ask. She couldn't have been sure that it would have helped his mind anyway. No one at the enclave had ever needed her for that.

She turned to Aaron, who stared at her as if she'd done something unbelievable. Which she probably had, if he were as allergic to the Sibile as Rysen was.

Pale. The name whispered through her at the mere thought of him, tripping her heartbeat. It almost formed on her lips, possessively, as if she had a right to use it. As if it were hers to say.

She jolted, trying to understand the inclination as well as the surge of fire in her blood when he wasn't even nearby. All from just the thought of him? It was a question she couldn't risk answering. She ignored it and concentrated on the boy. "Do you have a small glass?"

The man's reaction time was considerably slower than before. "A what?"

"A container?" Surely a glass was a glass, even off the enclave. "Something that won't melt."

"A container." His frown almost seemed as if he'd never heard of that either.

Leaving him to his disbelief while he searched for something appropriate, she turned back to the boy, who didn't seem to notice they'd not been paying attention. The physical healing didn't help, but maybe she could reach him another way. Lifting the child onto her lap, she'd just gotten him settled when Aaron returned, flexing his hand over and over. He gave her a small orb-shaped glass, something to hold a small candle, she realized. Perfect.

"My name is Jade-Scarlet. Mr. Favian here tells me that you don't like the dark," she whispered into the boy's ear. He didn't give any sign that he heard her. "I've never liked the dark, either. So, when I was little, my mother taught me how to make a star. Did you know that stars burn bright for millions and millions of years?"

Did his lashes flicker? Jade looked up at Aaron, who was watching the child with a sharp gaze, nodding at her to go on.

She held the orb out in front of the boy, carefully pulling his hands apart from the scrap of something he had knotted in his grip. He made a desperate noise,

snatching them out of her grasp. She recognized the knitted fabric...the hat the young woman had been wearing. It looked so small, like a pouch, in his grip.

"It's okay, you can hold your hat. I'm sorry." She smoothed his silky dark hair back along the side of his head. "If you can use one of your hands, though, I could make a star for you. One you can keep with you forever and it'll never be dark again."

She held up the orb once again, waiting as still as she could for the boy to respond.

His fingers twitched, toyed with the knitting on the cap, then, finally, reached out to hold the orb for her. "Never?"

"Never." She'd make sure of it. This much, she could do without losing control. With the boy holding the orb, she reached for the flames in the fireplace. Ignoring Aaron's whispered expletive, she separated the light and heat from the gases, transforming the orange and yellow licks into white. Then she pressed, tighter and tighter, the strain pulling at the back of her neck before rendering it into a tiny sphere of concentrated light. Shaping the tiny wave of heat around it to keep it suspended, she directed it into the bowl of the votive holder. The glow inside the glass shone even brighter in the boy's hand, earning her a gasp of amazed delight.

Finally, someone who liked her tricks.

"Now don't hold it too long, stars get very hot. But if you're careful with it, it will keep the dark away from now on." She took the orb and placed it delicately on the table in the center of the area. "If you'll let Mr. Favian bring you something warm to eat, you can sit next to your star and watch it, all right?"

The boy nodded, moving off her lap to kneel at the table and lay his head down next to the orb. She watched him, a small smile tugging at her lips even as exhaustion pulled at her shoulders. Between the walk, the Heat, the struggle with the black signature and the constant spikes of power Rysen seemed to set off, she'd already been growing tired. A small star wasn't much to ask, especially considering that she'd been so close to them earlier and let them pass her by, but the weariness in her dragged at her limbs. She felt Aaron's hand on her shoulder and looked up at his sun-lined face.

His hand squeezed, as if he could tell that she'd used more energy than she meant to, then he walked over to the kitchen to find some food for the boy. Giving in to the tiredness, strangely feeling as safe as Rysen promised she'd be with this man who guarded children, she closed her eyes and dozed. She had to rest. Before long, her gifts wouldn't be needed to wake small children from nightmares.

Instead, she knew she'd be facing one of her own.

Chapter Nine

Long gone again.

Pale took a deep inhalation of the cold air, but nothing more than the acrid scent of ash filled his senses. Ash and impatience, though, truthfully, that last was his own.

“Are you *trying* to get gutted?” he finally demanded of Tate, but his brother was still too busy grumbling about the melted rubber on the bottom of his boots to be threatened.

“They might as well be shovels now, damn it. Who the hell does she think she is?”

“You’re lucky that’s all you got for pissing off a Sibile.” Ty’s gray eyes scanned the trees as they waited for Pale to finish assessing the body.

“She’s a *Wolf*,” Pale growled, effectively shutting both of them up for long moments.

Not long enough, though.

“I always figured Pale’d mate a girl with as thick a beard as he has,” Tate said, because apparently silence was a fate worse than death. “Never thought he’d find someone as pretty as that.”

“She *is* pretty,” Ty agreed, “but I always figured his mate would have to be blind. Almost feel bad for her, looking at his ugly ass for the rest of her life. That’s just a damn shame.”

“Don’t the two of you have something better to do?” Pale waved an arm around the drifts of snow, his blood

revving hotter than before. "Have you tracked the trail? Have you found anything at all that'll get us closer to this bastard or are you going to stand there cracking jokes all damn night?"

Ty sobered immediately, his faint grin disappearing into a grim line, just the way Pale wanted it.

Tate, unfortunately, wasn't so accommodating. "Hell no, let's crack jokes. After all, we've been sitting here with our thumbs up our asses while you carted one of the evil Amish right into our most secure safe house. What's the hurry?"

Pale pointed at the near-frozen body in the snow. "Does this look fucking secure to you, Tate?" He crossed the space between them to glare down at the younger man from less than two inches away. "This is the sixth victim. The second one less than a mile from the cabin and that evil Amish is our only goddamned chance at finding the one responsible. There *is* no safe house here, not for them, and if you don't watch your tongue about her, there won't be one for you."

Tate held his ground for several stubborn seconds before his gaze flickered down.

When he met Pale's gaze again, it was with the respect demanded, his eyes focused just to the side, not meeting Pale directly. "Trail starts two miles south, where the road meets the highway. Last stop off the city bus. Looked pretty typical until the last quarter mile. She was moving fast, hit a hard stop at the top of this hill, then pretty much ran for her life. She didn't get far. Kid seems to have followed later."

The kid being the witness Tate mentioned when he'd called. Tate made no motion to further dissemble. For a

rare, suspended moment, he was the soldier they'd fashioned themselves into, waiting for the next command.

Satisfied, Pale backed away, his hackles lowering. He crouched next to the girl, still not sure what he was so irritated about. The two men knew their jobs and they did them without his interference or instruction. Their sarcasm was about the only reason all of them weren't ravaging the mountainside—or each other—because they'd lost another life. The teasing, the insults, the sniping...it wasn't new. Pushing his weight around didn't make him feel any better, either. The girl was still dead.

And Jade still wasn't his.

Yet.

Ferocious hunger swept through him, making him clench clawed fingertips and grind lengthening fangs. Now that he'd made the decision that he wanted her, Instinct surged stronger than before. Need burned through his blood, demanding he complete the bonding. She'd offered herself, a fact that had to have the Heat inside her boiling to new heights, but with this latest murder, with his brothers watching like spectators, they'd both have to suffer a while longer.

"Well, that answers that question," Ty murmured.

"What question?" Pale snapped.

"Whether you'd mated with her yet or not," Ty answered, no small amount of wryness to his tone. "I'm going to go with no."

Pale looked up to pin his friend with a glare that had little to no effect.

Tate's snort lacked eloquence, but Ty's slow grin didn't. "Well, you have to admit, you'd be in a better mood if you had."

Pale bit off an expletive. "Is this some kind of half-assed challenge?"

Ty only laughed. "Hell no. I wouldn't touch her with *his* dick." He hooked his thumb over at Tate, who scowled at the prospect. "Any woman who can boil snow with a look is not one I want to piss off. You, on the other hand, could probably use a woman with weapons. God knows she's gonna need 'em."

Maybe he should have left his brothers at the cabin and brought Jade instead. "How about the two of you just shut up and let me think."

"Yes, sir," Tate answered, the smart ass.

Pale ignored them both and looked down at the body. He didn't know what he expected to find that was any different than the times before. Like the last victim, this girl was dressed. Had she been given the time to shift, like the early ones? Or was she like Shae, and chose to be bait in order to save her ward? He looked upward, following the slope of the snow and saw that the distance to the road could have been traversed in seconds for a panicked runner. No, she hadn't been given the option to shift. The killer was either taking less time on these kills or he was becoming more patient with his stalking, letting the victims walk the lengths of their nooses before tightening the knot just when they could see safety. He wouldn't be able to tell until he could get Jade up here.

He glared into the gaping wound of the girl's chest, at the hollow blackness inside. "Where's the heart?"

"Yeah, that's the problem." Ty's easy manner disappeared behind the soldier he was first. "He took it with him this time."

That couldn't be good. Pulling a small flashlight from his pocket, Pale shone the beam into the body cavity. Unlike the other times, there was no ragged chunk of flesh left abandoned inside, an organ torn apart. This extraction was clean, leaving mangled lungs and severed arteries coated with fallen ice but nothing else. The bastard had finally figured out how to tear the heart out whole.

"You're sure he's gone?" he asked, though his own senses were absolute. But Tate and Ty had combed the hillside for miles. They might have insight he didn't.

"Honestly, Pale," Ty replied, tone dark with repressed frustration, "if it weren't for her, I wouldn't think he'd been here in the first place."

Pale nodded, understanding. Apart from the blood, each site had been utterly untouched. Not even a damn footprint in the snow. But he wasn't getting away this time. Jade would help Pale see to that.

He backed away, returning to the two on the far side of the clearing. The Woodsman's random selections over the past three months had been spaced weeks apart. These last two, mere days. And he'd risked survivors. The killer wasn't playing by his own rules anymore, and that could be dangerous for everyone, especially the families that came almost every other day now. Regret hung closer to him than a shadow, but he had no other choice. "Close the Underground. No one moves into Moonridge until this is over."

The two didn't like that option any more than Pale did himself. There were hundreds of shifters in the pipeline, traveling from safe house to safe house in search of sanctuary; more were coming all the time. Keeping

them in one place for more than a day or two was inviting discovery.

"Pale, we can't leave them indefinitely," Ty said, obviously speaking for both of them.

"I won't have them walking into the arms of a butcher." Particularly one who almost seemed to be reading their minds about how they were coming to the cabin. Grimly, he added, "He's taking them faster. Combine that with the city killings and he's accelerated out of control. Whatever the hell is going on, it's coming to a head."

Ty grunted in grudging agreement. Tate's eyes remained flinty, but he didn't argue. Meaning he knew as well as they did, this wasn't going to end easy.

"I'll get Jade. Don't move the body until I bring her back. We're going to start at the road. I want to know how long this bastard tracked them."

"She can tell you that?" Tate asked, for once not sounding offensive.

Pale shrugged. Not even for these men would he break the promise he made to her. "We'll find out."

On the way back to the cabin, Pale brooded in the snowy silence. Fat flakes came down on his shoulders and melted on his uncovered hair. So many choices to make and none of the answers as clear as usual.

For the first time in his life, his loyalties were conflicted. These brothers he'd gladly die for, would likely die next to, and he'd been ready to end them for looking at a female. A female he couldn't even bring himself to trust completely. There was something very wrong about that, but he couldn't reason out which aspect bothered him the most. That his allegiances could be

tempted so easily or that he resented having reservations about the woman he'd chosen.

He wanted Jade, unequivocally. Was attracted to her beauty, yes, but was even more attracted to the strength of her spirit. Of her Wolf, buried so deep he hadn't even been sure it was still there. But he could see it in her eyes, feel it in her voice. Taste it on her lips like a secret.

How could he tie himself to a woman who rejected everything he was? And how could she ever give herself to a man who had bathed in the blood of everything she'd been raised to become?

What price would they both pay if they tried?

His feet fell heavily on the stone steps as he opened the cabin door, the chill inside him now far more biting than anything the weather could attempt. He shook the worst of the snow off before opening the door. Her scent slammed into him like freight train, rocking him back on his heels as his senses narrowed to a single imperative point.

She needs. Find her. Take her. Claim her.

He was already halfway down the stairs before he could stop himself. Claws fully extended, fangs throbbing, he was prepared to tear through walls if needed to get to her. But it wasn't walls he had to tear through. It was a strange red haze, a light that filled the entire downstairs like fog.

Lust had his muscles clenching while responsibility—to the lost, to the people who relied on him, but most importantly to her—froze him where he stood. This was nothing he'd ever seen before. He forced himself to calm, to think. Hold back the crushing want. Long seconds, sweat forming and dripping down his back

as he willed the claws and the fangs back into human form. Pushed mercilessly until control was his again.

Aaron waited by the door to the underground extra rooms as he finally came down the stairs, eyes narrowed into a sharp glare. Every line of him was tension-filled and he kept flexing his left hand open and shut. Nothing new there, he tended to when he was pensive, a habit he'd developed after it had been crushed in Vayere's implosion. But it wasn't a good sign.

"I moved the boy to one of the rooms. He wouldn't understand—" Aaron gestured at the haze with his open hand, "*—this.*"

Pale didn't understand *this* either, but he felt it. This power of Jade's was nothing for a child to deal with. The red light felt like desire coursing over his skin. Pure, feminine need tugging at him, brushing around him in caressing waves, leaving his senses drugged even more than when they first met. The Heat. A studying glance told him his brother wasn't responding to Jade's call. Strange, but so relieving, Pale didn't question why. He'd have hated fighting Aaron just as much as he would have the others.

"She's sleeping. Dreaming, I think." Aaron tipped his head in the direction of the couch before slipping back into the closed bedroom wing, leaving Pale alone with the woman at least one of them should consider protecting. Then again, the only losing battle Aaron ever fought was the one for their survival.

Circling the couch, Pale found her, legs folded in front of her, her head resting on the arm draping the cushions. She moaned, a low husky sound that strung tight the threads of his hard-won control. He could almost

taste the beads of sweat at her temples, ached to relieve her inky hair of those tight braids forming intricate patterns around her head. That black thing held even more braided hair, coiled tight to the back of her neck. How long would it be, if it were free? To her waist? Longer? He couldn't begin to imagine. But he'd find out, he decided then and there. He'd unearth the Wolf she kept buried. Every impulse, every desire she kept held in. Tied down.

But she wasn't holding back now, not by the look on her face.

Flushed lush lips parted enough that he could see the lengthened points of her fangs. She shuddered in a breath, licked at the white lengths with a curling tongue. Would she sink them into him when he mated her? Would she be afraid when he did the same to her? Or would she climax hard enough to take him with her?

He reached with a fingertip, hand almost shaking with an effort to be his gentlest. Her bottom lip felt like warm silk against the back of his finger. He'd never dared touch anything so soft before her, and now he couldn't stop himself from grazing it again, not even when he knew he shouldn't. He traced the jut of her proud chin, scooping back up her cheek with the back of his hand. She quivered against him, another moan escaping her as she curved into his touch. Her lids lifted, only halfway, her amber eyes glowing with sensual demand.

Much as he wanted her, though, he could tell that she wasn't truly awake. Her eyes were too glazed, too unfocused. His mouth watered for her, especially as the red haze thickened around him, rippling up and down his body. But taking her now was wrong. Not here. Not now. "It's time to wake up, little Wolf."

She unfolded, standing on the couch so they were eye to eye. Her hands wound over his shoulders and she rubbed against his chest. Firm breasts flattened against him, rode upward, then dragged his shirt buttons into his skin as she moved downward. Tiny mewls of pleasure escaped her throat while she repeated the action, her small claws clamping onto the flesh of his shoulders. If she'd reached down his pants and gripped his shaft, she couldn't have aroused him more. Her need was palpable and his was growing to match it.

"Pale." She breathed into his ear, sounding so damn pleased with the sound of his name, just before sharp little fangs pinched the lobe.

He gripped her hips with his hands, if only to keep her from climbing onto him. Or maybe to help her—he was fast losing hold of why he shouldn't let her. "Wake up, Jade."

"*I want,*" she answered, voice rough and drunk with Heat. He leaned into the temptation of her lips, feeling them move against his temple. Her hands shoved at his coat, hooking the open sides at his shoulders so she could tug on his shirt. "Need to touch you."

"I know you do," he soothed, allowing his hold to lessen so he could help her. For him, the Heat was an undeniable call. For her, it was a fire, creating a desperation for touch, for sensation, and it had taken her over. His jacket fell to the ground, shrugged away and forgotten. She succeeded in dragging his shirt from his waistband, ripping the buttons open and tearing the undershirt wide, gasping only when he yanked her sweater up as well, baring her belly and a simple black

bra. He didn't give her any time to fight him, pulling her against him, skin to skin, mouth to mouth.

She groaned into him, her body fevered and quaking while he devoured her. Delving deep into her mouth, an answering groan of his own slipped free when her tongue wrapped around his, sucking him further into the kiss. She met him stroke for stroke, her body straining restlessly against his.

His arm locked around the small of her back, while his hand found the firm mound of her breast. The hard pebbled peak stabbed through the fabric into his palm, turgid and desperate. She jerked, hard, but didn't push out of his hold. So he squeezed, his claw flicking at the nipple. She broke the kiss, gasping, arching backward and pressing her breast farther into his hand.

She needed more.

Growling, his own hunger nearly unleashed, he pushed the restraining bra upward over the full globes of her breasts, baring them to his sight and touch. Her skin gleamed, the sheen of sweat over the cream-colored flesh tempting him, but not nearly as much as the deep blush of her nipples. Drawing on patience even he didn't know he had, he slowly lowered his head to blow a breath across one, watching it pucker tighter for him. She mewled again, her claws digging deeper at his shoulders.

His first lick was gentle, a light lap, but she jumped as if he'd hit her with electricity. She was close. He could smell the release rising, feel it in the tightness of her muscles. She needed and he was only too pleased to give. To mark her, even if only temporarily, as his own. Giving in, he sucked one into his mouth, laving it and drawing tight.

Her legs weakened and he lifted her against him even as he sank into the couch with her on his lap. The sweet heat of her core settled against the hard ridge of his cock, cradling him that close to a heaven he couldn't enter. Not yet. But soon, he vowed, knowing it was inevitable. As soon as she understood. Until then...

He switched breasts, using one hand to caress the abandoned one. His fingertip slid off the wet nipple as easily as his tongue flicked the other one in his mouth. Harder he sucked, listening as her gasps became soft cries. With his free hand, he stroked firmly down her back, squeezing her hips still when they twitched wildly against his. Soon, though, he couldn't stop the rocking motion without hurting her. Then he didn't want to. He began to meet her and when her breaths shortened into staccato rasps, he knew it was time. He bit down, not hard enough to break the skin, but definitely enough to push her over the screaming edge to oblivion.

He lowered his forehead to her still-burning skin, hearing the galloping pace of her heartbeat begin to slow only after the last spasms of completion were wrung from her. Her breathing took longer to come back to normal, but eventually it did and with it, the last of the red light faded away. Without that, there was no more reason to hold her this way. Regretfully, he pulled the cups of her simple bra back into place, resisting the urge to take a final taste of her. She'd be back to herself now and she wouldn't appreciate him taking the liberties.

Soon, he promised himself silently, they'd be his rights.

The sweater slid back into place easily as well, but the limp woman spread over his lap had yet to say

anything. She wasn't even looking at him, her downcast gaze firmly locked on her hands. Or rather, the deep crimson blood on the tips of her claws. He didn't think the flush to her cheeks was from the Heat this time.

"You didn't hurt me, Jade."

Her gaze flickered up, then back down. "I blooded you."

A satisfying fact his brothers would take as a sign that she'd made her choice. A sign any decent Wolf would have to respect. "It's not the first time. It won't be the last."

That got her to look him in the eye, even if her face was scowling. He pressed a kiss to her swollen lips, one she responded to as if she couldn't seem to help herself. When he ended it, she followed his lips hungrily for a millisecond.

Even better. It almost made his lack of completion worthwhile. "Can you stand?"

At the question, he felt her entire body stiffen. "Why wouldn't I be able to stand?"

She scrambled off him, all but leaping off the erection she only now seemed to realize wasn't a simple aftereffect of her orgasm. She wavered a little, but that damn Sibile pride of hers kicked in and she went militarily straight.

Much as he'd like to remind her of how soft and pliant she'd been mere seconds ago, his responsibilities were still waiting. Had been waiting too long. Ignoring the discomfort in his groin, he rose from the couch, pulling off his ruined shirts at the same time. He felt her gaze on his skin, tracing muscles and scars he'd long ago stopped noticing. Slash marks and random bites he played off as knife wounds when he had to.

“So many,” she murmured, her hand lifting as if she were going to touch him, then falling back to her side when she thought the better of it.

Pale clenched his teeth, instinctively angry that she hadn’t completed the motion. He wanted that touch. Needed it, damn it. Then again, if she had, she’d have been back on those cushions whether she wanted to be or not. And if there was one thing he wouldn’t accept, it was taking her without her being willing. “It’s not an easy world for a shifter.”

“Maybe it’s just not easy being you.” She looked down, busying herself with finding her gloves. Rather than watch her tug them on, he grunted and headed for the door to the cabin’s supply room. They kept spare clothes here, in case they ever had to shift without taking the time to strip; replacing his shirt wouldn’t be a problem.

Less than a minute later, he was yanking on a long-sleeve cotton pullover, striding toward his coat. She was already bundled in his jacket, waiting.

“Detective,” she began, not meeting his gaze again.

“Stop. I don’t want to hear it.” He could see the guilt and apology on her face already and maybe he was too rough, but he’d be damned before he let her say she was sorry for needing him. For wanting him.

She didn’t look up this time, no sparks of temper or grinding of her teeth. She just stood there, looking ten different kinds of miserable. In his head, he knew he should say something. A sheltered, virginal girl, unversed in anything about her own genetic makeup, and her body was going haywire on her. She couldn’t possibly know how to deal with Heat that could take her over. Or him. But words were not his forte and they weren’t going to

become so anytime soon. So he went with the only thing he could think of.

“We’ve got work to do, Jade.”

Her head lifted, those amber eyes filled with questions he wasn’t ready to decipher.

“I need you for this.”

She flinched, but nodded. “What about the boy?”

“He’s with Aaron.” Of all the shifters he’d grown up with, it was Aaron he trusted most. They had all suffered, all sacrificed, but it was Aaron who would move Heaven and Earth to keep what they were building safe. He’d already given his life for it once. He wouldn’t hesitate to do it again. “Come on. They’re waiting.”

She came without question, a decidedly un-Jade-like thing. She followed him to the car, climbed in and stayed silent all the way to the spot where he finally parked. He itched to push at her. Prod her into her usual confrontational manner, but he kept his itches to himself. For the time being. Hopefully until he could get this bastard murderer good and dead, then he could take his time claiming her. Teaching her how to claim him in return...

Meanwhile, the distance she was putting between them felt like walls, every brick of which was mortared with haughty reserve. As if that would stop him.

Build away, highness, he thought, his lips twisting into a near snarl. *It won’t last for long.*

Jade kicked at the snow, wishing ever so slightly that it was a certain hulking, bad-tempered Wolf.

“He was here somewhere. I can smell it.”

“No, he wasn’t. If he was, I’d see him.” She trudged, following the blue path alongside the snowy road, her

nerves strung tighter than ever, exhaustion dragging at her every step. In all honesty, she couldn't be completely sure of that statement. The killer might have followed from the trees, safely out of the sight of his prey as well as her abilities. To check that thoroughly, she'd need Pale. She'd need to wrap herself in his color and let it illuminate the shadows. So far, though she could see it, feel it nearby, it had yet to try to encircle her the way it always did. It almost seemed to be...waiting for something.

"I don't like being this far from you."

"Could've fooled me," she grumbled. She'd insisted he stay at least ten feet back, reminding him his signature was too strong. Since they were walking in the cold night, he'd insisted she keep his coat on, but he hadn't argued to stay at her side. No, all he'd done was offer her confusing signal after confusing signal. Wanting her, hating her, wanting her, rejecting her.

It was the Heat, she concluded. It was making him do and say things he normally wouldn't. The bitter truth was, if she didn't have pheromones attacking his senses from all sides, he'd never have considered looking at her as anything but an enemy. And it was bitter, she decided, tugging at her glove, eyeing the blue signatures next to her. Because she liked Rysen. She liked the look and the feel of him. The strength of him. She liked his rusty-sounding laughter and his grudging acquiescence. She could do without his demanding, but she melted over and over again at his unexpected gentleness. And his passion...

Jade bit back a sigh, her body tightening in memory. She could still taste him, feel his tongue on her breasts. The imprint of his touch on her back, on her hips as he

guided her desperate movements into a rolling glide of pure pleasure.

A deep growl sounded too close to be ten feet away.

Jerk. But she couldn't let him interfere with her thoughts right now. She needed to feel the signature. Unlike human ones, shifter and Sibile signatures had to be sampled to grasp the emotion. Every hundred yards or so, she'd let her fingers dip through the lingering streaks. The boy's signature was easiest to read. Happiness, excitement, an underlying thread of regret and sadness. Loss. All his emotions were pure and clear. The girl, though, wasn't so easy.

Jade slipped her hand into the color, concentrating on the feelings she found. They were blurred—protectiveness and weariness. Guilt and determination, followed by a growing sense of pride that she'd brought him so far, was so close to safety. Love, though, was strongest. She loved the boy, almost as much as her heart hurt for her family. Her...murdered family.

Jade almost pulled away at that feeling, knowing it far too well. But right about then she found it. Fea—

"I'm telling you, I can smell him." Pale—no, *Rysen*—had made up the distance between them in less than a heartbeat. Before she could argue, he'd positioned her behind him, blocking her sight of the trees. "He was here."

Pushing him wouldn't get her anywhere, so she did her best to ignore him and the streak of electric blue wrapping around her as if it could protect her all by itself.

She flashed on the memory of the color ripping the oily black signature out of her arm. All right, maybe it could. But *how* it could didn't make sense. How did his color have abilities when everyone else, even the two

Wolves she was tracking now, did nothing but leave an emotional recording for her to find? If it were a shifter skill, why wasn't this girl's signature around the boy's? Was the killer a shifter of some kind, given the way his color had attacked? Something she'd never seen before, like Aaron? What did it mean?

Jade wasn't going to find out right now. She had to concentrate on what she had in front of her. "The female sensed something here. Apprehension. Awareness of eyes on her. Following her." Jade moved forward, following the signature. Rysen let her go, his color strangely not interfering as she read the girl. With every step, the sensory increased. Skittishness. Fear. Flight. She needed to run. No...she needed to *fly*. *It's coming, it's coming, it's—*

"Jade."

She whipped around in a semi-circle, the sensation of the signature blinking away, her arm caught by Rysen's big hand around her biceps.

"What the hell are you doing?" he demanded, eyeing the tree line for any trace of threat.

A different set of trees.

She blinked, trying to clear her mind of the girl's emotions. The strength of the fear had been enough to take control. She realized that the rough breathing she could hear was her own, the icy air burning a trail down to her lungs. What had she been doing?

Running. The clear memory filtered into Jade's mind. With the boy on her back, desperate to avoid whatever was hunting her. And Jade knew she'd have followed through with the rest of the girl's fate if he hadn't caught her and yanked her free from the signature.

She hadn't seen the change coming, the strengthening of feeling. It had been low level, but not the full-on stream of consciousness capable of stealing Jade's sense of self. He'd attacked in the space of a heartbeat, and only the girl's sense of self-preservation, of protectiveness, had given her time to run.

"She knew he was coming." Jade looked up at Rysen's scowl, wishing it had anything to do with actual concern on his part. "She felt him watching her."

"Watching from where?" He didn't reach out to touch her again, but he didn't have to, not with that tone of pure demand. Verda-Rouge would have been proud.

Jade looked around, but the darkness among the trees was the same along the rock of the mountain across the street. "I don't know. I can't see him anywhere." But he was there. He had to be. She glanced again at the man who disturbed her as much as he satisfied her. Whether she liked it or not, she needed him. "Stay close."

He stepped as close as he could, his huge form dwarfing her. His hands settled on her hips, reminding her too much of their time in the cabin, but since he said nothing, she only bit her lip and relaxed beneath the calming hold of his color.

It brightened, coating her down to her fingertips. It took work not to sigh, contented by the gentle contact. As if it were trying to soothe her.

She gave her head a shake. Looking for the Woodsman was not a time to be soothed. Hands extended, his light creating a glowing sphere around her, she searched the trees and the shadowy spaces behind them. No trace of the blackness. Not until she turned and saw the ribbon of ink across the road.

The bastard, to quote the man at her back, had been there all along.

In motion, the Woodsman's mark wasn't a cloudy streak like most signatures. Just as opaque as before, it looked more like a trail of still-wet paint arcing from point to point. From the side, it made little more than a line curving through the air, but change the angle...

She crossed the silent road, standing beneath the signature with a sick kind of awe. Wider than her own armspan, it looked like a slice in the fabric of reality, floating there with a strange grace. Visually following it backward, she realized that her lack of thoroughness was about to cost them.

"He'd been following them for a while. Halfway down the hillside."

"Before where you started running?"

She nodded, glaring at the darkness in front of her. She'd been lax, tired and moody, missing cues in the signal because she'd been too busy thinking about Rysen. Thinking about herself.

"Take me there."

Tightening her lips at the command, she tamped down her anger and led the way back down the hill. It didn't take long, but Rysen wasn't any happier when she showed him the spot.

"How could he have started following them here? There's no access to this road except at the bottom of the hill." He looked up the tree, frowning. "You said the signature was flying up the hill. So you mean he flew *down* here, right? Maybe he's a shifter?"

"I don't know. But there's no trace of him or anyone other than the two Wolves on the other side of the road.

And *he* starts *here*. There's nothing that says this was a landing. He just appears." Behind a tree. The signal rooted almost from the ground before soaring outward. It remained parallel to the road, parallel to the Wolves. Keeping pace with them, if the girl's senses were to be believed. But the girl had been afraid because she couldn't see him. Didn't know what stalked her. How? As a Wolf, she should have been able to scent her assailant. Why hadn't she been able to figure out where he was?

If Jade didn't already know there were no answers to be found in the signature, she'd be tempted to touch it again.

"Don't even think about it."

She turned narrowed eyes on her keeper. "I'm not an idiot, Detective. I learn from my mistakes." Most of the time. Frustratingly, she couldn't seem to stop throwing herself at this man, no matter how cold he'd turn afterward. "This is just like the other scenes, he arrives out of thin air. But for some reason, he hunted those wolves differently, stalking them slowly."

"The city scenes were body dumps, remember? He could have stalked the others, we just don't know where he initially attacked them."

She nodded, forcing herself to concentrate on the puzzle before her instead of the brooding one at her back. "It doesn't matter. The answer isn't here. It's where he intercepted them. Since I can't touch him, I'll have to stay with the girl. Her signature gets stronger with her sense of impending danger. When I was running, I could almost see what she was seeing. It's probably strongest where he finished the attack."

He stared at her, his expression unreadable. "Can he hurt you again?"

She blinked at the astuteness of the question. “No.” At least, not in the same way. Though the Woodsman’s signature was an active force, like Rysen’s, it wouldn’t have the power to reach her through someone else’s signature. But reliving the girl’s last seconds wouldn’t be without its price. A price that would only be worth it if Jade could see the killer’s face or find any kind of clue that could lead them in his direction.

Rysen didn’t look as if he fully believed her, but he finally nodded and led her back toward the car. A brief ride up the mountain and he pulled over again. The brake made a creaking sound as he yanked up the handle to park. “You sure you want to do this? This girl didn’t die gently. Seeing it might be more difficult than you realize.”

Was there a better option? “I’ll be fine.” She opened the door and swung her legs out.

“Jade.”

She looked over her shoulder at him. His dark brows were drawn together, his brilliant eyes nearly white in the bright moonlight. Glowing. “What?”

“Don’t do anything that puts you in danger. I mean it.”

She bit back a resentful chuckle. “One of these days, Detective, we’re going to have to figure out exactly how far apart our concepts of danger really are.” Already pulling off her glove, she exited the car and set her sights on the darkening blue streak of the murdered girl’s signature.

She heard him say her name, the sound muffled and broken by the slamming of the car door, but she sank her hand into the color and the world around her disappeared.

Chapter Ten

Running.

Sliding.

Desperate.

Emmitt. Lead it away from Emmitt.

She spun, checking to see if it was following her. Emmitt had been thrown so far and he was so small. There was a chance he'd been knocked unconscious—

She screamed as something hit her, sending her flying backward. *It's here. Where?*

She rolled to her knees to get up and run. Something brushed fast against the back of her legs. A shifter, moving on all fours? She couldn't tell, couldn't see anything around her except shadows on the snow. Hardly any light, though the moon had been bright earlier. Shouldn't there be more light? The forest seemed to dim around her, the air that much harder to drag in.

What was that sound? A whisper and a roar at the same time, slashing past her face. *Run, for God's sake, run.*

The trees blurred, her feet barely touched the snow. Until the darkness enveloped her completely and she stopped, her toes digging into the fallen ice. *No light. No air. No escape.*

Eyes wide, she spun, unable to even see the trees ahead. It was here. Blind, she reached her hands out, terrified to take even a breath though her lungs burned as if they were on fire. *Oh God, the sound aga—*

Pain unlike anything Jade had ever experienced smashed through her chest, the utter blackness of the girl's memory flashing into a whiteout of agony. Her body jolted backward, her scream—not the girl's, the girl never had a chance to scream—echoing off the mountainside and ringing in her ears.

She hadn't landed in the snow. As her own senses returned to the forefront of her mind, her ragged breaths abated, leaving her drained and disoriented. She felt warmth and a near-bone-crushing hold around her body. She'd been caught and, given the anger she was picking up without trying, she knew who was holding her.

She lifted her lashes. Maybe it was the snow and the brilliant moonlight, but the man holding her wasn't the Pale Rysen she expected. His face looked colorless, what parts she could see of it above the beard, anyway. His eyes were wide, almost...afraid? One of his hands yanked open the coat flap and his open palm settled over her breastbone. She'd expected pain, because it felt as if she'd been ripped open mere seconds ago, but there was only relief when he touched flesh and bone. He must have felt it too, because his breath escaped in a rush.

But Jade didn't get time enough to be sure of the emotion because his eyes narrowed and the growl that rumbled out of his throat shifted her concern from him right back to herself. His anger surged, white hot and rolling. "What the *hell* did you think you were doing?"

She blinked up at him, still gathering her frayed edges together, unable to form a response.

"You could have died, damn you."

"No I couldn't—"

“No? Look at her.” He gave her a slight shake when she didn’t turn her head.

Swallowing thickly, she turned, knowing what she’d find. A teenage girl, splayed out like an angel, her long blond hair rippling in all directions. Dead. Blood spilled from her lips and nose, looking black on her frozen skin.

On the other side of the girl’s body, his brothers stood, watching them with predatory interest. Somehow she didn’t think they were overwhelming themselves with worry for her safety. They were watching her as if she were some kind of bug. Or was that how they watched something when they were trying to decide if it was a threat?

“*That’s* what you were about to become, Jade. Because you refuse to listen.”

She faced Rysen again, her temper sparking. “I am not yours to command, Detective.”

“Yes, you are,” he snapped, his canines flashing savagely in the moonlight, possessiveness coursing off him. “Mine to command, mine to protect. Mine in every way you can imagine.”

Jade’s eyes widened to the point of hurting. They stared at each other, she in stunned disbelief and he with raw satisfaction. He couldn’t possibly mean that. And she couldn’t possibly be happy to hear such a claim. If anyone were going to own anyone, she would own him. She wasn’t such a pathetic Sibile that she’d allow herself to be dictated to by a male. Not even a male as strong as this one.

And yet, she couldn’t form the words to deny it.

Angry, at him and herself, she pushed at his chest, hard enough that his gaze flickered before she slid out of his arms, onto the snow in a pile of shaking limbs, wiping

cold sweat from her brow. A sick sense of wrongness swamped her, turning her stomach and stinging her nerves. Because she pushed him away? She looked up at him to ask, but he wasn't there.

Rysen stalked a few feet away, turning his back on her and his brothers, both. His hands balled into fists, his broad shoulders seeming almost to widen against the confines of his coat. As if he were forcing himself from her but the pull was taking all his strength.

Jade instinctively reached out her senses to him, recoiling at the rage surging through his color. Snapping free, she remembered her own anger when she'd felt his rejection against the car. Was he feeling that now? Did that mean he had felt this same sickening sensation of having done something wrong then as well?

Good God, what was happening to them?

"She didn't see him," Jade said to his back, ordering herself to move forward. Heat wasn't rational, but *they* could be. Maybe if she could get him to think past it, could get herself to deal with the necessities, they'd be fine. They'd get through this and talk about all the confusing and overwhelming reactions when they were alone. She would not look over her shoulder at the two men quietly listening to them. Refused to give them any kind of satisfaction at her embarrassment. She stood, forcing her jellied legs to hold her up. "This place was black as ink during the attack. She never had a chance."

"I already knew that." Rysen didn't sound like himself. His voice was deeper, rougher. Still angry.

"The boy's name is Emmitt." He didn't know that, she decided, crossing her arms, wishing her skin didn't still tingle where he'd touched. "His entire family is gone.

He wasn't with her when she died, there's no point in questioning him about it. She ran to keep him safe. Everything she did, she did for *him*, including getting him here. For some reason, she thought being here was the ultimate safety. I don't know why."

So much for moving forward. Rysen remained silent, his fury still coming off him in waves. The facts were colder than the snow at their feet. They were going to have to deal with this now.

Jade turned to the two men standing sentinel behind her. "Can we have a moment alone, please."

Jensen's eyes widened slightly at the request while Tyler cleared his throat. "I'm not so sure that's a good idea."

"I won't hurt him." Though the temptation was there. She ignored the harsh scoff from the brooder behind her.

Jensen's mouth twisted wryly. "That really wasn't our concern."

Jade stifled a growl. "Maybe it should be."

Tyler was about to say something unwise—she just knew it—when Rysen shook his head. He hadn't turned to any of them, but she heard his sigh. "Bury the girl with the others. We'll be fine."

The men acknowledged the command with only a flicker of their eyes before moving. They crouched on either side of the girl, doing something with the snow around her. She felt Rysen's hand around her arm, pulling her back up the mountain. Only when she passed them, unable to take her eyes from the trio on the ground, did she realize they were packing the bloodied snow into the hole in the girl's chest.

That's what you were about to become, Jade...

Her heart thudded heavily, Rysen's warning feeling less like the unfounded worry she knew it to be...and more like foreboding.

Tyler's stare met hers, for the first time a trace of darkness showing in his eyes. She let Rysen lead her, tearing her gaze away only when Tyler returned to his work.

"No one will ever know she was here, will they?" she asked, her voice hushed as a fresh snowflake fell on her cheek. She looked up, seeing hundreds, thousands more, drifting softly through the air. Not a snowstorm, just a gentle dusting of new snow. More than enough to erase the mark of footprints and the empty imprint of an angel on the ground.

"No." Just that. No. A blunt answer to a foolish question, she supposed.

"Will anyone even know she lived?"

They reached the car. Rysen opened her door, the lines of his body still rigid, but a weary resignation cleared his face of the anger from her rejection. "Emmitt will. We will."

"But no one else." She wanted to touch him. Wanted to lay her hand over his on top of the car door. To heal the tears she hadn't meant to cause between them. She kept her hands at her sides. Her instincts couldn't be trusted. Touching him would offer something she knew he didn't want.

"If only." He nodded his head toward the interior of the car.

Jade slipped inside, frowning. Then she remembered what he said about the death squads. "You think she'd been tagged?"

“No, if she had been, they’d have gotten her along with the rest of them. But her whole family was slaughtered. That doesn’t happen by accident.”

“Neither does risking everything to get to a cabin in the middle of nowhere.” She watched for some kind of expression to cross his face, but nothing changed. “Do you think I’ll believe it’s a coincidence that she ended up here, in your care?”

He didn’t look away as he slammed the door closed. She watched him circle the car. He watched her right back, his stare laden with warnings she almost considered heeding. But somehow, in a matter of hours, this man had changed something in her. Tapped into it and there was no going back to the ignorance—the self-preserving cowardice—she’d known before.

The driver’s side door opened and Rysen slipped into the seat. He put his attention to starting the car, adjusting the heater and getting them directed down the mountain. She let him do it all in silence, waiting for him to talk, but he seemed perfectly content to say nothing. Finally, as the lights of the city became visible in the distance, frustration had her snapping.

“You’re really going to sit there and pretend I don’t need an explanation?”

“That was the plan, yes.” He didn’t even slant a glance her way while he said it.

If she had something heavy, she’d throw it at him without regrets. “What was that girl doing in the forest, Detective? Why did she think coming to you would protect her from the death squads?”

“She wasn’t coming to me. She was there and we found her.”

“No, the *others* found her. And they called *you*, because *you’re* their Alpha. And,” she added when he took a breath to speak, “don’t try to tell me they called you because they linked her to the Woodsman. The only thing that resembles the Woodsman cases about that scene was that she was dead.”

“I know his scent,” he reminded her.

“Do *they*?”

She got the glance she wanted now. “What did I tell you about getting into my head?”

“I’m not. But I’m not blind, either. Those men are not your equals, Detective. They know it. I know it. You know it. There’s something else going on here. Why won’t you admit to being their Alpha?”

“To have an Alpha, you’d need a pack. You might be a little out of the loop, but I thought you understood that there are no packs anymore. Shifters in groups is a fast way to get dead.”

A fact she knew was true, but she wasn’t buying it. “You have Woodsman kills you’re not reporting to the authorities. Bodies you’re hiding and who knows how many people coming to you for protection. I want to know why.”

“It’s none of your concern.”

“It is if you’re using me for your own ends. I deserve to know what’s going on.”

“All that’s happening is that you’re helping me track a murderer. It doesn’t matter who he’s killing as long as you do your job.”

“I *was* doing my job,” she replied, her blood heating so fast she wasn’t sure she could keep control of her gift much longer. How was he staying so calm now? Minutes

ago he was surging with anger. Now...nothing. Just cool detachment, which somehow made her feel all the more unstable. What other proof did she need that how he felt about her had nothing to do with her as a person and everything to do with the state of her Heat? "You're the one interfering."

"And I'll keep interfering as long as you keep putting yourself at risk. I'm not your Order, Jade. People aren't expendable to me."

"But I'm not a person to you. I'm just one more Sibile in the world for you to hate." All the training in the world couldn't keep her feelings contained now. Each swell of emotion felt bigger than the last, straining her until she felt as if she would burst. Or bite. She flexed her hands, wanting something to claw, to tear apart.

Rysen swore, his voice rich with frustration. "I knew this wouldn't work."

"What wouldn't work?" She swiped at her brow, already tugging at the high neck of her sweater. She could feel every single fiber and all of it itched.

"Me, you, together this long." As if six hours were interminable. "We're rubbing each other raw fighting the Heat."

She heard the car rev and felt the increase in speed. Out the window, the snow-encrusted trees sped by too fast to be counted. "Something tells me you're not much easier to deal with without it."

"Believe me, honey, I'm not the dangerous one right now."

Well, at least he was starting to understand one thing about her. "Maybe I'd be a little less frustrated if you'd start answering my questions."

His silence—not to mention the leap in speed on top of what he was already applying—might as well have been an answer.

Not enough of one. She wanted words from him. Honesty, at the very least. He'd had no problem being honest about anything else. "How am I supposed to help you with anything if all you do is keep things from me?"

"And how am I supposed to trust you if you can't take one fucking direction?" he finally roared back at her.

And the strange thing was how much better that made her feel. As if he were finally treating her like an equal instead of something to be tolerated. The stinging aggravation gave way to a triumphant smile she knew showed far too many of her teeth.

Rysen sent her a blistering glare. "All I ask you to do is let me protect you. But no, you throw yourself on any damn grenade you can find. I'm starting to realize why your handlers kept you locked up in that goddamned convent. You're fucking impossible to control."

He took a hard left turn, the speed of the car pushing her back into the seat while the wheels screeched out his satisfaction. "And you know jack shit about Wolves," he bit out, as if that had any bearing on anything.

The car tore into the city, ripping the silence apart as it slashed through the empty, snow-dusted streets. Jade searched for a sensation of fear, but her heart was racing too fast with a feeling she already couldn't name. There was no room for fear.

"Sibile don't get controlled, Detective." She knew she was pushing him...and liking it. "Least of all by lying, pig-headed Wolves who threaten to kill us whenever we displease him."

He didn't bother acknowledging her insult. "You're no Sibile, Jade. If you're going to accuse me of ignoring facts, you'd better be prepared to face some truths of your own."

A sarcastic sneer curled her mouth. "Oh, I forgot, I have to be the perfect little Wolf girl for you, don't I? Because that's the only way you'd be able to stand the fact that you want me. Better that I be shiftless and without enough strength to fight you off than a Sibile who could fry you on a whim, right?"

He took that threat about as realistically as he did the one in the woods. "You have no idea what you're playing with, little girl. Back down."

"No." One way or another, she would get what she needed out of him. If not the connection she craved, then she wanted the secrets he held. "Tell me what you're hiding out there in the woods."

A horrible screeching sounded in time with the car lurching to a violent stop, the front end of the machine nosing close to the ground before springing back up and forcing Jade to swallow the heart that had leaped up into her throat. Her relief at surviving was short-lived, because Rysen's hand wrapped around her neck, holding her effortlessly in place against the seat. She grappled with his forearm, determined not to show fear as he brought his face close to hers, snarling, his eyes glowing a little too Wolf for the man to be completely in control. But he was, she realized, because while his hold was firm, it wasn't threatening. Simply...dominating.

"Stop. Pushing."

She stared at him, yearning filling her until she felt heavy with it, from her eyelashes to her breasts to her

fingers and toes. She couldn't even lift her face enough to taste his lips again. And they were so close...

His eyes changed, refocusing and shifting back to the human iris she knew. "No matter how you poke at me, I won't take you like this," he ground out, but he did graze her mouth with his, his beard and mustache tickling her face.

She strained toward him, the warmth of his breath melting the knot of need in her belly. "Why?"

"Because you have no idea what it means." His forehead pressed to hers, his lids closing with what looked like effort. "Not for you, not for me."

"Then explain it to me." Following instincts that nearly drowned out her thoughts, she licked his lips, pleased at the earthy taste of him. She felt his indrawn breath and smiled. "Explain it...slowly."

His hold tightened, but not in threat. More like a reflex. "If I claim you, it'll be more than just sex. More than a mating. Heat exists to ensure we continue. It's how, even as ruthless and inhuman as we've become, there're still Wolf shifters being born. The rushes aren't happening because you need contact. They're happening because you're fertile."

Oh. But there were solutions to that, weren't there? The scarlets who returned from assignments were founts of information, thanks to her telepathic dorm mate. And sex was a topic Sage could spend endless hours talking about. "Couldn't we just—"

He shook his head. "There's no protection anyone has found that works for shifters. Even condoms. Something in our chemistry weakens the latex. Sometimes they work, most times they don't."

“So the reason you won’t...” She swallowed, wishing she were somehow more comfortable with this topic. “You don’t want to get me pregnant.” Now there was a sentence she never imagined would come out of her mouth. The past seven years of her life had been all about finding a strong enough mate for just that purpose. Children were essentially the only reason the Sibile bothered taking mates at all. But Rysen wasn’t talking about taking her as a mate. Only as a bed partner.

Rysen’s reaction was inscrutable. He leaned away from her fully, but his hand remained at her neck, his thumb rubbing absent circles over her pulse. “If we did this, you’d never have anyone else’s children but mine.”

She blinked, startled. “I’d *what*?”

“Mine,” he repeated, his gaze meaningful. “Only mine.”

Mine in every way you can imagine...

He took his hand away. “It’s called imprinting. Females generally imprint on their first lovers, accepting his DNA as part of her own, part of her scent and part of her body. They only come into season around acceptable males, most of the time in their adolescence. Other males can challenge for her once she’s in Heat. If her chosen male fails to protect her, she can be taken by the victor. From then on, she can only bear the young of the male who imprinted her, no matter who she bonds to emotionally afterward. It ensures our kind remain strong.”

And violated. “That’s horrible.”

Rysen nodded grimly. “There’re a lot of unwanted cubs as a result, now more than ever, though there have always been strays. They grow up in shelters, never knowing either parent. Our culture used to protect our daughters. Now everyone pretty much fends for

themselves.” His tone, dry and bitter, said more than enough about how he felt that worked. She considered the girl his brothers were burying and had to agree.

“Every generation is smaller. Throw in the genocide and we’re nearly extinct. A few do their best to protect the weaker ones, but there’s only so much we can do.”

A few. She wondered if that few numbered four—three Wolves and a...whatever Aaron Favian was. Rysen’s “idyllic” childhood took on a wider scope in her mind. He knew exactly how he’d come to be in the world, had always known. Each of them had. If what he’d been telling her was true, Wolves had become little more than a race of orphans in a world of cruelty. His carefulness with her, his need to protect her, even when he was sure she was a threat, spoke volumes about what that knowledge had shaped him into. The kind of man who would protect others, the kind people would flock to as a result. A leader. An Alpha. “You’re rebuilding the packs.”

He shook his head again, but she sensed the lie.

“That’s why that girl was in the woods. She was searching for a sanctuary.”

His unblinking glare aimed through the front windshield, but she didn’t think he saw beyond his own anger. “She’s the sixth Wolf to die that way. Young, defenseless. No one to protect her or avenge her because we miss him by minutes. Seconds sometimes.” She could see on his face how much that fact tormented him. “He’s been picking off our women on top of the kills in the city, and we have no idea how. Why. Nothing in this damn case makes any sense.”

And she’d been no help at all. “I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you more.”

“You told me too much.” He turned to pin her again with a searing stare. “Do you have any idea what it was like, watching you running like that? Hearing you scream, knowing what he does to them?”

She didn’t know what to say to that. The Sisters hadn’t shown the slightest concern for what happened to her as a result of using her gift during training. They had dragged her as a screaming child to the bodies of their dead, demanding answers to their questions. Forced her to see things she’d been unprepared for until she knew well and good how hard a heart could become.

For the smallest of moments, she wondered what it would have been like to grow up free, under Rysen’s protection. Did his people understand what a gift he was giving them when he took them in from the cold and death? How much his concern for their safety must cost him? Even if they didn’t, she did.

At the least, she could spare him some of his worry. “That wasn’t really me, Rysen. Those were *her* fears. *Her* pain. All I am is a conduit.”

He lifted his hand to her cheek, running his finger over the curve of her face to her chin. She didn’t have to search his color to sense his disbelief. “Someday, very soon if I have my way, you’re going to learn your own value, Jade-Scarlet. I vow that with my life, no matter what happens between us. You will know what you’re worth.” His voice rumbled with regret as he dropped his hand to his own lap again. “But until then, all I can offer you is comfort. Not completion.”

Meaning all those visions in his head weren’t coming true any time soon.

"I don't understand you," she said, but at least the pain of rejection wasn't present. She didn't think she could take that again.

"Give it time." Rysen put his hands on the wheel, gripping the leather tightly. He didn't seem to like that prospect any more than she did.

"I don't see how that's going to help our problem." She already wanted to claw and bite him, and that was without the Heat shredding her nerves.

A wisp of humor entered his eyes. "Impatient for me?"

Years of training demanded she be demure. Ignore the innuendo. But the part of her he'd unleashed wanted him, was tired of the mixed signals. It demanded satisfaction and, so far, only antagonizing him seemed to get the job done. "Maybe I'm just curious to see if you're as good as you think you are."

His thick brow rose, his pale eyes coloring with something that sent the Heat flaring. She looked down at her hands, her fingers relaxed on her lap, the curving claws at her fingertips for once not bothering her. If nothing else, Rysen's open appreciation for them had removed that stigma. Appreciative or not, he wasn't going to change his mind about giving in to the Heat.

But one thing did need to be settled between them or nothing would change, period.

"I'll make you a promise of my own, Detective. And before you doubt my word, understand that, despite your beliefs, the Sibile have codes too. We may be mercenaries, but the contracts we make, we do not fail. They're covenants. For us, there's no greater crime than breaking our word. It's worth more than our lives." She

set her gaze a hundred or so feet ahead, where a traffic light swung in the wind. At this hour of the morning, no one was here to see the lights change or care about the couple in the car too far away from it. "I will never betray whatever you're doing here, for these people. I vow it with *my* life. If ever the Sibile come for you again, it won't be because of me."

He watched her quietly for long moments before leaning back into his seat. "I actually believe you."

She smiled, her heart warming so much she wondered if he could see the glow. Leaving it at that, he faced the road and started driving again, this time at a speed that left the roads as quiet as they found them.

"This is not standard accommodations," Jade breathed, staring around the hotel room Rysen had brought her to. Just off the lake, the hotel was definitely a luxury resort of some kind. The bathroom alone was larger than the dorm room she shared with Sage. The bedroom included a desk, a table already set for meals by the massive windows, and what looked like miles of thick, cushiony carpet. Her feet actually sprang up with each step.

With his usual efficiency, Rysen dropped her pack on the bed before searching the room, checking out each door and shadow. "It'll do."

"For a Rouge, maybe. I don't need all of this—"

"Consider it a temporary bolt-hole. A place to hide for a few hours while you rest. Nothing more." He unhooked his gun and phone, laying one on the bedside table. The other he flipped open, sighing at the screen. "Frickin' Kennison."

Jade opted not to ask what the captain wanted now. He'd called twice already that she knew of. "Why not find some place less..."

"Opulent?" At her nod, he pushed out a breath. "Because they won't look for either of us here. Don't kid yourself, either. They're looking."

"Who?"

"The city council," he finally explained, levering his large frame onto the bed. "First rule of surviving out here is not to trust anyone who works for the city, or any arm of the government, for that matter. They send all the Sibile to the same hotel. Makes me suspicious."

"Why?" Clerks of any kind might occasionally be ruthless with their official power, but they weren't exactly in the same terror bracket as a displeased Sibile.

He hitched a shoulder, his dark hair looking blacker than usual on the crisp white pillows. She wouldn't have thought she'd find a man indolently lying back attractive, but something about him stretched over a bed—*her* bed—triggered a stirring. "The world's running out of shifters to blame for their problems. People like that Senator Thompson are smart enough to start looking for other targets. Wouldn't doubt it if they're tagging Sibile already. If they are, I don't want it happening to you."

Neither did she, considering the memories of the girl they'd just left. "If the city isn't paying for this room, then who is?"

The answer glittered at her in his eyes. *Mine to protect. Mine in every way you can imagine.*

What she imagined is that he would stretch that claim to cover more than his rule about her safety. So why didn't that bother her the way it should?

“Relax, Jade. I know the manager here, he owes me. You’re exhausted and so am I. We’re only here to sleep.”

Not that she’d get any next to him. Still, when he patted the wide-open space at his side, she only chewed her lip for a moment thinking about it. Circling the edge of the bed, she let herself sit. Rysen rolled onto his side, propping his head on one hand. When he made no further move toward her, she relaxed more and lay back on the pillows. The softness was its own kind of seduction. Closing her eyes in pleasure, she almost forgot about Rysen completely. Until his large hand slid over her midriff.

He pulled her closer, fitting his big body around her from behind, positioning them both to his liking until one of his big legs was between hers and her hand was holding on to his broad forearm beneath her breasts. His warmth surrounded her, giving her an unexpected sense of security. Intimacy that tempted for other reasons than sex.

“Any chance you’ll let me take this bowl thing off you?”

If she let him take anything off her, they’d both be naked in seconds.

He must have picked up on her thinking because his chuckle rumbled against her back. His breath on her cheek tingled just before he dropped a soft kiss near her ear. “Sleep.”

“Pushy,” she mumbled, already slipping under the spell he wove. He said something in response, a warm whisper she felt against her ear, but as she drifted into dreaming, she didn’t hear what it was.

Instead, another voice slipped into her consciousness. “You’re doing well, *chère*.”

“Jalla?” Jade turned, finding herself in Jalla-Rouge’s garden. The roses were in bloom and, all around, everything was green. Jade frowned, knowing that she herself had helped winterize the plants months ago, covering them with sackcloth so they wouldn’t freeze and break in the deep snows.

“Try again,” Jalla said gently.

“But it’s so hard.”

Jade froze, recognizing that small voice. It was...her own. She walked deeper into the garden, toward the gazebo in the middle. Moving closer, she could see the two figures on the padded seats lining the edge. One was Jalla, her hair pulled up as usual, its color the blond she only remembered, barely streaked with silver. Next to her sat a small marron in a thin brown robe, no bigger than a six- or seven-year-old, her jet-black hair shining and sleek down her little back.

My little back, Jade realized.

Jalla’s hand lifted and smoothed down the girl’s hair while concentration shook her small shoulders.

“It’s not working!” Jade’s younger self cried out suddenly, throwing herself into Jalla’s arms. For a brief second, Jalla held on, her eyes closing with what looked like...pain. Then she stiffened and removed Jade’s arms from around her neck.

“It *will* work, Jade. You have to work at it.”

“It doesn’t in the daytime. It *never* works anymore.”
Anymore?

“Ah, *chère*. Your gift is part of you. In your blood. If you fall down and cut yourself, do you not bleed because the sun is up?”

“No?” The questioning answer made Jade smile from her place behind them. Even now, she sometimes answered Jalla’s cryptic questions that way, unsure what the older woman was trying to make her understand.

“You are more than you think, Jade. You have more gifts than you know.”

“Did you see that in your dreams?” the little girl asked, her desperation for it to be true almost heartbreaking.

Jalla nodded. “Someday, you will do more than just see light or touch it. You will *become* the light. That’s what a *lucescere* does—becomes light and saves us all from darkness.”

“No one can become light, Jalla-Rouge.” Even at age seven, she’d known that basic truth.

“You’ll see, little one. Someday, you’ll see.” Jalla turned her head, her gaze finding Jade now, standing behind the gazebo.

There was something so sad on her face, as if she aged in a second, that Jade couldn’t even be shocked to realize the woman had always known she was there. Then she realized this wasn’t her memory. It wasn’t even her dream. “I don’t understand, Jalla. How is this happening?”

“I’ve given you every tool I can,” Jalla answered, her tone urgent. “It’s time for you to become what you were always meant to be.”

Jade tried to walk closer, but something kept her where she was. She pushed with her hands, but an impenetrable force wouldn’t let her near. She hit it with her fist, frustrated. “I don’t know what that is!”

“Yes you do, *chère*. Become the light.”

“What?” The gazebo began to fade, as if mist were filling it.

“Become the light.” Jalla’s voice was strong as ever even as the dream drifted away.

Jade opened her eyes, blinking at a darkened room she didn’t recognize. Then she remembered. The night before rushed through her mind, feeling much longer than a few simple hours. One thing was clear, for the first time since arriving in Moonridge, she felt...cold. Confused. She sat up, surprised to find Rysen missing. To find she missed him. He hadn’t gone far, at least. The door to the bathroom was open, light and steam spilling out. She could hear water pouring over him, crashing to the tiles in heavy streams.

It wasn’t cold in there.

But was she really ready to follow him in?

The seconds ticked away, indecision caused only by the fear that he might turn her away.

Finally, she lifted her hands to the *flos*, the “bowl thing” that held her hair at the back of her head. The gleaming black lacquered piece came off easily once she removed the prong that held it in place. The heavy weight of her braids uncoiled down her back, free. She laid the *flos* on the bed carefully, then, piece by piece, stripped off her clothes. When she came to him, she decided, she needed to do so as herself. Not as a Wolf in Heat. Not as a Sibile.

As the one thing she wished she could be at this moment. His.

Chapter Eleven

Even with the hot water pelting the back of his down-turned head, Pale heard Jade's first padded step into the bathroom. "You don't want to be here," he said, refusing to turn his head and look at her.

Not that he didn't want her. Dear God, he wanted her. If he hadn't been running on virtually no sleep the past four days, he wouldn't have been able to sleep with her lush body pressed against every inch he had to offer her. Some inches decidedly more interested than they were allowed to be. It had taken a while, but he'd eventually drifted off, satisfying himself with the fact that she'd trusted him enough to lie in his arms. The first night of many, he decided as soon as her breaths became even and deep.

The bonding was happening, whether they permitted it or not. He knew Jade could feel it, even if she didn't yet realize what was changing between them.

Eileen, his foster mother, used to go on and on about what it would be like when it happened to them. Souls becoming one, she'd said, a dreamy look in her eye while she sewed a loose button or fixed someone's bedraggled doll. He'd always thought her soulmate fantasy was just that, a fantasy for a lonely woman who wanted to believe that she'd know the right person for her when he walked by. That the right man wouldn't be *able* to walk past. Bonding was part of the same magic that made them shifters, and it was a gift that each of them would find,

she'd always say. A gift they should look forward to. She'd never once considered that her girls wouldn't be safe enough to choose for themselves, or that her boys wouldn't find a female they were willing to share their lives with.

And that was exactly what mating meant to Wolves. A lifetime commitment, something humans couldn't begin to replicate with their mere vows. If it were done right, the way it used to be, the imprinting would go both ways, stamping them both so that the male would be as changed as the female—infertile and impotent without her. Useless in too many ways to count. True mates lived and died together. *For* each other.

He couldn't say that about himself and Jade. Not yet.

They both had other allegiances. Other responsibilities to people they couldn't ignore. The bonding wouldn't be complete until they gave themselves to one another, wholeheartedly, but the connection was there. Growing. They needed each other, physically, emotionally. Rejection on any level was already painful. Soon they'd be past the point of no return. Sooner if she succeeded in opening that glass shower door.

He turned his head to growl at her.

But if he'd wanted her to leave, he never should have opened his eyes.

Golden Wolf eyes dared him to send her away. Her pointed chin rose high, matching her challenge. He let his gaze course over her, taking in the endless porcelain skin and full curves on display behind the glass. Her hair was mostly free, the shaped braids weaving along her scalp into a roll of plaits that met at the back of her head. Instead of that black bowl, they spilled in loose spirals

farther than he could see behind her body. A body that had his straining tighter than before, which he hadn't thought possible. Lean. Lightly muscled. Faultless skin. Her breasts were even more tantalizing, knowing what those pouting red tips tasted like. He could spend the rest of his life licking and suckling them and not regret a single day as lost.

At least not until his gaze drifted down the lithe curves of her belly and hips to find the dark curls at her center. His claws extended, scratching grooves into the tiles beneath his hands, imagining his tongue somewhere infinitely better.

"You. Have. To. Leave." How he managed to get the warning out through his locked vocal cords, he didn't know, but she didn't even flinch at the thick rumble of his voice.

"No." She pulled open the door, stepping inside without permission. Without sense.

The tiles broke, pieces falling to the floor of the shower.

Cool hands lightly touched his back, tentatively, setting his muscles rippling involuntarily under them. They lifted, briefly, making him grit his teeth, but came back with more confidence. More decisiveness. He felt her mapping the scars she found, tracing them as if her touch could take the old pain away. Maybe one day it could, but that day wasn't today. Right now, for all their gentleness, her soothing hands felt like a scalding iron on his already burning skin.

"You need me," she whispered.

He shook his head, though she wasn't wrong. He did need her. He needed her beneath him, wrapped tight around him. But more than that, he needed her to accept

him. Take him, the same way he would take her. An incomplete mating bond was a torture he could do without.

Her hands moved over him, gliding around his waist. Soft breasts pressed against his spine, her body curving around him and her cheek to his back. She felt small, but not delicate. Her strength almost seemed to infuse him, radiating from those hands, one at his belly and the other slightly higher, closer to his heart. The room's light brightened, the same as the city street hours ago, but whatever she was trying to do wasn't going to help the need ripping through him. Instinct couldn't be steered.

"This isn't something you can take away, Jade. Not with your powers." Just with her hands. Her mouth. Her body and soul...

"I don't want to take it away. I just want to help."

He straightened, letting her hands fall away before he turned to face her. Let her see him, see the man and the hunger that she tempted. He made no attempts to hide anything, not his strength, not his nudity nor his desire. She stared upward, eyes widening with elemental female recognition, but she didn't falter. Didn't so much as take a step back. Her back remained straight and her chin set to take anything he intended to throw her way.

Strong. Alpha. Mate.

Alpha. The word resonated in his mind. He'd known he would need a strong counterpart one day, but he never really expected to find one. A female who could lead next to him, who could counter his harshness with a gentle word or touch. But Jade wasn't a woman he could keep, and he wasn't a man capable of giving up what belonged to him.

“*This* isn’t helping.” He tried to gentle his voice, but it was a failed effort from the get-go. Craving ate at him too deep for gentleness, even when her expression clouded with hints of hurt. He fisted his hands to keep from reaching for her. “I have no right to expect anything from you, but I do. It’s instinctive. I expect you to understand what I need from you, but you don’t. I expect you to be here when this case is over, and you won’t be. I expect you to help me to wait for you, until you make your choice. But being rational and being Wolf don’t always go hand in hand. I’m doing the best I can. Just...you have to help me.”

“I’m *trying*. You won’t let me.” Color filled her cheeks and he noticed he wasn’t the only one with his hands in knots. “Tell me how.”

Some warped bit of honor forced him to answer. “Don’t tempt me, then push me away. It only makes me chase you harder.”

She scowled. “Do you see me running?”

He snapped his teeth at her, his fangs aching for her. “You should be.”

She jumped, but instead of leaping out the way she came, she reached for him, bringing her mouth to his in a bruising kiss.

In that instant, his better sense went up in flames. Wrapping his arms around her, he scooped her up against him, leaning her back into the wall. He couldn’t have let her go if he tried, but she wasn’t trying to get away. If anything, she was trying to get closer, get inside him, her claws sliding over his slick shoulders.

Without conscious thought, he rubbed his cock against her, finding both heaven and hell nestled by her swollen folds. He stroked, the broad head all but gliding

back and forth in an erotic kiss. All it would take was a change in angle and he could thrust inside. Sink into her and claim her. Almost mindless with hunger, he wanted with every ounce of his being to do it. And he would have, if he hadn't felt a sudden stiffening in her body when he pressed at her entrance.

Opening his eyes, he looked at her, at the passion staining her cheeks but the fear coloring her eyes. She blinked, her breaths coming in desperate heaves, but her arms were definitely locked at his shoulders. She wanted him, would even take him if he pushed, but it wouldn't be wholehearted. It wouldn't bind her to him. Not the way he was ready to bind to her.

Damn Sibile and their ruthless dedication to reason and logic. They'd lost their instincts, if they'd ever had any. And they'd stolen her ability to trust in herself, in what she could feel was right without proof.

"Why are you stopping?" Her bottom lip shook, almost like a shiver. Had he sent her into shock, his near possession far too fast, too driven, for her?

"I'm not," he promised, nipping at her lips lightly. He released her legs, the silk of her wet limbs sliding down his body a torment that had his cock jumping against her again. Leaving his hands on her hips, he guided her to turn, presenting the round globes of her ass to him. "Not quite."

She shuddered when he put his hands on it, testing the curve, tempted to drop to his knees and bite it. She quaked, her hands on the wall in front of her, while she muffled a sound he heard clear as day. He pictured her plump lips, no doubt being bitten, a brilliant white fang

creasing the flesh, while she tried to stay silent. Ever a challenge, his little Wolf...

He traced one cheek with the back of his claw, learning its contours, memorizing it, while his other hand curved around her ribs, searching out the lush flesh of her breast. It filled his palm, the hard tip rolling between his fingers. He plucked at it, squeezing it and molding her into the shape of his hand. She moaned, her back arching to push into his hold and her ass rising for him all by itself.

Groaning himself at the invitation, he reached for his erection, directing it between her thighs, fitting tightly in the keyhole-shaped space there. Not inside her, not until she was ready, but close. As close as he could, hoping it was enough to give them both the release they needed. He pulled her hips tighter to his, heard her soft little cry when the head stroked the equally hard little nub of her clit.

“Clamp your legs around me.” He licked at the side of her neck, the pressure in his cock threatening to unman him. Slickened by the honey of her body, it shuttled across her folds and between the firm muscles of her legs effortlessly. He kept the pace slow, caressing, but God alone knew how long he’d manage. Already, he could feel the itch to pound against her rising. “Tighter, Jade.”

She flexed, shifting her legs until they nearly crossed.

And he was lost.

His hips pumped into her hold, hard and fast, both his hands clamping onto her breasts, pulling her torso upright. Over and over he thrust, thoughts a blank canvas of white-hot desire. Drunk on her scent, her feel—the flex of her muscles around him, the slide of her wetness—it was all he could do not to crush her. He almost kept

himself from biting, but when she rocked back against him, wildly reaching her own completion, all control faded. She cried out, pain and pleasure clear in the ringing sound bouncing off the tiles, one of her hands reaching backward to cup the back of his head. His fangs sank deep into the muscle at her nape, the blinding pleasure coalesced only by the rampage of his climax.

Long moments later, his breathing only starting to return to normal, he realized he'd all but flattened her to the wall of the still-streaming shower. Water pelted their legs, the removable showerhead somehow knocked free in their desperation. His fangs retreated, easing out of her shoulder slowly. He licked the wound, soothing it. It would heal, the enzymes in his saliva speeding the process considerably, but it wouldn't fade the way her scratches to his side and shoulders already had. When a wound was deep enough, even shifters couldn't heal them completely. Like the scars on his body from the battles he'd fought to keep his people together, some things cut to the bone.

Or the soul.

He swallowed, the taste of her blood a flavor he took into himself without regret. The last step down the slippery slope. He didn't bother flogging himself over it. The line had been crossed. Willfully. He'd belong to her now no matter what. Bonded, connected to her, from this point on. But the circle was incomplete. If there was an emptiness in his heart because of it, that was no fault of hers.

Yet when he released her, backing away so she could breathe, that emptiness bled like acid. She turned, staring at him with something too close to fear to shrug off, her

hand already covering his bite as if she couldn't believe he'd done it. As if he'd somehow betrayed her trust.

Maybe he had. She didn't know anything, not what he'd just given her, not what he'd just sacrificed. Certainly not that there was no way he could ever let her go now.

Yes, he realized, as she walked out of the shower, out of the bathroom and through the door, her heavy braids swaying in opposition to the lush bottom he still wanted to bite. He had betrayed her trust.

He picked up the showerhead, replacing it on the hook on the wall and turned his face into the spray. If only he had the slightest trace of guilt.

He told you to leave, Jade's conscience reminded her as she grabbed a towel off the rack in the bathroom before leaving. *You should have listened*. She wrapped it around herself, her hand still clamped over the throbbing heat of his bite. And it *was* hot, even to the touch. It stung, but not like a cut. Like a burn.

She crossed to the bed, her legs wobbly and the oddest urge to cry itching her eyes. She sat, but even that wasn't enough to offset the strangeness, so she lay on her right side, scooping the blanket out from beneath her so she could pull it over her still-moist body. Her braids were probably soaking the pillow, but she didn't care. She wanted to ball up and sob, and she wasn't sure why. All she could feel was a yawning emptiness opening inside her.

Why hadn't he taken her? What was he waiting for? She'd offered herself. He'd bitten her, marked her, and she'd have to be an idiot to think he didn't want her. And it wasn't that she hadn't given him pleasure that stopped

him. She had yet to find enough strength in her limbs because of the effect they'd had on each other. Even the pain of his bite hadn't shocked it away. More the opposite, the sense of rightness to it overwhelming, driving her orgasm from startling to almost frightening in its intensity. As if her sense of self had shifted, making room for something more. It was only when it was over, when he let her go, that she realized the something more wasn't coming.

And when she looked in his eyes, shocked and confused, she saw a gleam of possession...and a world of pain. Whatever she was missing, he was missing too. And he had no intention of telling her what it was.

She felt the indentation of the bed behind her, saying nothing when he shifted the blankets to slide in next to her. His body fit around her like nothing she'd ever expected. All the broad, hard planes of him shouldn't have fit her so well. Shouldn't give comfort. But they did, feeding her warmth when she hadn't realized she was cold.

His big hand covered hers, unclamping her fingers from the tingling bite before he lowered his mouth and licked it again. Gently. Soothing. So at odds with the fury between them when he'd created it. He took his time, each stroke melting her hurt inside as well.

"You weren't ready," he finally rumbled, his breath against her ear while he went about pulling her fully into his arms.

But he wasn't apologizing for whatever it was he'd done.

The towel she'd left wrapped around herself tugged from the back. She glanced down, ignoring the urge to

help him pull it free. Was it the Heat putting her at odds with her own reason, or the man? Rather than deal with the answer, she nestled her head deeper into the pillow. "You're nerve-racking, Rysen."

"I could return the compliment."

But he wouldn't. The jerk, he wouldn't even insult her. Instead, he tugged at the towel again, just once, his finger tucking into the fold of fabric where she held it tightly under her arm. When she didn't give, he just sighed, running his hand over her shoulder and down her arm before coming back up. Petting her.

Jade's eyes narrowed, but she didn't say anything.

"Do you plan to be angry for long?"

"I'm not angry." She wished that long stroke didn't make her want to snuggle deeper into his chest.

He gave an impolite snort. "Now who's brooding?"

"Oh, like you'd be any nicer if I bit you."

His stroke stuttered for a second, the rumble in his chest delineating the pause. "I'd be much nicer, little Wolf."

The testing pull on her towel had her looking over her shoulder. When it didn't give, he moved his roving hand up and down the length of her body, his fingers catching on the hem of the towel on the way back up, lifting it a complete three inches before letting it go.

His eyes glowed, molten with a sensuality that rolled like silk in his voice. "So nice you'd never think of leaving me again."

This time, her breath was what caught. He wanted her to stay? She put her head back on the pillow, deflating when reality kicked in. "I have to go back. It's where I belong."

"Are you sure?"

She was sure they'd never let her go.

He seemed to sense she wouldn't answer because he moved on. "Tell me what's so good about your coven that you won't leave them."

"Enclave," she corrected, sure he was smirking behind her. "We're not witches."

"That's a matter of opinion."

She had to admit that. People who demanded high payment for talents they could offer freely couldn't expect affection. Luckily, the Sibile preferred fear.

"I don't know that it's good, but it's home. There are buildings there, most of them hundreds of years old. Homes and small farms. Animals. If we didn't come to the city, we'd never know time has moved forward. Apart from the gifts we use, life can be very...simple." Once a person knew their place in society, it was painfully simple, but she didn't want to think about that.

"There's a wealth of knowledge there," she hurried to bring up, frowning as she realized that her thoughts weren't positive in the slightest. "Things I can never learn anywhere else."

Even if that knowledge was incomplete. Edited to put her people in the best light. Or to flat-out lie about them, she acknowledged, thinking of the omissions concerning the Sibile's help in the shifter genocide.

"Protection," she added, thinking of the reinforced iron gates and all the power that kept them closed. Power that was a double-edged sword.

"I can protect you." His tone said he believed it, absolutely.

"My father thought so too," she answered, knowing it to be true even though she couldn't remember his voice.

Couldn't even remember the lines to his face or the curve of his smile. "He still died, both he and my mother branded traitors for all time." No one could protect her from that.

"So far, you're not selling me on the Sibile lifestyle," he concluded, a definite pleased note in his deep timbre. "If you were to stay—"

"I told you, I can't."

"But if you did..." He traced designs on her bare shoulder. "Just imagine the possibilities."

"Oh? Like what? Arguing in parking lots and rolling around in the snow?"

"Like all the hot chocolate you can drink. Being with someone who understands all those things about yourself you pretend aren't there."

She leaned back into him, picturing that. Being able to ask questions, not just because he would know the answers but also because she wouldn't have to fear the repercussions for what those questions implied.

"And it isn't as if arguing doesn't have its benefits. Making up can be fun."

Jade tilted her head, but he was directly behind her so she couldn't see his face without rolling over to face him. She almost didn't feel the towel slip, baring her back to him. She felt his smile, though, as he nipped at her neck. Suspicion flared. He was being too nice. Too...seductive. His urgency was gone, leaving behind a quietly pleased Wolf that she almost didn't recognize. One who had all the time in the world to touch her.

As if she already belonged to him.

"What are you up to, Rysen?"

"I'm just teaching you to trust me." His open hand caressed her hip, his thumb extended to smooth the curve

of her bottom. That faint, pleased growl sound came from his chest again. "Learning you."

He sounded more as if he were enjoying her, but since she could feel the near-singing heat of his erection nudging at the back of her thigh, she wasn't sure if that was the right word either. Before she could ask for more clarification, he continued with his inquisition. "Is that all there is for you in there? Knowledge and protection? A few animals?"

"No, I have friends." Sage, irreverent Sage whom Jade hadn't realized she'd relied on so heavily. She never had to wonder what other people were thinking, since Sage shared without being asked. Jalla, who taught, even when the lessons were frustratingly vague. Like that dream...

"But no family?"

Her thoughts veered away from Jalla's message like a cart on a rail. "I told you, my parents are dead."

"You had no other family?"

"Did you?" she asked tightly, rolling onto her back so he couldn't touch her so freely. She glared up at him. He didn't try to keep her in position or complain. He looked down at her, none of the ire she expected in his eyes.

"I find it's the family you make that matters most," he answered, bringing his disturbing touch to her face. He traced her chin, running his fingers to her throat, watching them wander over the swells of her breasts to the line of the towel. His finger hooked the edge again.

"Pull and I'll bake you alive."

A crooked grin revealed one of his fangs. "Strength is a desired trait in a female. Makes a male want to dominate."

And that grin made her want to be dominated. Her want tightened her throat, because she couldn't have him knowing what she craved. "Good thing you're above that kind of stupidity."

The tip of his finger drew more patterns on her breast, turning the stern tone she'd gone for into a breathless one she'd never used before. He leaned down, brushing her lips with his. Her eyes slid shut against her will. She lifted her head for him, sighing her lips open when he licked at them. His palm slipped under the towel, pushing it out of the way and cupping the mound he found with unmistakable possession.

"Isn't it though?"

Questions disappeared from her brain, melting like butter in a hot pan, as he took her mouth. His kiss demanded her response, firing her body from its cold tension to languid passion. The towel forgotten, he molded her against him, wrapping himself in her limbs. Her arms around his neck, her leg over his hip. She arched into him, reveling in the sensation of his skin against hers, his heat and strength beneath her hands. He lay over her, his weight pressing her down into the soft mattress. For a moment, she fought him. Strained to control the embrace, but he surrounded her: his size, his power, his desire. Every sense she owned filled with him: human, Wolf, Sibile...even simply female, recognizing that he could master her, could break her, but chose not to. That he valued her too much to break her.

Somehow, with that knowledge, that recognition, she felt reassured. Her place next to him inexplicably

outlined. She relaxed, melting into him. With all trace of her argument gone, he simply held her, pulling both of them onto their sides, their hearts beating against each other in slow, even time.

“What just happened?” she asked, confused and content all at once. She didn’t want to move, didn’t want to fight anymore. Her body was lax, as if it were exactly where it was supposed to be and if it had its way, she’d never move again.

“You yielded,” he said, which didn’t make her feel better but seemed to please him in a way nothing else she’d said ever had. The rumble was back. He settled his back on the bed, pulling her halfway over him, her cheek to his heart. His hand swept up and down her bare back. “For future reference...*this* is helping.”

Helping what, she couldn’t decide, but rather than feeling the Heat drawing her, she felt sleep wrapping tightly around them both. Peaceful, healing sleep. And when she gave in this time, there were no dreams at all.

Chapter Twelve

Become light.

Jalla's whispered voice snapped Jade's lids open on a gasp. Just as quickly, she already knew that Rysen was gone from the room. She blinked at the light sneaking through the thick curtains, rolling toward his side of the bed.

She touched his pillow, tempted to press her face into it and breathe deep. She would have if there wasn't a note there, the paper clearly stamped with the name of the hotel. One simple word. *Stay*.

Her lip curled. The man had too much canine in him.

But since his scent was addicting, crisp and masculine—like fresh snow and just cut pine—she stole a deep inhalation and hugged the pillow close, ignoring the note as much as she could.

Glancing around the room, she found a digital clock on the bedside table. Since it was bright outside, she had to guess that the one-nineteen on the display meant afternoon. She'd never slept so much in her life, even if she discounted the times in the night when Pale had awakened her, his hands and his mouth stroking and kissing away the burning surges of Heat.

She brought her hands to her cheeks, her body clenching anew at the memory of him sucking at her breasts, reverently drinking at her while his strong fingers snuck between her thighs, cupping her and applying just enough pressure to send her catapulting into oblivion.

There was more to this mating, she knew it. Ached for it. From the glow of his eyes in the dark, she was sure *he* knew it. And planned to exploit it.

She lay back, frowning, wanting very much to have something not frustrating to think about. She rejected outright the inclination to ponder Jalla's presence in her mind. Considering it would mean admitting she quaked inside because of it.

Next option.

She could lie here thinking about Pale, but that topic was circular. In the throes of Heat, he was the most amazing part of God's creation. Powerful. Intelligent. Satisfying. Utterly perfect. Outside it...he was demanding, ruthless and driven. And he hadn't yet agreed to let her live. Which didn't seem to affect her desire for him. Her hunger to know what went on behind those mesmerizing eyes or to understand why he could yell at her one second and hold her against his heart as if she were the most precious thing in his world the next. And if he was planning to try and make her stay with him, she wasn't sure how long she'd be able to withstand that kind of gentleness. Not even for his own good.

Which left considering the clues they'd pulled together about the Woodsman. Even she knew something was wrong with your life when you brightened at the prospect of a serial killer. Then again, it wasn't as if she'd had a lot to add to their collection of clues. The girl she'd channeled hadn't seen her attacker. Hadn't seen anything but darkness. The signature, for all its blatant presence, made no sense at all. Reading it wasn't possible and, judging by its soaring arcs high through the air, the man making it had to be capable of flight, which put him

firmly in the realm of the shifters. A bird of some sort. One that only left a signature in animal form. Which meant he'd had to carry dismembered body parts through town without getting noticed, shift for a second to animal form so he could leave a signature, shift back and walk away. Gritting her teeth, she grudgingly admitted she'd so far provided no help whatsoever.

She sat up, her body oddly sore as she tossed back the blankets and set her feet on the soft carpeted floor. Considering the strains of the day before—sexual and psychic—it shouldn't be surprising. If the moon were high, she'd simply offer herself some white light to take the discomfort away—

It never works anymore...

Her own voice echoed in her mind, much like the whisper that woke her up. A mental push that lacked any subtlety at all and made her head throb. With a huff, she gave in. "Fine, Jalla. But I'm getting dressed first."

Unfortunately, pulling the clothes from her pack next to the bed only took minutes and left the focusing stones she'd brought with her in an untidy pile on the bed. Her clothes didn't have much in the way of variety. Like every other scarlet still in training, her outfits were made in the enclave and differed only in color. Today was gray, the cargo pockets of the pants running down the sides of her legs. The turtleneck sweater was soft, closefitting and a regrettable choice since the Heat kept her constantly near sweating. She opted to skip it for the time being, slipping on the thin white undershirt instead. Without anything else to do, she sat on the bed, legs folded, and stared down at the glittering jewels.

Like Pale, most people believed that the Sibile collected them out of greed. They were wrong. No

manufactured stones would do. The gems they needed had to be created from the earth, designed by its particular vibration, meaning they had to be rare. Valuable. A truly strong Sibile had no use for them. Only the weak had to magnify their gifts through multifaceted stones.

Jade hated each and every one of them. She'd earned them, though, with each excruciating taste of death the Sisters had subjected her to. Her price for their answers. They'd paid, approving of her mercenary approach to the pain. The square-cut emerald had been her first. A pittance, because emeralds were so prone to flaws that could refract the gift the wrong way. Sister-Naima had no doubt been experimenting, ruling out whether the gems would help. She certainly had nothing to lose. At least, not until Jade had nearly hung herself in the same way as the young scarlet they'd ordered her to inspect.

She picked up the octagonal ruby ring, the stone large enough to require two fingers beneath it. She slipped it on, the gem nestling above the center of her palm. She could never touch this one without thinking of fire, remembering the male who'd burned his home to the ground rather than continue living as a slave.

She curled her fingers around it and closed her eyes, pushing past the memories that really weren't her own, reaching for her gift. As usual, she could feel it stir in her chest, but it didn't catch. A spark leaping to life only to wisp into nothingness. Just like always. But Jalla would keep on her if she didn't try. The strain made her head ache, her temples nearly ringing. In her chest, the power churned, disturbed, but not awakened.

She gripped the cold rock, dots of perspiration forming at her hairline. It was either that or throw it

across the room. This was pointless. She had no power in the daylight. Jalla was wrong. She couldn't do it and certainly couldn't *become light*, whatever that meant. A glance at the clock told her she'd been struggling for over an hour. Her body hurt for decidedly less pleasing reasons now, and for what? So she could grind her teeth and waste time waiting for a Wolf to come free her from her tower?

At the thought of Pale, the power surged, high enough for her to grasp, then slipped away just as quickly.

Frustration hit new levels. Relying on her emotions to build her power could get her into situations where she couldn't defend herself properly. In that, the Sisters were right. She needed to learn to use it at will. By thought, not impulse. By will. By will. By...

With a frown, she reached for her gift again, mentally directing her concentration toward the stone, pushing past the stinging scrape in her mind. Finally, the power caught, a thread of it—delicate as spider silk—trailed down her arm and hand. Nestled in her grip, the ruby began to warm. To vibrate. Carefully, Jade released a soft, triumphant breath, smiling as the gem began to light. *Yes...*

The door opened and she looked up, surprisingly relieved to see Pale walking in, a paper sack in his hand and the heavenly aroma of hot beef wafting in with him. He'd changed his clothes. Still in jeans, but they were darker than the last pair, younger. His buttoned shirt was black, emphasizing the shining ebony of his too-long hair and heavy beard. His masculinity stood out even more in the light of day, as if he were too male, too predatory, without the shadows. Not too male for her, though. Her heartbeat began to speed up, excitement welling in her chest that he'd returned. The thread of power suddenly

widened to a full flow, the ruby becoming so bright it could have been a light bulb.

Before she could rise, his brows crashed down and his eyes narrowed with recognition on the illuminated stone. His mouth twisted with repudiation. Recoil. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Pain, sharp and digging, lanced her chest. Her eyes watered and it was all she could do to breathe. Power blasted toward the stone, unchecked, rampant now under the inertia of her effort. The ruby's glow burst into actual flames in her open hand, then stuttered out as she flung the ring onto the bed in front of her, where it singed the golden duvet.

Curling her burned hand against her heart, Jade glared at Pale to ward him off, but he was already in front of her, his bag forgotten on the floor, reaching for her. "Don't touch it."

Except he did, pulling her hand between them and unclasping her fingers. She could feel his anger, but his touch was delicate, something she didn't know he could be. She hissed at the cool air on raw skin. The angry red burn was already beginning to blister.

"How fast do you heal?" Rysen's head was bent over her palm.

Faster than she felt like telling him right then. "Let go of me."

He glanced up, his sharp gaze pinning her. "No." Then he went back to his inspection.

"What are y—" The question turned into a shriek when he leaned in and licked her palm. A second swipe of his tongue and he let her go in time to ward off the pillow

she was in the process of swinging down on his head. "What's *wrong* with you?"

He yanked the pillow out of her hand effortlessly. "Wolves have healing agents in our saliva. Our bodies heal most minor wounds within minutes, if they're not too deep. It's a benefit to shifting you don't seem to have."

"Because *I* don't shift. I told you that." She jumped off the bed to get away from him, not liking that the pain had already receded. The coiling nausea in her stomach didn't let her go far. She stopped midstep, huffing out a breath. Couldn't she even be angry with him? "Where were you? I've been here by myself for hours."

It was hard to maintain a frown when his eyes were watching her as if he were tasting her, enjoying the flavor.

"I was called in. You were...exhausted." That smile had better not be smug. "I thought you needed the rest." He looked down, scooping up her jewels in his fist. "What were you doing with these?"

She crossed her arms. He could be as prejudiced as he wanted; she had every right to exercise her abilities. "Practicing."

"Practicing what? Flame throwing?" He tossed the stones back onto the bed like so many rocks.

"That was an accident."

"Pretty dangerous accident." His arms crossed over his chest, matching her, his cool confidence in direct opposition to the agitation she couldn't hide. He cocked his head, giving her the sense that he was sizing her up. Then he frowned. "What's that mark on your arm?"

"Can you please stick to one topic?" Preferably a *different* topic.

"Looks like a tattoo."

“Well, it’s not.” If anything, the red mark, formed beneath her skin and drawn into an elaborate design, was a brand. She forced herself not to cover it with her fingers so he’d stop looking.

“What is it?”

“Nothing you need to concern yourself with.”

His gaze flickered, something dark in it setting off her internal alarms. “Like these gemstones, right?”

“Right.”

He nodded, staying aggravatingly calm. “How’s the hand?”

Swallowing a scream, she stalked into the bathroom and slammed the door on him. Why had she been happy to see him? And what was it about him that had her power surging to life whenever he was around? Whenever she simply thought about him? Temples ringing, hand still tender, nerves drawn tight, she ran a towel under cold water and then covered her face with it, sighing in relief at the cool temperature.

This wasn’t her. It was the Heat. The man. It wasn’t her, losing control left and right, acting on instinct instead of thinking everything through. Her power might have been unreliable, even unstable at times, but she’d always been able to *leash* it. She needed to find that control again. Needed to find the will and the concentration that had kept her alive for twenty years.

Pulling the towel off her face, she faced the mirror over the sink and glared at her own reflection. Grudgingly, she twisted her right shoulder so she could see the red mark on her upper arm. An elaborate “X”, one length a straight diagonal line, the other a double line of thick, curlicued scrollwork, the intersection marked with a

round dot on each quadrant. It hadn't been put there for decoration. Her *volo*, a mark of power. A reminder of strength. The cruorlector who had drawn it to the surface, leading to her acceptance into the Order, had almost been afraid at the sight of it. Who was afraid of her now?

No one.

Jade let go of her arm with a growl. She wasn't raised to be this weak. Submissive. She'd been brought up to take challengers and bury them without mercy, the only acceptable exception being when she faced elders. Why was she allowing this man, this Wolf, to treat her how he liked? To dictate and question her and believe he had a right to anything? Where was her sense? Her pride?

In the mirror, her cheeks pinked, her golden eyes fairly glittering, she made a decision. The next question he asked, she'd send him flying into a wall again. Yes. Definitely. That would remind him of his place. Of *hers*.

Pale Rysen does not control me. He can't change me. He's only a man.

Satisfied, she took a deep breath and stepped back into the suite. He wasn't waiting meekly for her return. Instead, her pack was on the bed, the jewels cleared and the bed made. All signs that they'd been there were gone, including the clothes she'd taken off the night before, apparently repacked.

"You should eat," he said, not even looking up as he adjusted the fold of the duvet beneath the pillows. "We won't be here much longer."

Jade's eyes narrowed. That was it? No more inquisition? No more judgment?

"Food is still hot. I assumed you're not into salad, but if you are, we can pick something up. We're expected at sundown, so you have maybe an hour."

“You’re going to ignore what just happened?”

“Which part?” he asked silkily, his shoulders rolling back as he deigned to meet her glare. “The part where you set yourself on fire or the part where you hid in the bathroom?”

Why, the arrogant, overbearing— “I was thinking the part where you took one look at me using my abilities and had to force yourself not to be sick.”

Finally, he scowled. “I didn’t—”

Jade raised her chin, daring him to lie. “Empath, remember? And that’s not a gift I need moonlight for.”

“It wasn’t *you*,” he answered, impatience cutting his voice into jagged edges. “It was the fucking jewels.”

She pulled in a breath to continue yelling at him, only to draw up short, all her hard-earned anger stumbling to a stop.

“I didn’t take you for the greedy kind, Jade.”

“I’m not.”

He snorted, his derision clear. “The cool million or so in that pack say otherwise.”

“Only because you have no idea what you’re talking about.” More than she should have said, but she couldn’t quite stop herself. “Just because you knew one of us once doesn’t mean you know everything about my people.”

“*I’m* your people.” He took a step forward, no doubt attempting to intimidate.

“So are they!” she snapped, before realizing what she’d admitted. Her hand shaking, she rubbed tiredly at her forehead. Getting angry with him just got her mired further. “Look, you don’t understand, all right? You don’t know and I can’t tell you. These are things the Order keeps sacred and secret.”

"Then maybe when they send their mercenaries out to kill children, covered head to toe in those goddamned things, they should make sure they do the job right, don't you think? Witnesses have a way of remembering."

"What?"

He stared at her, gaze hard, hands fisted. "When she came that night, she was wearing them. Jewels. Gold. Like fucking armor. So much of it she clanked when she hit the goddamned ground. So don't tell me I don't know what I'm talking about."

"But...that makes no sense."

He speared her with a stare. "Explain."

She shouldn't. She knew she shouldn't. But something was very wrong with his story. Something she needed to understand. Why, since she had no intention of staying, she couldn't say, but she felt it. And with the realization that she was going to confide in him, she took one step closer to an edge in her mind she wasn't ready to look beyond.

"The Order would never send a novice scarlet to take on a pack of Wolves."

"We were children, not a pack."

"And people fight hardest to protect their children." Something he should know better than anyone else. "Scarlets are too valuable to risk that way. They would never have sent her if she needed all of that."

"Needed what?"

"The *stones*, Rysen." She closed her eyes, gathering her courage. God help them both if one of the Rouges were listening. "They're for the *weak*."

His head reared back. "You're not weak."

A surprised laugh escaped her at his insulted expression. Insulted for *her*. He was wrong, but even in

the midst of the argument, she was...touched. "For those who can't focus their abilities on their own well enough. We use the stones to magnify our powers. If the woman who came to your home was covered in them, she'd be of no use to the Order. She'd be unreliable and ineffective. They would never have allowed her such an assignment."

If she didn't know better, Jade would have thought he'd gone ashen.

"Vayere wasn't weak either. She had no trouble at all focusing her skills, not once. I saw her carve a rose in a tree for the girls using just her voice. She never had any of that shit on when she visited us before." He sat on the edge of the bed and looked up at her. "If what you're saying is true, she could have used those jewels to flatten the compound into dust and no one would have known we were ever there."

His pain, self-recrimination, horror, ebbed around her, but he didn't move. He sat, still as stone, staring forward without seeing. A pull, deep in her heart, strong as a tide, had her crossing to sit next to him. As the night before, she wasn't sure how to help. How to comfort. Comfort was as alien in the enclave as forgiveness. Then she remembered what he'd said the night before. Was this what he meant? That he didn't want her gifts to take his hurts. He just wanted...her?

Unsure, she slid her hand beneath his arm, curling it over his chest, doing the same with her other arm around his back. When he didn't stop her, she laid her head on his shoulder, closed her eyes and forced herself to relax against him. She didn't know how long they stayed that way before he lowered his head against hers, his hand curving around her biceps to press her closer.

"She knew I would have to kill her," he rumbled. "She knew, but she gave us a chance to survive anyway."

Jade held on, her fingers knotting in the smooth fabric of his shirt. His emotions buffeted her on all sides, almost battering her, but she couldn't let go. He'd never forgive her if she let go, she knew it in her soul.

"Why? Why not warn us, give us a chance to leave? We would have gone. No one had to die that night."

"Someone would have," she answered, pieces falling into place in her mind. "She must have taken the assignment for a reason, maybe to protect as many of you as she could. Someone else would have been assigned, someone who would have killed you all. She gave her vow to fulfill it. I told you, our word means more than our lives. If she hadn't done what she promised, the Tribunal would have judged her." And her entire family. "Believe me, you showed more mercy than they would have."

He shook his head, moved to pull away from her. "Dead is dead."

"Not to us." She clung tighter, lifting her face to whisper to him. "There are ways to punish us beyond our deaths. But that's not what matters. She made her choice, knowing the cost. You did nothing wrong."

"She was my *friend*. And I ripped out her fucking throat."

"She killed your mother. Killed *children*. What were you supposed to do? Ask questions first?" If it had been her, she'd have incinerated the woman where she stood. "Why else bring the jewels? She was counting on you to do what had to be done to save the others."

"I did it," he answered, his voice hoarse and bitter. "I killed her, stole every bit of gold and gems I found on her

and left. To protect them, I've done what no one else was willing to do. Over and over again."

"Then you've honored your friendship."

"You don't understand. I do it as a *punishment*."

"No, Pale." She cupped his jaw, the silk of his beard sliding through her fingers as she made him look her in the eye. "You lead because that's what you are. *Who* you are. Alphas are forged in blood, even I know that. Blood always has regrets."

He fought her, his jaw working beneath her fingertips, so she did what instincts railed at her to do. She kissed him.

He went still, his mouth hard and unyielding, but she refused to let that stop her. She nipped at his full bottom lip, licked, gripping the back of his neck when he pulled back. She licked again, along the seam. A smile pulled at the corners of her own mouth when he growled, lips definitely softer.

Both hands in his hair now, she held him where she wanted as she teased, as just the tip of her tongue flicked over him. She planted her foot on the ground, pushed her body up to standing and moved so that she stood between his open knees, never breaking off her assault. His hands came with her, clamped onto her hips almost hard enough to bruise. Fingers gripped her backside, the heavy points of his claws making themselves known. Heat exploded in her center. Electricity danced straight to the heart of her and made her jump in response. He swallowed her gasp, yanked her against him and rolled her onto the bed beneath him so he could kiss her as thoroughly as he liked. As she liked.

"I think I've just figured out how to win arguments with you," she whispered when he gave her a second to breathe again, her voice rumbling just as much as his could. All around them both, his color twined, pleased. If she had one, she had a feeling it would be wrapped around him just as tightly, just as content.

"I concede nothing but the fact that you've learned how to redirect me." His hand pulled the strap of her undershirt down, baring her to a gaze so hungry she could feel it on her skin. "And that you have the most incredible breasts ever created."

Tempting as it was to let him have his way, shushing their discussion as if it didn't matter, she couldn't let him do it. She cupped his jaw again, holding him in place until he looked at her. "Trust me, at least in this. She knew what she sacrificed and what she was taking from you. It was her choice, not yours."

She thought he'd let her go, get up and walk out of the room. Thought he'd at the very least brush her words away as meaningless. After a few motionless seconds, he settled over her, laid his cheek against her heart and nodded, his color emanating his warmth and acceptance. "I trust you with all that I am, Jade. For always."

In the quiet intimacy there, her hand sliding through his hair, his breath warming her naked skin, something in her heart unknotted and began to float free. Something pure, animal in its rightness. She stared up at the ceiling, tears filling her eyes at the emotion she almost didn't recognize. Was afraid to recognize.

It's small, she told herself, continuing to stroke his hair. A flicker she could easily ignore until it went away.

But it warmed her. And it was growing. Growing dangerously fast.

Oh, God, don't let me start to love him...

The tears spilled into her hair, not because she thought God wasn't listening.

Because she knew it was already too late.

Chapter Thirteen

Pale drove the car, dusk well past them but his sense of unease was only getting stronger. He'd had to drag himself from Jade, wanting nothing more than to climb between those sheets and hold her for another night. But time—and this killer—were moving whether he was ready or not. Another body dump had been found at dawn.

Once he told her, her efficiency at redressing and slinging her pack over her shoulder had almost amused him. The longest part had been forcing her hair back into the black bowl. She'd scowled in the mirror because he'd managed to muss her beyond easy repair. Small strays escaped the rigid braids everywhere, like fractures in her perfect façade. They gave him hope.

Her face when he asked if she'd be willing to look at the remains in the morgue hadn't.

"You don't have to do this," he said again, glancing at her in the seat next to him. God knew he didn't want to see her go through what she had in the woods again.

"I don't see any other options. The sites were useless. The last Wolf victim had nothing to divulge. The boy could barely speak. You know as well as I do, this is the only thing left."

"Will it hurt you?" He didn't believe reliving anyone's emotions could be painless, no matter what she said. And she'd definitely been holding something back in the woods.

She shook her head. Not meeting his gaze, he noticed with a deepening frown. "Human signatures aren't nearly as strong as a shifter's or a Sibile's. When I know what to expect, I can shield myself. Stay separate from their memories and watch without feeling it myself. I'll be fine."

"You knew what to expect on the mountain," he reminded her, pulling into the empty back parking lot to the county building. The day shift had ended, leaving skeleton crews to carry the load at night, when the public had no access. Probably for the best, considering the fewer people who saw her, the fewer people might remember her.

"And I *didn't* get hurt on the mountain, did I?"

He parked, pulling up the brake with more force than strictly necessary. He wanted to argue with her. Hell, he wanted to strap her in and drive as far from Moonridge as he could get. Neither one would do him any good. "You should brace yourself," he added in a soft voice that wouldn't carry through the windows of the car. "The assistant coroner, Mitch Kroft, is a Wolf. I would rather have come while he was off shift, but he's their night guy. No way around him."

She frowned, finally looking his way again. "Is he mated?"

Did she know mated males were no threat to her? "He wishes. He's a white Wolf from Colorado. Nothing wrong with that normally, but throw in that he cuts up people every day and that's pretty fuckin' creepy. Like some kind of albino cannibal. The females here have about as much interest in him as they do the mange." He reached for his door handle, opening it and hoping to God

the bad feeling in the pit of his gut didn't mean shit. "Stay close. Kroft can be a little...weird."

Edgy or not, his passing judgment seemed to amuse her as she climbed out of the car. "Says the oh-so-normal beast-man who stalks the night?"

His harrumph lacked bite, especially since he was hurrying to get out and catch up with her. Why didn't this woman have the slightest care for her own safety? "Exactly. Kroft doesn't have my good manners."

At least she waited for him to close the door and hit the auto lock before smiling cheekily over the top of the car. "Meaning he'll skip the niceties of asking my name before he rubs against my leg and bites me?"

His growl made her grin. But the moment of levity faded when he reached her side and took her arm. "Do not, under any circumstances, let him know you're a Sibile. All he needs to know is that you're a consultant on this case." He paused, looking down into that beautiful face, wishing he was asking her to do anything but this. "And that you're mine."

She couldn't begin to know the satisfaction that filled him when her cheeks colored and all she did was nod.

Four minutes later, he'd signed them past the first security door and was leading her into a tiled white hall with a hand to the small of her back. That satisfaction sank deep because she didn't shrug him off or push him away. She even leaned into him, her shoulder grazing him with the slightest slide of fabric, brushing her scent over him. Proprietary touches, trustful ones. Subtle, but indicative to any other Wolf watching that she was with him.

Not giving himself any time to build on his own dread, he opened the door to the morgue quickly, stepping

in first, using his body to keep her shielded from the blond man on the other side of a cluttered L-shaped desk next to the doors. Thankfully, no bodies lay on either of the two gleaming autopsy tables. The wall of silver cabinet doors beyond them, however, were probably not as lucky. The rest of the autopsy room, with its smooth concrete floor and black-and-white tiled walls, was clinically clean. The chemical agents they used to keep it that way stung his nose. How Kroft managed to maintain his sense of smell was a mystery, though if he hadn't, that might explain his oddities.

"That you, Rysen?" Kroft asked, not lifting his head from his ever-present paperwork as Jade took the place behind him that Pale indicated with his hand. Kroft knew without looking that it was him, of course—they were more than familiar to each other—but he played the game as well as any other Wolf.

At least until Jade's scent hit him.

Pale's gut clenched as Kroft froze in place. When he turned his head in their direction, it only clenched tighter. Glazed blue eyes met his for a fraction of a second before Kroft began trying to see around him. His cool gaze traveled up and down however much of Jade was visible, interest—and something definitely darker—in his stare. "Not alone this time, I see."

Pale shifted to cover her more, his arm tucking her farther back. Business as usual, he reminded himself. "Not this time, no. Do you have it ready?"

"Sure." Kroft sounded friendly, but a fine tension filled the air. The first wrong move would lead to blood. "Same thing as all the others, though. Doubt you'll find

anything that won't be in the preliminary report we sent over to the station."

Pale shook his head, keeping his gaze unblinking. "Potential break in the case. Just need to take a look for a minute to see if we're on to anything real."

"Who's your friend?" Kroft tilted his head, trying to see her better.

Jade picked a bad time to peer around Pale's arm, that curiosity of hers at work again. The last thing he wanted was to let her get a look at another male, least of all one who looked uncomfortably close to a Sibile. All fair hair and pale skin. Lean enough to pass for harmless to anyone who didn't know what he was. But Pale knew, and if she got a look at him, a sense of him, she could well decide Kroft was a more acceptable mate. He eyed the whelp piteously, finding flaws in every direction.

Not bloody likely.

Still, he let Jade take her look and waited, the same as Kroft. Nothing happened except her slow recoil behind him again, her fingers curling into his waistband. The grin on his face felt a little vicious, something Kroft seemed to note, his blue eyes turning steely at the clear rejection.

"She's a consult from the mayor's office," Pale answered unnecessarily, shifting to stay in front of her. That look was the last one Kroft would get of her.

"You'll have to sign in, both of you," Kroft tried again, pointing at the clipboard at the edge of the desk. "To see the remains."

Pale nodded. "We'll do that while you bring them out." It wasn't a suggestion and Kroft seemed to realize that. He bowed his head, a submissive signal that Pale didn't buy for an instant. Kroft backed up for several feet before turning to open one of the cabinet drawers.

Jade's grip tightened at the sound of the metal drawer clicking open. Her heartbeat began to beat so fast and heavy, the sound drumming in his ears, that Pale risked looking away from the other Wolf to turn to her.

"What's wrong?" He reached for the clipboard, barely glancing at it before writing his name.

"There've been a lot of dead people in here," she whispered, all color leached from her face, even her lips. She wasn't looking at him, instead peering around the room, her eyes barely focused. "Hundreds and hundreds..."

"Jade. *Jade*."

Her gaze locked on his at the urgent tone.

"Can you do this?" A quick glance over his shoulder found Kroft unzipping a body bag. He turned back to her, pushing the clipboard into her cold hands. "If you can't, we'll get out of here now. We'll find a different way."

"There is no different way." No melodrama. No self-pity, just a clear statement of fact he couldn't refute.

And he didn't give a shit about it. "That's not what I asked you."

She didn't get any color back, but she did meet his stare steadily. "Yes, I can do this."

He handed her the pen. She looked down at his scrawl on the blue chart and chose the line immediately beneath. Before she could put ink to the paper, he whispered in her ear, "Make only the first name legible and pick any name but yours. Scribble something after. Whatever you do, make no eye contact with Kroft. He'll take it for an invitation."

She bristled but did as he instructed. A good sign, he hoped, ignoring the twitch at the back of his neck that something was about to go horribly wrong.

She handed back the clipboard and they both turned at the surprising sound of a second drawer being pulled out. He should have been watching, he realized, should have blocked her a little longer because she wasn't prepared for the grisly sight, not even with it across the room. Four body bags were unzipped, not one of them even half full. The remains had been laid as respectfully as possible, but the familiar shapes of arms and legs—in pieces no longer than the span of a piece of firewood—spread out as if in a butcher's glass case, would make anyone's stomach revolt.

Jade spun into Pale's chest, grabbing hold of his waist with both hands. She pressed her face to his heart, eyes closed, her claws threatening to ruin another shirt. She tucked so close, he thought she might want to hide inside him.

"Give us a minute, Kroft."

The other Wolf seemed to think about it before nodding. "You know the rules."

Once he passed them, taking one more speculative glance at her form, Pale only waited for the doors to close before curving his hands around her shoulders so he could pull her back enough to bring his mouth next to ear. "Slow breaths. In through your mouth, out through your nose. Slow."

When she didn't listen immediately, he growled, low and deep enough to rattle her. The sound of dominance. She shuddered, then did as he ordered. He didn't fool himself that it would work when she wasn't inches from hysteria, but it was a nice millisecond fantasy.

A few more breaths and she lessened the grip on his shirt. Taking a moment, she smoothed the front of it down his chest with flattened hands, fussing at wrinkles he couldn't care less about.

"You knew what you would see here," he reminded her, doing his best not to be too rough. "If I could do this for you, I would."

"I know." She nodded, rubbing her face against him just a little before moving out of his arms. "Keep him out a few minutes longer."

"You can't go near the bodies without a coroner present."

"I don't need to. Just, whatever you do, don't distract me." Visibly braced, she turned to face the bodies across the room. Pale watched her back, her rigid posture in drab gray clothes. As all the other times she'd used that second sight of hers, there was nothing much to see. But he could feel it, the hairs on the backs of his arms rising, almost as if a charge filled the air. The fluorescent lights overhead brightened with a growing drone of building electricity.

"So many signatures..." she breathed, reaching out her hand, turning in place, her expression one of dreadful wonder. "There's been so much pain in this room."

He didn't want to imagine.

"Children." She took a step. "Murderers. Police officers. Mothers... They're all calling me." She bowed her head into her hands. "They're all I can see."

"In the back, Jade. Just the ones in the back."

"I'm *trying*, there's just so many inbetw—" She jerked suddenly and at first he thought it was because he'd spoken, but then the lights began to whine, glowing too bright, a cracking noise breaking the silence.

“Jade?”

“My God.” Her voice was hardly a whisper. Almost a thought, and it sent icy horror down his spine. She backed up, retreating. “No, no, no—”

“What’s wrong?” But the question was too late.

Whatever it was she’d been trying to escape, it had her. She rose up impossibly high on her toes, as if someone were lifting her, hands clawing at her throat while she choked.

“Jade!” But she wasn’t hearing him. Just like the night before, in the woods, she was completely immersed in someone else’s memory. Someone else’s death. He locked in on the pieces of women across the room. Fuck that. Arm out, he spun her around to face him, but it wasn’t quite Jade anymore. Her eyes had changed, the pupils so wide there wasn’t a trace of gold in the irises at all. Just pure darkness. Whatever she was looking at, it wasn’t him.

And whatever was looking back at him...wasn’t her.

“Let it go, Jade,” he ordered, hoping she could still hear him.

Her hands slapped onto his chest, over his heart, feeling him like a blind woman. Grounding herself? He could only hope.

Clamping his hand over them, he pressed his forehead to hers. “That’s right, honey. Feel my heartbeat. Follow it back.”

“No,” she answered, her voice not remotely like her own. Slow. Cold. Odd and echoing...as if there were more than one of her. “She...must...help us.”

“Jade!” He shook her, without reaction.

“She draws...strength from...you.” The rippling voice lacked emotion of any kind. “Do not...let go.”

It was all the warning he was given. Jade suddenly arched backward in his hold as if yanked, her back drawn tight enough to break, her face a mask of pure, unadulterated agony, and a scream like none he'd ever heard before tearing out of her throat. The lights blazed bright enough to blind, making it nearly impossible to see her, before shattering and throwing the entire room into utter blackness.

Just like that and an eternity later, it was over.

Panting, he looked down at Jade as she sagged in his arms, though even his vision wasn't good enough to see in the absolute absence of light. But he could feel. She'd gone completely boneless, almost slipping out of his hold. He shifted to swing her up against his chest.

Her weight was nothing to bear, but with his ears still ringing and his memory forever burned with her pain, she suddenly seemed the frailest thing he'd ever touched. He could barely feel her pulse, faint and thready, and he'd had to listen desperately to tell if she was even breathing. The sound, when he found it, relieved the building desperation in his chest, but not by much. They had a bigger problem.

Mitch Kroft hadn't come back in.

Jade's trance—one that had set every hair on his body on end from the energy coming off her—had lasted too long, her scream too loud, for Kroft to still be politely waiting outside. Which meant only one thing.

Kroft had to be lying in wait. Pale couldn't tell how much time had passed, was only able to hope fate was kind and Kroft would be waiting alone.

Holding her close to his heart, he prayed she'd found the answers she'd sought because by all that was holy,

he'd never bring her back to this place again. He strode out through the doors, back to the main corridor. If they went out the way they'd come in, there'd be questions. Unconscious women had that effect.

They'd have to use the back way out.

Working from memory, he pushed through the doors, finding the hall just as black. Her power had blown more than just the bulbs. The whole building had to be out of power. He opted for the turn that led to the private offices of the head coroner and the records room. Beyond them was an employee exit that led to the parking lot via an alley. The bad news was that it was Kroft who'd shown him the way before, so it wasn't safe either, but it would have to do.

Pale pushed the door with his back, his night vision shifting as he stepped into the space between the buildings. The door slammed behind them. Looking left, then right, he started the walk toward the lit lot on the right. Twenty paces at most to the open area. Another thirty to the car.

He'd gone five when the scent hit him. Wolves. Three, maybe four. He stopped for precious seconds, needing to be clear on who was coming from what direction. Two silhouettes peeled from the walls at the far end of the alley. Two more, closer to the light, closing off the safe end. Kroft had called in reinforcements.

The door to the building opened, revealing the assistant coroner. No white jacket. Shirt already gone. Prepared to shift and challenge in Wolf form. So much for professional courtesy.

"She's *mine*," Pale snarled at the incoming interlopers. He didn't expect to scare them off—her scent

was probably already driving them crazy—but it was worth a try.

“There’s no law that says you can’t share,” Kroft replied silkily. Unmoved and unafraid. Confident, actually, that he’d stacked the deck neatly in his favor. The bastard should have been born a reptile instead. He licked at his growing fangs, eyes going glassy with hunger. “You have no right to hoard a female in Heat. We aren’t mated. She could choose any of us.”

“Unconscious?” Pale would have liked to sink his teeth into Kroft’s jaw and hear it crunch like mulch. Just because the packs were gone didn’t mean any sense of honor had to go with them. “She made her choice.” He hoped.

“If she’d chosen, she’d be imprinted already.” Kroft took a deep inhalation, a sick smile spreading his lips as he crudely acknowledged the scent of her on the air. “She’s so ready, you can almost taste her.”

“Leave now, and I might not claw out your entrails.” *Maybe.* Pale didn’t want to make any promises he couldn’t keep. He didn’t dare take his eyes off the man directly across from him, but he’d be stupid if he didn’t keep the others in his peripheral vision.

“You can’t beat us all, Rysen.” Kroft’s soft taunt came as the others stalked closer, sealing off escape.

No, he probably couldn’t. But he’d try.

Kroft leaped into the air with a roar, shifting in a silent ripple midair, revealing bared teeth, colorless fur and vicious black claws. With no time to do anything else, Pale spun, taking the brunt of the white Wolf’s weight on his back, falling to one knee rather than drop her. Fire arced down his back as the Wolf scrabbled for grip,

digging deep when he did. Sharp teeth clamped where Pale's shoulder met his throat, tearing deep gouges while Kroft shook his head, ravaging toward a kill.

Pale roared, rolling Jade to the ground before grabbing Kroft by the scruff and flipping him into the darkness beyond. His flesh tore, blood sluicing from the wound, but it wasn't fatal. It would take far more than that.

White fur gleaming even in the darkness, Kroft twisted as he hit the ground. In less than a second, he was back on his feet; only his friends were with him now, growling and snarling. All five formed a half-circle around Pale and Jade. He held his arm up in front of his face, still kneeling, protecting her the only way he could in his current form. As a man, they'd rip him to shreds. As a Wolf, he had a chance.

He took a fleeting glance at the woman curled on the ground of the filthy alley, unclipping his badge and his gun slowly, tucking them beneath her. It wasn't allowed, but he'd be damned if they'd get her without a fight and she was no match for them without a weapon.

They waited, knowing he couldn't use his human tools against them. This was a Wolf matter. The badge was useless in a challenge and the gun, unforgivable. The only law that held sway among Wolves was his right to protect what was his—his life, his pups and, most important, his female. They'd all die before he let them have her.

A moment later, he changed. A howl went up in the darkness and the enemies rushed in.

Chapter Fourteen

Jade's eyes fluttered open when something heavy hit her legs, pinning them down. Sounds registered next—angry barks and vicious snarls, high-pitched whines of pain and submission. She lifted her head, then ducked as a wayward paw whooshed past her face. She lurched backward into a rough brick wall, dragging the rest of herself toward it. Once she had her back to it, she kicked at the weight on her legs. Belatedly, she realized it was an unconscious Wolf. At least, she hoped it was unconscious. Blood dripped from its neck onto her pants. She refused to check it for any signs of life.

Rubbing at her eyes, she took in as much of the scene before her as she could. Dim alley, small trash containers knocked onto their sides, three piles of fur strewn in different directions. Three more were still fighting. A brilliant white, a more common gray coat and a giant blur she made out more by the gleam than the color. A black Wolf, the same shade as a raven wing.

Pale.

She wasn't sure how she knew, but her heart thudded with fear for him. This was what he'd warned her about. A challenge. If he didn't win, the others would try to rape her. She looked around wildly for light, something she could draw on to help him. There was some at the far end, the parking lot. She reached, feeling the draw in her fingertips, as if she were pulling at a fabric instead of the

light. Very little came. Too far away and she was too drained. She tried again.

A loud bark made her jump and she realized it was Pale, barking at her. Milk-blue eyes met hers, a message in the shake of his head just before another leaped on his back and he was whisked back into the fight.

Don't help him? Or don't expose her abilities? Did it matter?

She pulled her hand back, unwilling to distract him from staying alive. In front of her, the black and the white collided, standing on hind legs, their forelegs clawing at each other's chests. Dark stains mottled the white, but his teeth still flashed. The black caught him at the throat, giving his head a mighty shake and throwing the white into the wall like a rag doll. A sharp whelp of pain and the white stayed down. The black growled menacingly at the remaining gray, which paced nervously, licking his teeth and whining in her direction.

Jade pressed herself closer to the wall.

The black took a threatening step forward. That quickly, the gray abandoned the others and loped through the alley to the street beyond. Leaving her alone with the great black Wolf, which stumbled as it turned its huge head her way.

He'd won. Protected her. Relief flooded her, even though her heart had yet to slow down. She hadn't even realized it was racing. He lowered his muzzle at her sigh, moving to her with stuttering steps. She cut the distance in half, reaching for him and burying her face in the fur at his neck. Too late, she realized he was covered in something thick and wet. She pulled her hands back. Even without bright enough light, she knew it was blood. *His* blood.

“Oh, Pale.” She wanted to help him, but the longer they stayed exposed, the more of a danger she was to him. “Can you make it back to your car?”

He pawed the ground near her feet, where she found a wallet and his gun.

She picked it up, showing it to him, not even bothering to stop from rolling her eyes. “Don’t you think this might have been a little handier than your teeth?”

He growled, then licked his chops and led the way toward the lot. She had a feeling if they’d chewed his leg off, he’d still have led. Stubborn male. Gathering herself, she pulled her legs under her and followed, wavering almost as much as he was. When she wondered why her mind was still fuzzy, she flashed on a stream of bloody memories that weren’t hers and cut the thought off desperately. Ghosts. In the blood. Sickened, she rubbed the back of her hand over her forehead, understanding her weakness. They had drained most of her power. She’d need rest, soon.

No one else bothered them as they crossed the lot, passing a car haphazardly parked near theirs. How long had she been out, that those men had the time to arrive? How long had Pale fought to protect her? How much blood had he lost to keep her safe? The questions filled her as she walked on leaden feet, the lack of answers weighing her sense of responsibility. He’d told her to stay behind him. Sure, Mitch Kroft might have tried to get at her based on scent alone—she had enough logic to accept that he probably would—but she was the one who’d insisted on continuing with this case in the first place, leaving herself and Pale vulnerable. Risking her own life was part of accepting her assignment. She’d had no right

whatsoever to ask him to risk his. But he had. And that meant something to her heart.

By the time they reached the car, she was barely keeping herself upright. He sat on his haunches next to the back wheel on the driver's side, scratching with one paw, a puddle of blood starting to form beneath him. He wanted in, did he? Well, he should have had the presence of mind to put his keys with his gun, shouldn't he? Jade blinked heavy-lidded eyes at him, trying to decide if she wanted to expend the energy to argue with a dog.

Pale scratched again.

No, she didn't. She could accidentally step on his tail to make him back off until she figured a way into the car, but that would take energy too. Energy she needed to conserve, if only to repay him.

In Wolf form, the top of his head still came to the middle of her ribs. He definitely outweighed her. She wasn't going to be teaching him any lessons on patience tonight, not even with him wounded. And the items in her hand, while important, weren't going to get them in the car—or to the shoulder pack, which lay at the foot of the passenger side.

She slid Pale a sideways glance. "If the Order finds out about this, I'll spike your doggy kibble with a spell that'll make you impotent for a year."

His bright eyes narrowed on her.

She lifted her hand for the small light from a nearby lot post. It came easier, without the distance. She didn't need much, just enough to shape the glow into a small tool. She inserted the tine of light into the lock, and then used pressure pulses to fill the tumblers. A quick twist and the door unlocked. She yanked the handle and released the light.

Ignoring the wolfish frown on his muzzle, she stretched into the compartment for her pack. Once in hand, she reached in for the cape he despised. Before he could nip at her to hurry, she unfurled it and draped it over his shoulders, pulling the hood over his pointed ears. He shook his head, but she kept it in place.

"We don't wear these for the fashion," she snapped when he tried to shake it off again. "These capes amplify our gifts and I have very little left right now so stop fighting me. You *need* this."

He stopped writhing under the cape, but she wasn't sure if that was because he was listening or because his breath was turning into rough, wet sloshes of air. Pulling the ends together at his throat, she felt for her power, found it warm around her heart. Already stirring, but ebbing low. There would be nothing left when she did this. She'd be defenseless, most likely unconscious, but it was necessary. He'd bled too much already.

White. She imagined the color, a pure, clean light in her mind. New. Healing. Her hands began to tingle, then heat, soothing them both with light that covered the cape in a shining moonlight glow. For a beautiful second, power burned, brilliant as a new star, then faded, leaving her empty.

Jade's bottom sank down to the concrete, the edge of the open car biting into the space between her ribs. The cloak in front of her shifted. When the hood lifted, she didn't see a black muzzle, but the rough-cheeked face that filled her with relief.

Pale stared at her, awe and shock clear in his eyes. "You're a healer?"

Her vision blurred, but she gave him a smile that felt lopsided. "Occasionally. But don't tell anyone. I don't want all those sick people interfering with my fascinating career as dogbait."

He frowned, looking down at his hands as if they were a new invention. "You enacted my change."

"Did I?" Her head slid to rest on the edge of his car seat. It took effort to keep her eyes open. Was he saying something important? His head was tilted to the side, his frown deepening the groove between his dark brows. So strange to see the cloak on a man, but red was a beautiful color on him. Deep and true against the gold of his skin. The only thing that looked better was no cloak at all. Oh yes, she'd love to see that again. Feel that again.

She only wished it weren't so dark, so she could see more of his broad chest between the open folds of the cloak. Broad muscle, heavy, warm and firm under her touch. Abdominals she could trill her fingertips over as she drifted down his torso to find the thick male flesh she'd felt against her earlier. Encircle it in her hands and stroke it. Maybe even taste it...

She wondered groggily if she'd want this man even when she was dead, because it was starting to feel as though she'd end up that way before she got him.

She reached to smooth the frown lines between his heavy brows. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

He watched her finger miss him by a mile and flop down into her lap. The frown deepened. "Because something's wrong with you. I don't like the way you look."

She squinted at him, almost insulted. She liked the way *he* looked. Normally. He continued to blur in front of

her. "You got a real way with the ladies, Detective. I bet they just dive at your feet."

"No, I mean your skin looks like wax."

And his voice sounded as if it were coming from inside an empty room, but he didn't hear her bringing it up, did he? Her eyes drifted shut. Finally, her fuzzy mind registered the concern in his rough words. "I'm drained."

"We need to get you out of here."

"Lead the way, lover." Her head lolled back, thumping on the open door. She didn't care. He picked her up and, even in her current state, she curled into him, slipping her hand between the cloak folds and rumbling in her chest at the silky feel of his warm skin. She complained a little when he set her inside the car and closed the door, but not much. She was safe. He'd protect her while she slept.

There were some muted thumps outside, but she paid them little mind. Soon, the car door opened again and she was enveloped in warmth. The engine purred to life. That opened her eyes. To her disappointment, he was dressed. A pair of jeans and a hastily shrugged-on button shirt. Must have been what he'd been thumping around at the back of the car for. The cloak lay over her now.

He smiled at her, she thought. She saw his teeth anyway. "Hide-a-key, under the wheel well. I was trying to tell you."

She didn't have the energy left to shrug. "Don't speak puppy."

He shook his head. "I'm just saying. No need to spike the kibble."

“As if I would.” She sighed, remembering the feel of him behind her well enough to throb. “Not until you give in anyway.”

His brows rose. “Are you like this because you’re out of juice or are you just like this under all that Sibile crap?”

She would have said something—she thought—but she realized they were being watched. Turning her head, she found the spy with ease. Near the parking lot light, next to the mouth of the alley, the white Wolf crouched.

“Shit,” Pale growled, following her line of sight.

“How much do you think he saw?” Her question didn’t matter and he didn’t answer her. The car lurched backward, then screeched forward and curved out of the lot into the street traffic, leaving the bloodied Wolf behind.

Jade stared down at the fabric draping her. Vividly red, even in the dark—Mitch Kroft would have been able to see it. He didn’t have to see her use her gifts; she was already exposed. Cold fear swamped her—memories of agony and screams flashed through her mind like an icy spear for a split second—pushing out the warm pleasantness she’d had talking to Pale. Someone outside the squad now knew there was a Sibile on the Woodsman case. Someone knew, someone who couldn’t be trusted. It was only a matter of time before it was public knowledge.

She’d just become a target.

And she had to tell Pale why. Tell him what she knew they were facing. That she wasn’t sure they could survive.

“Sleep, Jade.” Pale’s heavy hand found hers under the folds of her robe. “I’ll protect you.”

She turned to the man at her side. The order was autocratic, yes, but she believed his promise all the way to her soul. She nodded. She needed to rest. This could be the only time left. She closed her eyes and took him at his word.

Jade awoke to the smell of bacon sizzling. She blinked lazily, trying to take in her surroundings. Warmth all around her. A thick dark blue duvet with matching pillows beneath her head. Better yet, a delectable masculine scent filled her senses from all around.

Pale.

The rumble in her chest matched the instinctive pleasure of recognizing him. This wasn't another hotel room. It was his private space. His *bed*. She buried her face in the pillow next to her, wrapping her arms around it and hugging it close before she even fully woke. It wasn't him, but he'd been there. Recently. Had he been next to her while she slept? The blanket and sheet, still tucked in on that side, said he hadn't, but the pillow didn't lie. He'd been there, close enough to make her feel secure, and probably to satisfy himself that she wasn't hurt. The man could kill her with his gentleness.

What about when he wasn't so gentle?

The thought woke her fully. Her body, already thrumming, began to heat again. Arousal like a living thing uncurled inside her, stretching to fill her from tip to toes. She closed her eyes again and breathed in deep, reveling a second longer in sensation. Just one, then she'd have to get up and find him. Tell him what she'd seen. What the ghosts had told her about their killer. With that heavy weight in her mind, the softness of his bed beneath

her was nearly impossible to leave. Even if she hated him, she'd still want to linger in it.

Tinkling noises of plates floated through the half-open pocket doors beyond the bed. If she were smart, she'd get up now, but just this once, she didn't want to be smart. She felt safe. Cherished. Protected. All new things for her. In the Order, she was barely tolerated. The cog in the machine that never fit. The Abomination. Around Pale, the fit was so perfect she wondered if she struggled against it out of habit.

Reality peeped its head and she admitted she might be romanticizing things a little. Pale expected to control. She needed to make her own choices. They struggled back and forth to lead in their strange little dance. But struggling didn't lessen the rightness. Even when she lost, she didn't mind much. Pale wouldn't hurt her for any perceived failings. He wouldn't cast her out or kill her over them, either. How she knew, she wasn't sure. More of the Instinct, she supposed. She just knew if she hurt him, he wouldn't hurt her back. And hurting him would only hurt herself.

She peered around, sobering somewhat, partially to get her bearings. The rest pure curiosity about the man her body—and okay, yes, her heart—craved so deeply.

Bathroom over to the right, a dark blue towel hanging from a hook on the front of the door. Cool gray paint on the walls she could see. The others were blocked by heavy wood bookcases. Three, each one full of all kinds of reading material—paperbacks, hard covers, magazines. No particular order, the fiction standing next to the nonfiction in equal amounts. Either Pale Rysen was a serious reader or he had a lot of time to kill.

He padded barefoot on the wood floor leading to the doors, balancing a tray in front of him. Two things stood out right away. One, he'd showered, because his hair was still damp and he was back in a well-worn set of jeans and an aged white T-shirt. The other was that he'd shaved. She'd expected handsome. His devastating appeal stuttered her breathing almost to a stop.

He wasn't beautiful beneath it, certainly not the way Sibile beauty was perceived. Pale was too hard-boned, too dark and raw for beauty. But his strength, intensity, his sheer grace made the Heat already churning in her turn to a scald.

Without his beard to hide behind, his mouth was a full, blatantly sexual shape. "You're awake, good. I was worried you'd be out for the whole day too." He set the tray next to her before sitting in the empty space of the bed. The food—sliced ham, not bacon, scrambled eggs and juice—tempted her almost as much as the man. He lifted a forkful of fluffy yellow deliciousness and held it up to her lips. "Hungry? You've been out a long time."

Day? She'd slept all night? Jade blinked, looking to the window to verify his words. Sunlight poured through the windows, bright and sure. Late morning, if she didn't miss her guess. Nearly midday. Meaning she'd collapsed utterly. More than enough time for him to cook her a feast. She bit her lip, knowing if the Sisters ever found out she'd let a male feed her, they'd peel her skin from her body. But the dual temptation of his hopeful look and the smell of heaven was too much and she opened her mouth for him. The buttery flavor was almost good enough to satisfy the Heat.

He looked far too happy as he pulled the tines from between her lips.

"Where are we?" She took the fork from his hand—all right, he *let* her take it—and rolled onto her side to eat in earnest.

"My house."

As she'd thought. "Won't we be easy to find here?" Too soon, the eggs were gone, but the mouthwatering flavor of the ham made up for it.

He shook his head slowly. If she didn't know better, she'd think he was enjoying just watching her. Until his hand moved to snatch a piece of the ham. He chuckled when she growled and smacked his knuckle with the back of her fork. "I keep this place off all records. The department thinks I rent an apartment closer to the station."

"Why didn't you bring us here night before last? Why bother with the hotel?"

"I didn't trust you then."

She warmed at the implication that he trusted her now. Apparently unconsciousness had its benefits. Smiling, willing to reward him with the last piece of meat, she moved to sit up completely. As she shifted, a lock of hair fell into her face, freezing her in place.

He stilled, his gaze checking all her visible parts for signs of distress. "What's the matter?"

She stared at him, reaching for her wild tresses. He'd unbound them completely from the knot and braids, creating riots streaming down her back and onto the pillows. "My hair."

"I couldn't lay you down with that bowl-thing bending your neck." He lifted his chin to indicate her *flos* on a dresser next to the bathroom door. "And before you

get pissy, I took your clothes off for a reason. They had blood all over them.” He’d washed her too, her skin completely unmarred by any stains or dirt. Not even her fingernails.

Manners dictated she offer thanks. But something she couldn’t tamp down demanded his apology. “You didn’t have to undo the braids.”

His unwavering gaze remained equally unrepentant.

“It takes three people to braid it.” And a migraine to handle the tension of the plaits. Part of her enjoyed the current freedom, but being free was not part of being a Sibile. “You take too many liberties, Detective.” If he took them in front of the wrong person, he could get hurt. Or worse.

“Detective?” He raised a brow, picking up the juice and offering it to her. “You were calling me Pale last night.”

She took the drink, if only to put off responding.

When she quit drinking, he took the glass, still waiting for his answer.

“Apologies,” she grumbled. Her skin itched at being scolded by him of all people, but she couldn’t blame him for the corner she’d painted herself into. Wanting him and wanting to hit him were not feelings she enjoyed having at the same time.

He must not have liked the grudging tone she used because he put the juice down on the tray hard enough to slosh the remnants over the rim. “Keep your apologies.”

She could only stare as he pushed the tray her way again and rolled off the bed in a furious expression of coiled energy. He was to the doors before she realized he was leaving.

“Wait!”

His spine remained rigid, but he stopped.

Weakness was not allowed in the Order, or in the Sibile as a whole, but she felt lost suddenly. Out of her depth and unclear. She especially didn't want him to leave. Not any part of her. Not like this. She forced herself to admit her lack of understanding. “Did I do something wrong?”

She hated how small her voice sounded. Submissive. But she couldn't let him storm away. Couldn't repay his kindnesses with anger.

He sighed, a long rush of breath that didn't make her feel any better. His hands came up to settle on his hips. Was he gathering patience? She guessed so when he said, “You can't keep toying with me, Jade.”

“Apologizing is toying with you?” That made no appreciable sense.

He turned, openly angry now. His eyes narrowed, face drawn into a deep frown. “You're in my bed. Covered in my scent but still not imprinted. I spilled blood for you. Damn near ripped out throats for you, and you can't even bring yourself to use my fucking *name*?”

She looked around again, finally comprehending the magnitude of what he'd done. He'd kept himself from taking her when they first met, against both their instincts. Protected her, fought for her, then brought her to his most private place. He'd even cleaned up to present himself at his best. He made so many efforts for her and she'd just thrown them back in his face without realizing it.

She folded her hands in her lap, remembered how much he hated her “prissy” pose and dropped them to her sides. “What would a real Wolf female be doing?”

“You *are* a real Wolf.” His frown softened from a black cloud to the strain of frustration.

She wanted to tell him he wasn’t the only one struggling. Not the only one who craved against all the logic he lived his life by. But that was too close to begging and she couldn’t do it.

The longer he stood there, unmoving, the more it felt like rejection. Like failure.

Her muscles nearly vibrated with the urge to leap up and pull him to her, knowing with that vague instinct he inspired that he wouldn’t be able to resist, but her Sibile pride—maybe even her Wolf pride—held her in place. Luring him with sex would only make him trust her less. He knew she wanted him. That wasn’t what he was waiting for. He was waiting for some kind of sign, but what? She had nothing to give him. No promise she could make.

“I don’t know what you want, Pale.”

“Yes, you do.” If he decided she was no longer worth the effort, she didn’t know what she would do. Neither could she bring herself to subjugate herself further by pleading. She waited, each second stretching her tighter. *Please come to me. Don’t leave me this way.*

He didn’t move.

“I’m not a Wolf,” she whispered, meeting his gaze. “If you truly want me, you have to understand that.”

“Yes, you are,” he replied, still looking down at her. “And if you ever want to be whole, *you* have to accept it.”

She stared at him, shocked. All her life, anything Wolf needed to be tamped down. Ignored or dismissed, crushing a part of her she’d never been allowed to fully recognize. The part of her that longed for freedom. Until

him. With each passing hour in his presence, that part was clawing past her guards, leaving her bindings in tattered shreds.

Finally, it became clear what he was trying to tell her. The message he was insisting she hear.

“I’ll never be able to go back to the way I was, will I?”

His head shake was slow. Implacable. “Wolves live by Instinct. Like the voice of the animal in our hearts. It’s kept us alive when everything else has disappeared. Because we accept what we are and we give ourselves over to it.”

To Instinct. If she did, the force in her heart, in her gut, would never be silent again. She blinked, finally bowing her head, staring down at the folds in front of her. The more she listened, the stronger it would grow, pushing against the control she needed to guide her abilities.

Or was that simply another lie the Sisters had used to control *her*?

It was too strong a possibility to ignore. But that didn’t mean she could turn herself inside out to please him. She couldn’t do that again for anyone.

“Maybe you’re right. I do have to accept. But I have no idea what I am. There’s no magical voice in my head telling me the right thing to do. No idea how to give you what you want.”

“*You* are what I want.” Did he even know the way his eyes glowed when he watched her? That when his voice was so gruff, she could feel it and all the longing he had in it? That he was stealing parts of her heart with every word? “I want all of you. For always.”

And that was the crux. He wanted a promise she couldn't give. A mate to stay at his side. Who could help him lead. As much as he knew of her people, there was one fact he could never understand. Would never believe. They were *all* slaves.

But she could give him the one truth that whispered in her heart. Indisputably, Instinct or not, it was something not even the Tribunal could force her to keep silent. "Then take me, Pale, because I'll never want anyone else."

His eyes shifted Wolf. The sight gave her heart the slightest trip before it began galloping wildly in her chest. Would he pounce on her now, like he had in the shower? All that power moving within her instead of so close she had screamed for it and been left empty.

She waited, watching him for any sign.

Finally, his shoulders relaxed, millimeter by millimeter. Relief allowed her to sigh the breath she forgot she was holding. He lowered himself onto all fours at the foot of the bed, slowly crawling toward her, gaze locked on hers.

His movements were sinuous, even with his hard angles and broad muscle. He settled on his belly next to her, then leaned onto his side. He set his head on one hand and lay there. Letting her look her fill as he picked up the ends of her hair and twined them through his fingers. His eyes smoldering, he said only two words. "Prove it."

Unable to look away from him, the very slow synapses in her brain couldn't quite figure out that he had challenged her. When they did, need flickered into a taut, fiery rope from her heart to her womb to her moistening sex.

He would satisfy. He would fulfill.

Giving Instinct free reign, she let go of her final mental restraints. Eyes open, she leaned forward and kissed the Wolf.

Chapter Fifteen

He let her nuzzle into him, even raised his chin to fit her better, but that was all. She wanted more. Fire waited inside her, she could feel it straining to escape, but soft, chaste kisses wouldn't set it free.

She whimpered against his mouth, a sound she couldn't remember making in her life, but frustration covered the embarrassment.

His hand cupped her cheek—finally—but did nothing to pull her closer. She scrabbled her hands on his shirt, trying to lift the fabric up, but her hands shook and her claw caught the weave, slicing through it. Yes, that would work.

Another tear, the fabric parting enough to slip her hand in and touch his warmth.

He caught her at her wrist, pulling away from her kiss with a faint growl. His eyes glowed, dangerously aroused. "If we do this, it's forever, Jade. Be sure."

"I am," she answered, meaning it from her soul.

She found herself on her back, Pale leaning above her, her hands on either side of her head where he pinned them, the blankets shucked down to her waist between them. If looks could ravish, she'd have been devoured, just as he promised. She arched upward, desperate to rub her body along his. Everything hurt, as if it strained to be next to him and couldn't reach. Her breasts ached, the nipples hard and stinging. Worse even than the night in

the shower, the core of her throbbed, wet and swollen. Empty. Painfully empty.

A hard thigh planted between each of hers, supporting his leverage. Brief relief came when she slid her leg up the solid pillar of him, but the duvet she'd at first reveled in had become a net, holding her away from what she wanted. She tried to shake it off, but without her hands, all she achieved was more friction to her over-sensitized body.

Slowly, like a man sinking into water, he lowered his hips, his weight settling onto her. Through the twisted bedding, she could feel his erection jutting hard against her thigh. Jade groaned, arching up for more of him. While she felt frantic, he seemed to have all the patience in the world. One arm at a time, he lowered himself to rest on his elbows, his full length above hers. But he didn't kiss her again. Wouldn't let her kiss him. Jade settled for rubbing her face against his jaw. Smooth, hot skin fed the need, just as the rush of his scent filled her senses and soothed the hunger.

"Why did you shave?" she asked, though her voice sounded fevered. Breathless.

"Didn't want to hurt you," he whispered and for the first time, she understood his control was costing him. His voice was practically a hiss.

"I liked it." The prickle against her skin had felt like dozens of caresses at once.

"Next time," he replied, nuzzling her back finally. She shuddered at his breath on her neck. Leaped against his weight at his hot lick against her pulse.

"I want to touch you." She almost moved him, bracing her feet to the mattress and lifting her hips.

"Remember what I told you about Wolves in Heat?"

Unpredictable. Dangerous...

"I wouldn't hurt you," she whispered, a wisp of pain getting past the desperation.

"Not on purpose," he agreed, running his fangs along her neck. His tongue caressed one particular spot gently before he settled to suck.

She arched hard this time, her feet pulling the sheet and blanket from between them another few inches. His hold on her wrists tightened and he made a sound she could only call a pleased growl.

He's enjoying this!

She thrashed harder, rucking the blankets farther down until the bare skin of her belly met the rough edge of his jeans. He sucked harder at her neck.

"Pale!" The blankets were a nonissue now. She drew her knees up on either side of his hips, fitting herself to the hard ridge her body instinctively craved.

She wanted to claw the clothes off him. Wanted them torn to shreds until there was only golden skin and sweat. And she wanted it *now*.

"Easy, Jade." He drew her hands over her head, grasping both her wrists in one hand so he could trail the other over her arm. She whimpered again beneath the gentle caress. Gentle wasn't what she wanted. What she knew he could give. But he gave her no choice and she could only lie there, watching him as his eyes mapped her breasts as if he were making plans for every centimeter before him.

Time seemed to stop as he drank in her fair skin against the rose red of her nipples, each an excruciatingly turgid point. His smile spread with each shift of his gaze.

If she'd thought him devastating before, there were no words for his appeal now.

I wouldn't have guessed he had dimples...

His large palm settled gently over one mound. She held her breath, trying to remain still, but he was so slow, she thought she'd die before he finished cupping her.

"Perfect," he rumbled, testing the weight. His thumb circled the hard peak, and she bit her lip to keep from crying out. No matter how she tried to stay still, her trembling increased to a quake.

"Please, Pale. Do...*something*." Anything to salve the need.

His smile faded, but she could tell his pleasure hadn't. His eyes remained trained on hers as he slowly, torturously, grazed her right nipple with his bottom lip.

She would *not* whimper for him again.

His tongue snaked out to lap at her, wrapping around the edge and pulling the tip into his mouth. A soft tug and he let go. And smiled.

So he thought he could play with her? She clasped her legs around his waist, rolling her hips against him. He winced, but she didn't think she'd hurt him. His big body rocked against her, the pressure sending bolts of excitement through her where he rubbed into her heated folds. Oh, yes, this was better. She pressed her hips to his again, reveling in his reactionary thrust.

Wet heat encircled her nipple, playfulness gone. He suckled, hard, and when she arched this time, it had nothing to do with pushing his boundaries. He let go of one hand—or he lost his grip, she wasn't sure—but rather than fight him, she slid her fingers into his hair and pulled him closer. Sounds she'd never heard before filled her ears. Deep growls she could feel in her own chest. His

hand found her hip, gripped tight and guided her to roll into his thrust so she could feel him from her aching entrance to the throbbing point that made her gasp. He switched breasts, the cool air on the abandoned tip a stark sensory jolt.

He ground against her, but it wasn't enough. She needed more. Him. Inside.

Her other hand slipped free, leaving her one of two options. Tear the clothes off him. Or grab whatever she could reach and hold on...

The remaining fabric of his shirt gave way with little resistance. She filled her hands with his smooth skin, pulling him down to her. "More," she breathed, thrashing as he slid down over her belly.

Distantly, she heard the tray crash off the end of the bed, but all that fully registered was the scrape of claws on her hips, warm hands holding her thighs open wide. A dark, wet kiss made light flash behind her tightly closed lids. His tongue slipped between the folds of her sex, curving through her, soothing and tightening the tension in her body, both at the same time.

Whimpers escaped without ceasing when he dipped into her entrance, lapping as if he'd found the sweetest of water. Jade clawed the pillow behind her head, panting and trying not to scream when he'd slip back to the top and suck on the sharpest point of her need, then head back down to dip inside her. Over and over again, until she was sure this was madness. A dream. A wild, desperate fantasy.

"Sing for me, little Wolf," he murmured, gently gliding his fingertips over the wet lips before parting them. He found the small pearl there, caressed it with his

tongue...then sucked it between his lips and drew on it as he had her breast.

Her brain completely disconnected from reality.

Colors such as even she'd never seen filled her mental vision. She clamped her legs around his shoulders, lifting herself to his mouth, shuddering now as the Heat he'd ignited in her became the conflagration she'd sensed inside, filling her at every point, then overflowing until she felt like a star of light, streaking through the sky. When it finally ebbed, when she sagged back down to the bed, her throat was raw and her body languid. Boneless. Not even her own.

She opened heavy lids to see Pale sitting on his haunches, a smile of complete self-satisfaction on his face.

Considering her current state, she couldn't quite blame him.

He licked his lips, a Wolf to the core, and shrugged out of the torn shirt, baring his wide pectoral muscles and the dark hair sprinkled there. It arrowed down the center of him, over the ripples of his abdominal muscles and disappeared into the waist of his jeans. His hands moved to the button there and her gaze snapped back up to meet his.

"You didn't think we were finished, did you?"

The fire in her began to build again. Stronger. Faster. The hollowness at her core ached more than before. Since she couldn't quite speak, she simply let her eyes follow the lengths of his arms to where he'd freed himself from the bonds of his clothes. The denim still clung to his hips, but loosely because the zipper had been pulled down all the way. In his hand, being stroked slowly, was the heavy erection she'd felt but never been free to claim. Blush

colored, thick and definitely urgent, she waited for the sense of concern to swamp her as it had in the shower. Nothing came, nothing but curiosity and want.

Deep, unquenchable want.

Pale waited. For a signal? Some sign she should know how to give, but didn't? The Instinct he was so insistent on didn't seem inclined to fill her in. Words didn't come to mind, nothing that didn't sound stupid or naïve, and she had no intention of asking for direction. He'd led enough. So she did the most direct thing she could think of.

Sliding her legs together, once, twice, she parted them in invitation and waited.

He didn't move, but he definitely looked at her, open there for him. Tempted to cover herself, she slid her fingers downward to the dark curls still moist from his kiss and her release. His eyes followed the motion and she noticed he'd stopped breathing. Interesting.

Her fingertips found her flesh. She quaked at the contact because her nerves felt like live wires, but it was worth it when the hand he held himself with tightened and his big body shook as well. She stroked herself, sliding her fingers the same way he'd moved his tongue on her, and just kept from rolling her head in delirium. When her finger slid inside, though, he finally lost his restraint.

Roaring forward, he took hold of her hand and came down on her, pinning it over her head. "Temptress," he growled against her neck, his fangs pressing into her skin. Lower, his erection pressed against her entrance, far thicker than her own slender touch. "I hope you're ready, Jade, because I've got very little control left."

It probably wasn't wise, but she felt reckless. She pulled his face up to hers with her free hand and met his glowing gaze. "You don't need any."

She took his mouth for her own.

He pushed inside, taking her as well.

She gasped against him at the inexorable movement, her eyes stinging as her body stretched around him. She could feel him on all sides, the thick head of him tunneling forward inch after inch. Her claws sank into his shoulders as something deep inside tore away and he finally stopped.

They both took a shuddering breath, but he ended his with a kiss, soft and chaste and so different from how their bodies strained to fit together. "I didn't want to hurt you."

"You're not," she lied. But it was a good lie. The pain was fading, leaving only a sense of fullness in its wake.

He made a sound of mild disbelief, but that was okay too. She never expected him to believe her.

"More, Pale." She licked the corner of his lips. "More."

His eyes closed, but he pressed deeper, as she wanted. Her breasts rubbed his chest, the feel of his skin almost as hot as the heat of his mouth. Almost as satisfying.

He kept driving forward, slow and smooth. He lowered his forehead to hers. "How deep will you take me, sweet Jade?"

"I want all of you." Body, soul, stubborn male pride and all. Everything he had to give. Maybe it was the Instinct claiming him, but it felt like more. Like a choice she'd made the moment she first kissed him. Surrender. In

her heart, that knowledge burned, but pleased too. A brand on her soul she'd placed there herself.

All that she was, all that she'd ever be, she gave to him. "For always."

He stole a kiss and proceeded to take her breath along with it, burying himself completely. He rolled against her, tentatively pulling away, then surging back home. Jade looped her arm around his neck, senses scattered.

What started small became a fluid motion, their bodies rocking together. Pale rose up on his hands again, his thrusts no longer gentle, but rough and deep. Long strokes she rode, eyes closed, body moving completely free of her mind.

"God, Jade," he groaned as they pounded against each other.

She could feel the release coming, feel him swelling within her, and it was all she could do to hold on. Just a little longer. A little harder. And then—

White light filled her, like power but pleasure—honeyed and drugging—instead. It overwhelmed her...*became* her. Mindless with sensation, her claws dragged into his back and her fangs sank deep into his shoulder. All at once, that empty part of her was gone. An altogether new sense of him surged through her, bringing with it a new sense of herself. In an instant, her entire being changed. Re-formed. Rejoiced. She heard her name, felt his body shudder and rack in her hold.

Then the world became still.

She slept. Pale lay behind her, propped on one hand, tracing the curves of her arm with one finger. He kept a

steady watch on the shadows creeping through his window. Sunset was coming. She'd wake up soon. He'd gotten the four hours he needed, off and on, between the times he made love to her, driven by the now completed bond to stamp her indelibly. By his own uncontainable hunger for her dark beauty and endless passion. He'd intended to wait before taking her again, to comfort her by setting her in a warm bath to soak away the soreness he'd no doubt caused. But she hadn't wanted to be alone and there went all his plans to be gentlemanly.

He'd never been good at waiting anyway.

Or being a gentleman, for that matter.

Now the late sun painted her gold and set up all kinds of strange new imaginations in his mind. He wasn't a romantic man. He had no fanciful thoughts and about the only thing he could claim to be creative about were his artful placements of bruises on anyone who'd wronged him or those he protected. But something about this small woman with her yards of silky black hair, still damp, inspired the strangest fascinations.

He could spend all day studying just one inch of her at a time. Learning the exact curve of her cheek as it sloped into that impossibly stubborn chin. Memorizing the plane of her shoulder as it led to her toned biceps, complete with that strange red tattoo. He rubbed his finger over it, surprised to find the spot...warmer. He stared at the design for a long while, touching the scrollwork lines and wondering at the four solid little dots. Far more ornate than any mark he'd ever seen nature make on skin. Beautiful, though, just like the rest of her. Perfectly fitting. *His*. Even better, he was hers. Finally.

This was not what he'd expected bonding to be like.

He'd expected his own emasculation to be at least somewhat disconcerting. At this point, he was as close as he could come to being overjoyed. The emptiness in his heart was gone. In its place he could feel her, her soul—her life and energy—connected to his own. The Instinct was never wrong, no matter how the males of his species tried to bend their fates to their own will. From now on, where one ended, the other began. The fairy tales his mother had told all made a different kind of sense now. They weren't hopeless dreams. They were a reality. *His* reality.

Maybe he *could* build a real life, wake up with his mate every day and sleep with her every night, knowing that he'd kept her safe and the satisfaction that it brought. His life could be fulfilling instead of the vast emptiness of death, responsibility and failure. Those things would come—he wasn't capable of that much optimism—but he wouldn't bear them alone. They'd face each together, part of each other, until death took them both.

Except...she hadn't promised to stay.

He frowned, thinking past the unusual sense of contentedness. She'd offered herself, accepted to be his and no one else's. Even accepted that she'd bear his children, was likely already breeding...

But she'd never said she'd *stay*.

Inwardly, anger began to bloom. No, not anger. Betrayal. For all that she'd accepted him, she still considered herself Sibile. Still believed she had to return to her place there, taking his child to be raised by people who would hate it, while leaving him to pine for her until he died. Most likely of blue balls.

Shit.

"I can *feel* you brooding, you know," she mumbled against his pillow.

Pale looked down, glad that her lashes were still dusting her cheeks. It gave him time to school his expression back into one that gave nothing away. He still had her. There was time yet to convince her. Now that the bonding was complete, he had biology on his side. Biology was something he knew how to use.

Her eyes opened slowly, brows already rising as he gently stroked down the length of her bare belly. She brought a small hand up to scrub over her lashes as she rolled onto her back, her warm body sliding in place against his stomach.

"Your face is prickly again." Her hand touched his stubble affectionately and she smiled up at him. Sweet. Unsuspecting. Completely unaware that the sheet had slipped down and bared a small reddish nipple to his attention. A shadow darkened her eyes and she sobered. "Thinking about the case?"

Not even remotely. For the past several hours, he'd been able to think of nothing more than sliding inside her and making her scream with ecstasy. He considered informing her there was no way he could let her go back to her Order, or anywhere near the psychopath who chopped women into pieces for his own sick pleasure, but both options were sure to start an argument that would ruin what they'd shared. This time couldn't be marred with anger. Or even his own resentment that she still sought to leave him. This might be the only time they had for peace.

So though he wanted to say all those things—any of those things—life was not something that listened to Pale Rysen. And his moments of self-delusion were over.

All he said, voice strangling on the words, was, “It’s dusk.”

Chapter Sixteen

Pale dressed quickly, barely looking at her before walking out of the room, leaving Jade confused and alone in the bed. She frowned, going over the events of the day in her mind, but no answer came to the forefront.

This must be why men were not allowed to make decisions among the Sibile.

Not that the Sibile were making a world of sense lately either.

She'd dreamed of Jalla again. Unlike her last dream, Jade hadn't been surprised to see the older woman. As before, the invisible wall kept them apart, but Jalla hadn't been reliving a memory.

She'd been sitting in the middle of a white mist, dressed in full regalia, her black velvet robe wrapped around her, her blue eyes looking tired. All of her looked tired. "You've chosen your mate."

Jade could only nod, wanting with all her being to cross to the older woman and find out what was wrong. Her eyes filled with tears when Jalla smiled.

"Then it's time."

"Time for what?"

Jalla's mouth pursed in censure. "You will never survive this if you purposely blind yourself, Jade-Scarlet."

"I'm not. I—"

Jalla raised her brow and Jade fell silent. "You were born for a purpose. We all are. This is yours."

But she didn't want this purpose. Couldn't bear the weight of it. "Does the Tribunal know?"

"No one knows and that is how it will stay." Her authoritative tone couldn't be argued with. "No one but us and the ghosts who told you."

Not told. *Showed*. Shared. Without mercy. The remembered agony of those deaths would follow her for the rest of her life. "Why haven't you told them?" The deaths, all of them—shifters included—could have been avoided.

"Because it is not my destiny to stop this killer, or theirs. It is *yours*."

No. No one could be so callous. So cold. But as she met Jalla's unrepentant stare, she knew that the other woman had been exactly that cold. "How could you let them, all of them, go to their deaths?" The Wolves, little more than children. And the *others*... "How could you decide that?"

"I didn't. The decision was never mine. It was his and he made it."

"You could have stopped him."

Jalla shook her head. "Some things we cannot afford to change. This is the path we had to take. The only one."

"But—"

Jalla raised her hand. "This dream won't last much longer. Ask the questions you really want to ask, *chère*. There won't be time for more."

She struggled to quell the need to rail, to demand how this had been laid at her feet. But Jalla was right. Fate did not believe in argument. And there were bigger fears on the horizon. "How can I possibly stop him?"

"Become light." So simple. So easy.

“That’s not an answer, Jalla.” An answer would have been telling her how.

“It is, if you trust yourself. This mate of yours, he’s unlocked more than your heart. Believe in the gift he’s given you.”

Jade looked down at her hands, extending her fingers to see her claws. He had opened her heart, changed her, but nothing could make her what he needed. “Pale wants a Wolf, not a Sibile.”

“No, my dear. He wants you. Just as you are.”

Jade scoffed. Because a woman who constantly pushed his set boundaries was his idea of perfection. “He’s not like us.”

Jalla’s laugh was the first truly happy note Jade had heard from her. “Men never are, *chère*.”

“I don’t mean like that—”

“You mean he expects to be dominant. Your mother had the same problem.” Sadness drifted through the wall between them, swelling Jade’s tears until they fell over her cheeks. “She found a solution. I’m sure you will as well.”

“Was she—?”

Jalla waited, unwilling as usual to answer unspoken questions, though she always knew what you were trying to ask.

Jade forced herself, curling her fingers into tight fists. “Was my mother happy? Did she ever regret what she gave up to be with him?”

For the first time in years, Jalla’s smile curved with approval. “Oh yes, *chère*. She was happy. *Loved*, by a very good man. When you were born, she was at her happiest. You fulfilled the only part of her life that was still empty.” Her smile faded, stained by memories she

didn't seem inclined to share. "There are always regrets in the road not chosen. The path you decide not to take. But if she had had the choice, I know in my heart she would not have changed a thing."

"How?" Jade demanded, her own senses telling her the dream was coming to a close. "How do you know that?"

"Because no matter how many times I looked into her future, she never had a fate without him."

"What about me? What about my future?"

Jalla's eyes took on a glitter Jade couldn't decipher, except that she knew the woman she loved like a mother wouldn't tell her. "Become light, young *Lucescere*."

"Wait." But just as the time before, Jalla began to fade and, when Jade opened her eyes, Pale had been staring down at her inscrutably.

And then he was gone too.

Jade scrubbed at her face, deciding that the next person who couldn't simply say what was wrong with them was going to feel the hot edge of her temper. Old lady or Wolf, she didn't care.

Nothing was right in the world. She'd betrayed the Order by not returning to them right after regaining consciousness outside the morgue and, despite Pale's strange mood, she was going to betray them and Jalla both to him before she let him leave this house. He was facing something unimaginable in this Woodsman, something even the Sibile had no idea could exist. She should be afraid, terrified. Yet, as she lay there, her body aching in strange new places, in strange new ways, she still felt...happy. Whole.

Maybe men weren't the only strange beings in the universe.

Her muscles protesting, she rolled into a sitting position and began to look around for her clothes. Her pack sagged in a chair next to the window, her robe folded neatly next to it. Beneath the chair, her boots sat in the gathering shadows. Her brow wrinkled as she recognized how much thoughtfulness he'd put into arranging her things. As if he cared for them the way she would. Strange, strange Wolf.

Shrugging, she reached for the bag. Aches sharpened. With a sigh, she checked the sky. Not full dark, but dark enough for the basics. Bowing her head, she reached inward for power and found it quickly, almost as if it were already surging. Her eyes opened with her surprise. She felt stronger. No, *changed*. Her power, for all its uniqueness and force, had always been a struggle to harness. But now it was just...there. *Unlocked*.

Jalla's explanation echoed in her mind. Pale had done it. But how?

Closing her eyes again, she decided not to second-guess it. Instead, she focused on colors. *White...*

No sooner did she imagine it, the cool freshness of healing, and it manifested, holding without effort. All over her, her skin tingled, warmed, then the feeling dissipated. When she opened her eyes again, every ache was gone.

Something strange was going on. Her gift never took the pain completely. She took her pack into the bathroom to shower. Clean, she pulled a change of clothes from her pack, going through her ablutions as quickly as possible. Pale came back into the room as she was pulling her boots on. His eyes widened as he took in her outfit, all white

this time, but the same as the other two colors she'd worn in his presence.

"Where are you planning on going?" he asked, apparently tucking his surprise away. So much for gathering any information from his face, like normal people. Switching to her gift, his color was subdued as well, staying close to him and out of her reach.

If he insisted on ignoring what had happened between them, she could do the same. For now, there was something more important to discuss. "We need to talk."

His eyes narrowed. "About what?"

She gathered her hair in one hand behind her head, doubting he had any kind of hair ties lying around. Maybe there was one in her bag. She moved toward it again. "About the Woodsman."

"No." He crossed his arms when she spun back around to look at him in shock. "You're not on the case anymore."

"Excuse me?"

"It's too dangerous."

She couldn't help it, she laughed. Not hard, not happily, but a laugh all the same. Jalla insisted and Pale denied. No one seemed to be interested in asking if she *wanted* to face this killer. Because she didn't. But that didn't mean she had a choice. "It's not up to you."

"You're damn right it is. You're my mate." A word he said with too much relish for her not to feel a tingle of pleasure course down her spine. But tingles did not render her stupid...or weak.

"And you're mine," she answered evenly, opening her pack as she'd intended. The words seemed to soothe him. At least, until she spoke again, pulling out her brush

and the bands she kept on its handle. "Mating hasn't changed what has to be done."

"What are you doing?" he grumbled, opting to change the subject.

"I have to re-braid my hair. Which I plan to do while we talk about the Woodsman."

He made a face, one he wiped away before she could smile at him for it. If they survived this killer, she really would have to find out what was wrong with him.

He sat on the bed. "Fine, talk. But you're not getting involved beyond that. Not after last night."

"Why not? I'm not in danger of attracting Wolf hordes anymore, am I?"

The interesting thing about his beard being gone was that she could now see his jaw working with frustration when she asked a question he didn't like. Much easier than feeling his color and being drawn into his inexhaustible desires.

"I'll take that as a no. And since I have no plans to go anywhere near any more ghosts, I'll be perfectly safe." She sat in the chair facing him and brushed the ends of her hair. If she kept her hands busy, chances were better he wouldn't see them shake. "Just listen, all right? I have to tell you some things and you can never tell anyone else. The Order is a secret society for a reason. They've killed for less." A fact she knew better than many of the others. She waited for Pale's nod, however slight. Accepting that, she parted her hair and began to plait along one side.

"As you know, the Sibile are a matriarchal culture. Sons have been bred, but they have little to no say. About anything. The reason is because males don't manifest gifts. What no one talks about is the fact that we are all

slaves, gifted or not. In our world, *no one* has a say of their own.”

He frowned, probably because he couldn't comprehend a world where he didn't decide his own life, but one existed. And no one would change it.

“Socially, we are controlled by the Order, which trains our women to use our gifts for the betterment of our people. Completing the training raises the social status of our families. It's important not to fail.”

“Because you're rented out like mercenaries,” he grumbled.

“Yes.” No point in arguing. Scarlets were mercenaries of the most powerful kind. “Part of each fee goes to the support of our family, extended and personal. Families without appreciably gifted females have to earn their livings another way in the enclave. They're looked down on, eventually bred out.”

“Survival of the fittest.” A concept he knew well.

“But the Order doesn't control us as individuals. The Tribunal does. They decide everything for our people. They assign leaders to the Order in each enclave, decide our place and our functions. They maintain the peace, prosperity and security of every enclave in the world. They are spread out among all the communities and they only meet in person for the most serious situations. Right now, they are *all* in my enclave. Waiting.”

“What about your Praemonere person?”

“Jalla-Rouge?”

“She has a name?”

She nodded. “Jalla's the most powerful precognitor in six generations. She's a member of the Tribunal, but she's a law unto herself to anyone who knows her because

she follows her visions unerringly.” Jade pulled in a deep breath, a jagged stone in her stomach now that she knew *exactly* how unerringly. “As far as I know, only she has ever lived to disobey them.” Though there had been prices the other woman had to pay, prices she never allowed herself to discuss.

“So humans aren’t the only ones who rule through fear.”

If only it were that simple. “Their decrees aren’t about creating fear, they are about what *is*. That’s what makes them so powerful. What they say as a group becomes fact. It’s the way of the Rouge.”

He wasn’t understanding. His frown created deep lines around his mouth.

“Your people would kill for the scent of a female in season. The Tribunal will kill to preserve their way of life against those who would destroy it. It’s a brutal world, Pale. You know that better than anyone.”

He didn’t like it, but she watched him accept it. “What’s the difference between a Rouge and a scarlet?”

“To achieve scarlet, rigorous training and tests are given. If you pass, you’re granted a cloak and allowed out into the human world on a case-by-case basis. The rest of the time, you study, increase your skill and knowledge and raise your family.”

“And a Rouge?”

“They’re the strongest of our people. Gifted with *unlimited* power. Only those scarlets with the greatest potential are allowed to attempt the Rouge trials and even then, they wait decades to try. The tests are so dangerous, failing usually means death. Once they’ve passed, an accepted Rouge becomes a member of the Tribunal.

Together, if they deem something to be true, it *is* true. Or becomes so.”

He was a smart man, this Wolf who could consume her with only a half-lidded glance. It didn’t take him long to put two and two together. “Your parents.”

She nodded. “Information about the society became known and released in a series of articles in a national newspaper when I was five. The information could not have been known by anyone who was not part of the Order. My mother was the only scarlet to have ever left them. The Tribunal deemed her defection a danger and declared them both dead in their eyes. Three days later, a man came into our home and killed them. Later he killed himself because he had no idea why he’d committed the crime.”

His gaze flickered. Did he wonder at the lack of emotion in her voice as she relayed the information? Should she tell him of the nights she cried, as silently as possible, mourning for parents the Order openly viewed as traitors? Did he know the kind of fear she had lived with every day, waiting for her parents’ judgment to be brought on to her head? Or would telling him just make him hurt for the years of pain he couldn’t take away?

“Why are you telling me all this?” Simple enough question.

Very complicated answer. “Because I want you to fully understand what you risk if you help me.”

His enigmatic eyes narrowed. “Help you what?”

She finished the second braid. With surprisingly steady hands, she twined the two braids together. In fact, as she’d spoken, a calm like none she’d ever known covered her. Or maybe it was just purpose. Using the

band at the end, she secured the plaits. Taking the second band off her wrist, she held the ends to her nape and looped it into place. All the while, Pale watched silently. Patient again. Finally, she could put it off no longer.

“I need you to help me stop a Rouge.”

“The Woodsman is a *Rouge*?” Pale tried to force the puzzle pieces together in his mind, but nothing fit. “How do you know what he is?”

Her eyes turned dark. As if a world of misery were locked tight inside her. He almost pulled her into his arms, but every signal she had was blaring to keep his hands off. If he thought she was doing it in rejection, he’d be angry. He could read her fragility. Whatever she was going to ask of him, it was taking all her strength to force it out. Someday, someday she’d understand that there was nothing she could ask that he wouldn’t do for her.

Except let her go.

“When you started outlining the crimes, certain facts stood out right away, but I thought they were coincidence.”

“There’s no such thing as coincidence.” Not in his experience.

Her lips curved slightly. “I’m starting to realize that.” Much as he liked that subtle grin, how it seemed to say finding him was no coincidence, it faded quickly. “Or maybe I just didn’t want to face what was right in front of me, I don’t know. But I should have realized.”

“Realized what?”

“When you mentioned the triangle cut into the arms,” she answered. “I should have put it together. It was too specific to ignore, but I was so tied up in keeping our secrets, I dismissed it.”

Pale thought back. He'd known something had caught her attention. He'd even asked about it, but when she'd claimed it was nothing, he let it go as well, his mind clouded by Heat instead of the matter at hand. It was clear to him now, though. The two-inch wide shape, just wide enough to fit a red tattoo... He stood, restless energy inundating him while understanding froze the blood in his veins. "The victims are Sibile."

"Scarlets," she corrected solemnly. "He hunted them. He killed them. These four weren't the first. I think he just let you know he was killing so he could lure in more."

Questions bombarded Pale until he didn't know where to begin. "But you said it was a Rouge. How can it be a man?"

Fear, the first true fear he'd sensed from her, filled the room. "I've told you how a signature works. It's emotional, the stronger the emotion, the stronger the signature. Just like a shifter is different from a human, the Sibile are different from shifters. Maybe it's the strength of the magic that gives us our abilities, I don't know. Humans don't have enough to leave more than an emotional impression. Shifters...your signature is a living extension of your life force. It's almost an extension of your will. For the Sibile, though...it's even more than that. A scarlet's power is in her blood. Part of her body, part of her soul. Power is far stronger than a signature. Wherever her blood is, *she* is. Do you understand?"

The strangers looking out through her eyes in the morgue. They hadn't been figments of his imagination. They'd been real women, trapped in the pieces of their bodies by their own magic.

She must have seen the horror on his face because she pursed her lips and released a careful breath. "When we die, there's a ceremony that releases our souls from our bodies. Without it, we'd remain trapped. That's what he's done to them. On purpose, he's forced them into a hell no one can even imagine."

"You can, though, can't you?" Pale closed his eyes, his chest tightening into a vise around his heart. There was no way to shelter her, protect her from something like that. He wouldn't even know where to begin. Helplessness crouched on his shoulders like a steel weight.

All their fear, all their pain, shadows of what they saw and did, they had forced her to relive, and all he'd done was hold her for the violation. For the first time in his life, Pale was almost violently ill where he stood. "Does that mean they're still there? Still trapped in that morgue?"

Jade shook her head. "Not anymore. When the ghosts took me over, those traces of their souls were freed."

"Is that what happens in that ceremony? Someone goes through what you did?" He couldn't picture what that kind of horror must do to a soul, over and over again. Or maybe he just didn't want to.

"Normally it's a beautiful ceremony, a peaceful release. I don't have that gift, though." Her expression darkened. "My gift siphons them out, like a magnet. Violently. Painfully, for all of us. That's why I was unnerved when I found out what kind of case this was. You were right, on the mountain. I do feel the deathblows, I hurt the same as the victim. Humans and shifters take me over, but with the Sibile...with them I rip the soul

right out of the signature. It's not what my gift was meant for, just an uncontrollable side effect."

One he'd never have her face again, if he had his way. He wanted to touch her, soothe her, and normally, he would have. But she looked so fragile, as if it were taking everything she had to explain this to him. And it was important to her to get it out. He'd already screwed up making her go through it. He could make himself listen as the poison of it all seeped free. "So what did these ghosts tell you?"

She blinked, giving the tiniest shudder as she refocused from the nightmare to the facts. "He took them from their beds. Snatched them right out of their lives, without warning. They woke up in the dark, naked on cold metal tables, already fearing him, even as they tried to curse him. It was no use. They were all powerless against him.

"Once he had them, he cut them while they were still alive. Bled them slowly," she continued, her husky voice flat and emotionless. Nothing like the vibrant being who'd spent hours twining his emotions around her soft body. "He took their *volos* first, to strip away the symbol of their power."

The mark, he guessed, confirming it when she clasped her hand over hers.

"You're not answering the question." And it was an important one. He needed all the pieces to the puzzle if he were going to help her. Hell, to find out if he *could*. If not, he didn't care who he might have to fight to take her somewhere safe. He'd kill each and every member of her damn Order if he had to.

She sat perfectly motionless, keeping the lines of her body close. Ankles and knees pressed together, hands now lowered onto her lap. Her scarlet pose. Emotionless. Peaceful. Eerily still. Pale closed his fingers into fists so as not to shake her. She couldn't be his Wolf right now, no matter how much he wanted her to be.

"How can it be a man if males can't use power?"

"Just because males can't manifest gifts doesn't mean they can't *contain* power." She lifted her head, pride sharpening every rigid line of her. "The Sibile are *meant* to be powerful beings, all of us. I don't know if it was always like this or if the breeding practices made the men this way, but Sibile men are essentially empty vessels. Empty vessels can be used. Sons are either mated, relegated to work, or cast out upon maturity. I believe a castoff has learned how to fill an empty vessel."

Pale actually felt the color leach from his face. *The women were drained... Our power is in the blood...*

Jade nodded again, her golden eyes haunted. Now he knew why. "He's cannibalizing them to fill himself, using stolen gifts to trap the next victim. And the next. And the next."

Pale ran both hands through his hair, almost wishing nothing like this had ever crossed his path. But if it hadn't, he wouldn't have her... "How many gifts are we talking about here. Four scarlets..." Shit, *one* had decimated a stone compound.

"He's taken more than four because he'd never have been able to get *them* if there hadn't been others first. These four were strong and they'd had no chance. The only way for him to handle that much power is if he's a vessel the size of a Rouge. And before you ask, a Rouge's range is...unspeakable."

Pale allowed himself a second or two to think. “Why is he killing Wolves, then? They can’t give him anything.”

Jade shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe he kills the scarlets for the power that he uses to kill for pleasure. I think it’s safe to say he’s precognitive, though. It explains how he knew where they’d be on those nights. How he knew someone was coming for him.”

All those girls, killed for sport. It would fit with the killer’s tendency to abandon the bodies the way a child did his broken toys. That was almost worse than dying in the genocide. The prospect that they’d never had a chance to catch him didn’t make him feel any better. “Why would someone with that kind of...capacity—” the concept still sounded strange, “—be cast out?”

She didn’t seem to have any solid answers. “It’s difficult to say. The Order may have felt he wasn’t controllable or compatible. He might have had reproductive difficulties. There might simply have been too many males for the available females and he wasn’t chosen. There are a million reasons to reject a male.”

Pale almost felt a smile tug the corner of his lips. At least some things about women were universal.

But the thought wasn’t light enough to remove him from the grim truth of what they faced. Whatever this bastard’s reason, he was out there and he was hunting scarlets. Likely hunting *Jade*, whether he knew if she was on the case yet or not. He was waiting for the next scarlet and he’d been a step ahead of them every moment of this sick game.

Pale refused to allow his mate to become another victim.

“Let’s get you back to your enclave then. You can tell your Tribunal what you’ve found. It’s a Sibile matter. Let them handle him.”

She moved her head to the side once in each direction, her eyes telling him she knew what he was trying to do. “Even if they believed me, there’s no way of knowing how or when his justice would come. How many others of the Order will he kill before it happens? How many unsuspecting Wolves?” She tilted her head, a gleam in her eye just this side of feral. “You’re hunting him, making *you* his enemy. That makes you the Order’s enemy as well.”

He reeled back. “How the hell does that work?”

“The Tribunal will not allow you or anyone else to know anything about them, least of all something like this. If it got out that all any male needed to do was wait for a scarlet to pass and steal her life, our society would fall into chaos. This knowledge is sacred. They can never know that you understand what’s happened.”

She reached into a pocket on the side of her pants, pulling out a small cloth pouch he recognized from the day she’d set her hand on fire. It held the largest of her gems, a diamond so large, clear and flawless he wouldn’t have believed it was real if he hadn’t held it in his hand. She held out to him. “My mother left this for me, she said it would protect me. I know you hate these, but I want you to keep it.”

The hair on the back of his neck lifted again, not in warning so much as awareness. The lights overhead flared, the elements inside starting to jangle with strain. He knew the energy was coming from her, magnifying through the stone she wasn’t even really touching. The determination on her face left no doubt. “Why?”

“Because you’re as hunted as me now. Either he’ll kill you or they will. I can’t let that happen. If this stone is as powerful as she said, with you is where it belongs.” She raised the pouch higher. “Please.”

Hers to protect.

Pale circled the bed and picked her up in his arms. Her cheeks turned his favorite shade of red as he kissed her, his heart full of so many things he couldn’t say. Not yet. So he kissed her again and felt the rest of his soul become hers.

Chapter Seventeen

Pale didn't like losing arguments. He stalked through the police station looking ready to bite people. Jade followed, her face in shadow from the hood of her cloak. Which was good because he wouldn't appreciate her smile as she watched him lead.

They'd argued about her wearing it the entire way over from his house. The cloak made her a target, he'd insisted. The cloak was her strongest defense, she'd reminded him, adding that she'd already been seen by Kroft. Better safe than dead. Pale kept fighting her until she climbed on his lap after he parked in the police lot, licking his lips as she promised to remain at his side while he tried more traditional means to identify the Woodsman. If she didn't have to track him herself, she'd have less chance of becoming a victim. The offer didn't pacify him, but he knew he didn't have much choice if he didn't want her out on the street as a blindingly red target.

The people in the department gave her a wide berth, wider than the one given Pale. She decided to keep that gratifying bit of knowledge to herself. For now.

He indicated the chair in front of his desk with a grunt. She took the seat as if he'd pulled it out for her, hands folded as was proper. From under the shadow of the hood, she could watch him, bemused. If he needed to be commanding so he could feel a little more in control of the situation, she could stand it. The unlikely calm was still in her, leaving her temper blissfully asleep.

“What are we looking at?” she asked when Pale shifted a stack of files her way on the desk.

“*You’re* not looking at anything.” He moved another stack. She finally realized he wasn’t offering her the files. He was clearing the paper away from a scuffed and slightly dented computer. “I hate these things.”

“I’m sure the feeling is mutual,” she replied, watching him begin to type with hammer force. They didn’t have computers in the enclave, but she’d read about them in the books and magazines others had returned with. Somehow she’d pictured something a little more...stylish. Then again, she thought with a wince, perhaps Pale’s older, sturdier model was chosen by necessity. “How many of these do you crush in a year?”

He snarled openly.

“Pale.” The warning was little more than a breath. She searched the room, reaching with her gift for a sense of alarm from anyone. The signatures remained as stable as before. Various shades of browns, blues, deep greens and grays flowed around people, same as before. She avoided looking at Jorgensen, even with the ease of power in her. She didn’t like his aura any more today than she had when they’d met. What kind of people did that man spend time with?

Since all was well, she centered her attention on Pale again, sending calming colors his way. There was more than the Woodsman case on the line here. Being a homicide detective was his livelihood. A core part of his existence. It wasn’t his fault she brought out the Wolf in him, but he couldn’t keep risking everything because of her.

"Sorry." He didn't sound as though he meant it, but she accepted with a nod. "I'm doing some reverse-investigation. We could never get anywhere with the case because we had no leads on the killer and no leads on the victims. Nothing to connect them. But now we know what the victims were, we can try to see how they might relate to the places they were dumped."

"Not dumped. *Placed*." She tipped back the hood to meet his gaze. "He *wanted* them found. He wants to send the city into a frenzy, enough to contact the Order and request another Sibile. He's sick, but he's smart. Assume every step he takes has been vetted for counter-tactics. He believes he's untouchable and every move is designed to bring him to the next gift."

Pale paused in his typing. She could feel new arguments welling up in him.

"Try it and I'll lick you again."

The small grin on his lips made her bounce a little in her seat as he went back to whatever he was entering into the computer. "Might be worth it to keep Jorgensen from hitting on you."

Her lips twisted and she shuddered.

His smile grew, creating a wholly different feeling to course through her. God, but the man was stunning. "Most women fall all over themselves whenever he's around."

She looked over Pale's shoulder grudgingly, finding the brawny blond already watching her intently. She glanced away quickly, unnerved. "Yes, well, they don't see what I see."

"What *do* you see?" He was reading his screen, flicking his arrow keys and frowning. She stared at him, bemused. He didn't have a clue about his effect on her.

The brand he'd left on her heart warmed as she looked at him. "The better choice."

His eyes shifted from the screen and for a small, perfect moment, there was no case, no Tribunal, no danger to either of them.

Too soon the moment ended, broken when the computer beeped loudly.

He frowned, switching his attention to the screen. He pointed at it for her. "The cases are here. The residence where the last victim was found was the address of a kidnapping, three years ago. The liquor store was the site of a rape and murder six years ago. The fountain was where a body was found eight months ago. Scarlets were commissioned for each of them." He tapped the arrow button on the bottom corner of his keyboard. "None of these cases are closed."

Jade straightened. "How many cases involving scarlets are still open?"

He did more clicking and typing. "Nine, spread over the last fifteen years since our county started consulting with them. Including the Woodsman." He stared at the screen, but she knew he wasn't seeing it. "Failed scarlets. A rejected Rouge..." He turned to face her, the movement so sharp she moved backward in response. "He's punishing them."

"What?"

"Stripping them of their gifts, right? Removing the tattoo. He's ensuring they suffer, helpless, even after they die. It's punishment for failure. They were given gifts, accepted into the society that rejected him, but they weren't worthy. He kills them, then he rewards himself with their power."

And like any other Rouge, any other member of the Tribunal, he needed no one else to justify his decisions. "His decree is law," she whispered. They stared silently at each other, the probability that he was right sinking in.

"But having an idea what he's doing doesn't lead us to him," Pale grumbled. "Not directly."

"You can build a profile." She considered where to start. "He's someone with access to police files."

"Someone with a strong sense of anatomy. The limbs were all bisected at specific points and joints. Perfectly," he added. "No easy feat with an axe."

"He'd need medical supplies to do the draining efficiently. Somewhere they could do the cutting that no one would hear the screams." A shadow of what the other scarlets had gone through rippled over her. Remembered fear led to another thought. The white Wolf from the night before. "Has anyone questioned Mitch Kroft?"

Pale's eyes widened. "He's a bastard, but he's no murderer. And he's a Wolf to the bone. There's no way he was cast out of a Sibile enclave."

"Didn't you say he's not from here? He could be a half-breed, like me. He wouldn't tell you."

Pale shook his head. "There's no one like you."

"He had a pack of rapists at the ready." She'd put nothing past a man like that.

"He wouldn't be the first. Strange things happen when nature gets screwed with." Which only proved her point. His mouth quirked, conceding. "I don't think so. There's the fact that he's a Wolf. Wolves don't fly. Besides, wouldn't you have seen the power in him? Or that black signature you talked about? Wouldn't it have been all over the morgue, following him like slime?"

True, but she wasn't willing to give in just yet. This killer had already done the impossible. Maybe he knew how to mask his signature. The memory of that inky black stain seeping into her flesh streaked through her. "Who knows what he could do with it? That signature was sentient, like yours."

"So were the ones in the morgue that took you over."

Why couldn't any of their information be definitive? She suddenly understood why Pale's computer looked so bedraggled. Kicking it a few times right now was bound to make her feel better. "I've never even *heard* of a male Rouge before this and I've never seen anyone with gifts that weren't their own."

"Rysen!" The captain called from somewhere behind Jade's back. She turned to see him standing just outside his office door. He didn't look happy. "A moment?" An uneasy glance her way before he added, "Alone."

She turned to Pale. No, he didn't like that idea at all. His mouth looked hard, his jaw working as he stared at the man who was his superior as if he could crush him effortlessly. What bothered her was the likelihood that he would.

"I'll wait right here," she offered, hoping to appease him. Pale didn't respond. "Look, you can leave me alone in a squad room for five minutes. Most of the men are more interested in their paperwork than me and the rest are afraid of at least one of us. Nothing's going to happen."

It took a while, but he finally stood up. When his gaze fell on her, it was implacable. "Go *nowhere*."

"Yes, your lord mightiness."

He moved around the desk. He could have gone around the next desk too, but he made it a point to brush against her as he passed behind her chair.

She reached for his leg, grasping the inside of his thigh before he fully moved away. She looked up, happy to find him reassured by the contact. "Don't kill him. I'm pretty sure you'd get fired for that."

The frown came back, but he coupled it with a tug on her braid through the hood. Then he was gone.

Jade waited all of a minute to get up and get behind his desk to see his screen. She'd waited years to touch a computer and now was the best chance she'd get. Unfortunately, there wasn't much to look at. Text, text and more text. The down arrow scrolled the screen to the bottom of the file, she discovered with a glee even she knew was childish. Crime description, dates, evidence record numbers, noted investigators... Beria-Scarlet was the last name added to the list.

Jade hadn't known her well. Beria was several years older. Quiet, even for a well-trained scarlet. But something in her jolted in primal recognition at the name. She'd been one of the ghosts in the morgue.

She clicked the left pointing arrow button Pale had been punishing, pleased again when it switched to another file, and searched for the names of the other women. Women she hadn't even known were missing from the enclave. Did anyone, other than Jalla? The Sibile weren't exactly a warm people, but someone should have noticed these women were gone. *Someone* should have been worried.

In each of the other open files, the scarlets were the last to be listed. Kinne-Scarlet. Dane-Scarlet. Torma-Scarlet. More. Some she'd never known.

When she looked at her fingers again, she realized the name above the scarlet's on the last file was one she recognized—Mitch Kroft. Checking to see if Pale was coming back yet, she flipped back through the other files. Kroft was noted on two of the more recent cases. But another name caught her attention. One that broke her out in a cold sweat, stealing any of the pleasure she'd had in learning something new.

She glanced at the captain's office door. Fifteen feet away. Pale would be angry that she'd moved but it had to be done. Even now, the hair on the back of her neck was tingling, warning of danger in a way she had almost forgotten. Trusting it, she rose slowly and started walking. There wasn't time to worry about his temper. Ten feet. Five. She had her hand raised to knock when a voice whispered behind her. So close she had the suspicion it had actually been in her mind.

"I've always thought nothing was as beautiful as a scarlet's robe."

The door opened, Pale lurching in surprise to find her standing there. Before she could say anything, a meaty hand slid around her throat. Jade clawed at it, Pale already reaching for her, when the world disintegrated in front of her.

An eternity passed before it returned, but not as she'd left it. She now faced a muddy mirror in a dark, musty room. In the reflection, a ghostly, grisly smile reflected back at her.

"Yours will be my tenth."

Kennison spent two whole minutes on fake small talk. Had Pale slept well? Had he enjoyed his personal time away?

Yes, yes he had. But hell if he was saying as much to Kennison.

“Mitch Kroft mentioned the Sibile found a break in the case,” Kennison fished, finally coming to the point.

“He did, huh?” *Bastard*.

“Right before she had a freakout and burst his eardrum screaming.” Kennison watched Pale like a bug under glass.

He could look all he wanted. Pale only allowed himself a small grin at Kroft’s expense. It hit a new low, blaming Jade for his injuries. They’d be gone in a day or so, though his jaw might never hang quite right again. All in all, he had really only hurt the coroner’s pride. “When did you talk to Kroft?”

“When I was looking for you, since you didn’t seem interested in answering your damn phone.”

Pale waited to see if the other man would burst a blood vessel if not kowtowed to.

It only took another minute. “You and that Sibile just took off—”

“She has a name.” A reminder the man would be wise to heed.

“I don’t give a rat’s ass about her name, Rysen. The city is on alert. The chief and the mayor are both up my ass for a status report and you take the one person they expect to hear from and disappear into the fucking night with her. And don’t think I don’t know what you two were doing either. I haven’t heard shit from you, damn it. Where are you with the case?”

Nowhere Kennison wanted to know about. "I called in. Check with dispatch. Jade overloaded. She lost consciousness and had to wait for moonrise for the next step. Which is what *you're* interrupting."

Kennison's scowl would have made a lesser Wolf envious. "What step is that? And before you give me any of your shit, it better be good. Something with some answers."

"Believe me, you don't want these answers."

Incensed eyes squinted at Pale, the flat line of the other man's mouth clamped so tight he could double for a steel trap. Then he nodded, almost absently, though his cheeks were still mottling. "All right. I'm game. *Why* don't I want your answers?"

Pale considered his options. Most of them put Jade in a bad position with her Order. So he went with the truth as it pertained to Kennison. "Because I'm pretty sure you don't want to be the one explaining to the mayor that the victims are all Sibile. Or that there's a good chance the Woodsman has his hands in police files to track them down."

Silence like a brick wall descended.

Well, one thing was sure. The captain wasn't the killer. If he'd punched him, Pale didn't think the captain could have been more horrified.

"Told you you didn't want to know."

"You're sure?" Kennison finally asked, his voice betraying a slight shake beneath the authoritative tone. Probably wet himself, but otherwise, not bad. In that instant, Pale could almost feel for the guy. No one wanted to find themselves in mortal peril with the Sibile. If

Kennison knew what Jade had told Pale, he'd do more than stain the furniture.

"I'm working on it." Pale waited for the dismissal, but Kennison was lost in his thoughts. He didn't have time to wait. Jade was out there, virtually exposed. God only knew what kind of trouble she'd get into if left to her own devices much longer. But while he was here... "Since the jurisdiction on this case has changed—" to put it politely, "—how about you tell me the truth of what's going on with the Sibile."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb, Kennison. I just want to know if they're getting tagged. Because someone is keeping track of them, that much is clear. Keeping notes on who did what and what each of those women can do. If our guy is using those files to pick Sibile to kill and chop up into little bits, don't you think the Order is going to be more than a little pissed off about it?"

Kennison's mottle returned.

"I just like to know where I stand, that's all. So when one of those Sibile bigwigs asks why their girls are turning up like shark bait, I know whose office to point them to."

At Kennison's continued silence, Pale shrugged and pulled open the door, stunned to find Jade standing there, her slim hand stretching out to him from under the cape. He could see the beginnings of his name on her red lips, then a hand seemed to materialize around her neck.

Pale blinked, trying to focus. A whole man stood behind her... But *nothing* was behind her. He could see through the figure, its features indistinct, like a shadow come to terrifying life.

“Jade!” But even before he got her name out, they were gone.

Gone.

His mate, vanished before his eyes.

“Jade!” Not a yell. A roar, burst out of him with a growl no one could mistake for human. He surged out of the office, but nothing was there. No woman seated in front of his desk. No red shroud. Only the fading traces of her scent...laced with terror...laced with ash. He yelled her name again, turning in a circle to find her, but there was no mistaking the truth. She’d disappeared into thin air.

The room went silent around him. A few people got to their feet, all of them watching him, but he barely noticed. Rage, desperation, clawed from inside, demanding he find her. Track her. Save her. *Protect*.

“She was just...there.” Victor said, staring at the air in front of him, oblivious to the intervening silence. He seemed less concerned about Pale than he was that a woman had just disintegrated in their midst.

“What happened?” Pale demanded, but of the roomful of detectives, only the kid had paid attention to the woman in the flaming red cloak.

“She was at your desk, using your computer. She walked to the captain’s door and...I thought—” His gaze met Pale’s, confusion all over him. “There was someone behind her, but...there wasn’t.”

Pale couldn’t explain to the boy what he himself didn’t understand. A shadow had formed around her like a cloud and taken her. Even with his knowledge that darker beings than himself lurked in the world, he had trouble believing what he’d seen.

Find her. Protect.

His entire being struggled to shift, to listen to the Instinct and locate her scent. Bring her back to him. But he needed the rational mind of a man to find her. To save her. He rushed to his desk. She'd been on the computer. He noticed immediately that the files had been rearranged. All scrolled down to the roster. She must have seen something there. A pattern he'd missed, not that he'd had much time to look. Where? What did she see?

He flipped files, one after another. Kroft? Yes, but he'd only been around a little over a year. These cases went further back than that. Then he saw it. Jorgensen. Again and again and again.

He turned, already testing the air for the cologned smell he hated. The scent, like Jade's, was fading. The seat where the cocky detective worked, empty. He stared at it, unable to believe the killer he'd hunted had been staring at his own back for months. But it was true.

"Where's Jorgensen? Where does he live?" he asked over his shoulder.

No one answered. Men he'd have trusted with his life just yesterday were staring at him as if he'd grown a new head. Belatedly, he felt the sharp fangs in his mouth and looked down to see that his fingers had shifted into black, menacing claws. A glance around the room showed him only expressions of fear. He didn't care. All that mattered was Jade.

Pale moved to Jorgensen's desk. It looked the same as most others. Computer. Stacks of reports and forms. Blotter with notes scribbled, picture of the smug bastard on a boat holding a fish still on the line. Pale yanked the center drawer, snapping the lock in two. Inside was the

same standard deal as above—pens, paper, staples, velvet necklace box.

He only hesitated a second. Pulling out the box, he handed it to Victor. He'd give the kid credit, Victor didn't flinch at brushing Wolf claws. But he almost threw up when he opened it.

"What is it? What did you find?" Kennison asked, the only one moving in the squad room. He walked up to the desk, frowning.

Victor put the box on top of Jorgensen's desk and backed away, still gagging. Inside, a piece of skin, cured into leather, lay stretched and mounted. The red tattoo, dark brown now, could have been a snake, given the horror it produced. The others didn't know what the tattoo meant, but they all recognized the triangular shape.

Pale glared pitilessly at the captain. "We just found the Woodsman."

Kennison looked down, then closed his eyes, dread aging him in a heartbeat.

"He has my mate." Let them decide what they thought of that on their own. Even humans, for all their prejudice and purposeful blindness, knew the danger of coming between a Wolf and his mate. And every man there knew what the Woodsman had planned for her. Carter, the last face he'd expect to show compassion, dared to shake his head in pity.

Flinching, Pale glared back down at the desk. There had to be something there. Some clue, some slip. His gaze snagged on the picture frame. Jorgensen on his boat, little more than a dingy, on the still and greenish waters of a lake. In the background, an old cabin sagged among the trees. "Where is this?" He held out the picture.

A few heads shook. Victor shrugged.

"That's his place on Lake Salderon," Kennison mumbled, taking the frame in hand, frowning down at it.

That lake was an hour away, up over the mountain. Pale reached for Kennison's tie, yanking the man forward and nearly off his feet, scaring the ever-living shit out of everyone nearby at the same time. Everyone took a step back, if not two. No one seemed interested in freeing their captain from his grip.

He leaned down, almost pressing his nose to that of the man in his hold. "Do whatever you have to, call whoever, but you get me up there. Now."

Kennison didn't so much as blink.

"If she dies, Kennison, trust me when I tell you that the Sibile will be the last people on your list to be afraid of."

The captain nodded, but Pale took no pleasure in it. He snatched back the framed photo, staring at the dilapidated cabin. The glass cracked in his fingers, falling to the surface of the desk. Irritated, he snatched the picture out, dumping the broken frame with the rest of the glass.

"There's something—"

Pale half turned, finding Victor reaching for the photo.

His hands snapped back in surrender. "On the back. It says something."

Looking down, he flipped the picture over. A man's scrawl wrote only one line. *Rysen—her heart can only belong to one of us.*

In a haze of pain, Pale remembered every heart he'd found in the woods. Torn straight out of a woman's chest and left uselessly on the ground in shredded pieces. No,

not just a woman's chest. A *Wolf's* chest. All except the last, the only one to have her heart pulled out in a single strike.

They hadn't been sport.

They were *practice*.

"He knew she was coming," he breathed, remembering what she'd said about his precognition. They'd been thinking too focused, closing in on the kills and not the pattern. The Wolves were practice. The scarlets were bait.

Jade was *always* the prize.

Jorgensen's desk went flying across the room, landing with a crash, the surface shredded by his claws. For all the noise it made, there was nothing else he could do. Pale held on to the part of her in his heart, the glowing vitality of her soul bonded to his. *Stay alive, Jade. Wait for me...*

But until he could find a way up that mountain, she was on her own.

Chapter Eighteen

Jade spun her back toward the mirror, facing the tall man, her hand at her throat where his touch left a numb pain behind. He'd burned her with the dark, somehow, but instead of the heat she'd expected, she found ice flakes on her skin. The garish hint of humanity floating in the nothingness faded to blackness as he slipped backward into shadow.

"Jade-Scarlet." Jorgensen's voice was more of an eerie hiss. Nothing she would have thought could come from a human voice box. "I wondered if I would ever meet you. Face to face...so to speak."

She searched the dark for him, but could see nothing. She held on to the sides of the mirror at her back, her heart racing. He'd teleported them. *Teleported*. That gift was nearly as rare as a *lucescere* and just as hard to control. He'd taken it from a strong scarlet. Nearly a Rouge herself. If he'd stolen that, what chance did *she* have?

"How do you know my name?"

"Everyone knows you." The hissing voice seemed to come from all directions. "The Abomination."

She wanted to flinch, but didn't dare close her eyes.

"The child of traitors."

"My parents were no traitors!" She hadn't dared to say as much to anyone in the Order, but what did she have to fear now? This man fully intended to kill her.

“No, they weren’t,” Jorgensen conceded easily. “But it was an excellent excuse, wasn’t it? Leak a little information, nothing truly harmful to the society, and have cause to claim the most powerful *lucescere* ever born. It was brilliant.”

Jade barely felt her breath passing through her lips. “I’m not powerful.” She was barely functional. Not even Jalla-Rouge’s promises that she’d learn true control had helped. Only Pale ever had and she knew in her gut he was far, far from here.

“That’s where you’re wrong, Jade-Scarlet. The power in you, it glows like a firestorm...waiting for me to take it.”

Her hands tightened on the mirror.

“When Jalla-Rouge told them what you would be, the Tribunal couldn’t pass up the opportunity. Your mother refused to give you to them. Refused to return, as was her duty to the Order. What she would not give the Tribunal demanded, at any cost. As was their right.” He waited several moments, as if he knew his silence built her fear. “No screaming in defense of your rulers, young scarlet? You have no doubt of their treachery?”

No, she didn’t. Which terrified her even more. He could be telling the truth. “Who *are* you?” she demanded, her voice roughened by a snarl.

“Me?” He sounded almost jovial. But then he would. He was merely playing with her. Enjoying the upcoming kill. Suddenly, the dark parted in front of her, a breeze of shadows swirling until a tall blond man stood solidly in front of her, his handsome face clear of expression, but his dark eyes blazed with rage.

Jorgensen. If she could have backed up a step farther, she would, but the mirror refused to bend to her will.

“Don’t you see the family resemblance?”

“F-family?” She cursed herself for showing weakness, but she couldn’t help it. Just the thought of this man’s blood running in her veins... Revulsion turned her stomach. “No, it’s not possible.”

“Come now, niece. Surely you haven’t forgotten your own mother’s face. Don’t you see her?” He leaned close, those eyes burning colder than before. “She’s right here. In me.”

Horror threatened to tear right out of her throat. “*You* killed my mother?”

“Where do you think the precognition comes from?” He looked so pleased with himself as he backed away. “She was my first. The hardest too. She saw me coming, even set a trap, but she knew as well as I did that it wouldn’t work. As soon as the Tribunal declared her dead so they could claim you, her fate was sealed. It was the opportunity I’d waited my entire life for. I couldn’t pass it up.”

“That’s not how it happened.” A man had come into the house, she remembered that much. He’d killed them in their sleep. Jalla had told her so. That was what everyone had said.

Jorgensen shook his head in pity. “Your father would have killed me but a funny thing happens when you kill the mate of a Wolf. He dies too. Painfully. You can actually *see* the soul being ripped out of him.”

She despised that she could feel his remembered pleasure. It filled the room like noxious fumes. That he was intimating how much he’d enjoy killing another Wolf

the same way. No. Not her, not Pale. “They caught the man who killed them—”

“They caught the man who *thought* he killed them. It comes in handy, the ability to enter people’s dreams. Almost as handy as being a police officer who everyone trusts. But you’d know that because of your new mate, wouldn’t you?” He let the question hang there, enjoying his captive audience.

Finally he shrugged, looking almost casual as he slipped his hands into his pockets. “Mother has never quite forgiven herself for bringing on the death of her most cherished child, her protégé. I think that’s why she took you so much to heart, even if loving you meant I had something to torture her with in the night. For some reason, she thought *you* were worth it.” Bitterness laced his voice now.

“Jalla-Rouge isn’t—” Jalla would have said, wouldn’t she, if she were Jade’s grandmother? She would have told her...

He nodded and even that small movement was mocking. “We’re both quite auspicious, aren’t we? You, the *lucescere* they’ve waited an eternity for, and me, Challen-Rouge, son of the strongest oracle in six generations, cast out by the Tribunal in their jealousy. Their *blindness*. But they see now, don’t they? That’s why they sent me *you*.”

If he was right about the other things—she shivered at the realization that he might well be right about that too. The Tribunal would do almost anything for power.

But power combined with reason, she reminded herself. Power they could control. Whatever Chris

Jorgenson had turned himself into, control was not a part of it. "See what? That you're insane?"

A tsking sound accompanied his slowly shaking head motion. "That I'm ready to *join* them. I've overcome my trial by fire. I am what I was always *meant* to be." He raised his hand, palm up. The shadows stripped away from the walls, piece by piece, whipping past and around her to gather into a sphere at his fingertips. Then even he melted away as darkness surrounded him again, leaving only the sphere that glowed malevolently with deep purple violence. "They know now that I'm a god."

She stared, struck mute, as the sphere began to rise.

"I am the judgment you've been awaiting, Jade-Scarlet. The embodiment of the law of our people. You have been found guilty. Lacking. *Evil*." The sphere's glow increased to a stinging blue.

"I'm not evil!" *Get your wits, Jade. He's scaring you to keep you still. Move.*

But her legs wouldn't unlock.

The sphere reached the ceiling.

Move!

She leaped as the black ball of energy darted in her direction. She hit the ground, the explosion shattering the mirror behind her. She scrambled, pulling the cape around her and raced into darkness. Her eyes adjusted to the dark instantly. There were pictures. Cabinets. She sidestepped a beat-up recliner and noticed the wood floors. A cabin. They were in a cabin. She searched for a door.

"Will those Wolf instincts come with your power, I wonder?"

She ignored him, running flat-out to the door. She'd almost reached it when he was suddenly there, his powerful size blocking the way. She almost skidded into

him. He allowed her to step backward out of his reach. *Allowed.* Anger charged her.

"I'm curious how your gifts will change for me, Jade-Scarlet." He watched her back away, made no move to reach for her. He knew he had her cornered. That he was free to toy with her.

She bit back a snarl, scanning the room for another exit. A boarded-up window. A crack of light. Anything.

"I've wondered for a very long time, what would happen if I took your gift. Can light become dark? Or will you be the key to changing me to the light?"

"What are you talking about?" No exits she could reach. A small skylight, square and dingy, in the roof above the mirror. She'd never fit and he'd never let her get close to it anyway. There, finally, a closed door behind a chair, but it might only lead deeper into the cabin. Or was it the only way out?

"Taking gifts is no easy task. The giver must be alive, but even then, once it's out, once it's inside someone new, it changes, becomes like the taker. They've all turned inside-out. Dark."

Rotted, she almost added. That explained his strange auras. The mixed colors weren't stray signatures. They were dying ones.

"Everything turns dark in me. Even fire becomes a shadow flame. Cold." He stared down at his hands, not even watching her anymore. "*I am* the dark."

Memories startled awake in Jade. Jalla-Rouge's arms around her shoulders when she was young. "You're more than you think, *chère*. Someday you will do more than just see light. You will *be* the light. That's what a

lucescere does—becomes light and saves us all from darkness.”

Is this what you meant, Jalla?

“You *will* give your light to me, Lucescere.” Another blast came from nowhere, launching her into the furniture.

“Sure. Whenever’s good for you.” The light here was weak, enough only for a small dagger at best. It wasn’t enough.

Do something, Jade, she ordered herself, but there wasn’t anything *to* do.

Become light.

She pushed away Jalla’s unhelpful voice in her mind.

Run. Which was a much more productive thought, given that another ball of dark energy came hurtling her way. Taking the last option left, she burst through the door, only to tumble down a flight of rickety stairs, dust choking her as she fell. The faint light had disappeared completely, until even her night vision was completely blind, but she was conscious.

And trapped.

Darkness, thick enough to strangle, surrounded her. She could have fallen into a cave or a box, there was no way of knowing.

Become light.

“Shut up!” she snapped at the urgent voice in her head. She knew what she had to do already. It didn’t help. There wasn’t enough light to wrap around herself. Or even to create the smallest glow to comfort herself.

The weight of the darkness increased, flattening her body to the ground beneath her. She pushed upward, a scream escaping when she realized the dark was solid. Suffocating. No, it was more than that.

It was *him*.

His hand clenched ruthlessly around her throat. Her claws sank into the black, finding no purchase, no muscle, no man to release her. Only an oily evil she couldn't push away. Heavier and heavier it weighed on her, seeping into her skin and leaching out all fight, all resistance...all hope.

She wasn't even sure when she slid into unconsciousness.

Pale watched the tree line pass beneath the helicopter, clenching his fists to keep his claws retracted. Kennison had called for a pilot as soon as Pale let him go. It hadn't been easy to fool the pilot before getting the ride, but Kennison insisted he be able to pass for a human or they'd never let them in the air. Terrified pilots had a tendency to crash, a dry logic that even Pale had to agree with. He'd pulled his claws back in by sheer will and ground his teeth silently to hide the fangs. Kennison had barely glanced at him since giving that order, but Pale's conscience had yet to flicker. His mate's safety outweighed anyone's opinion of his tactics.

The copter's rotors cut the air above while he visually combed the mountain under the spotlight. Twenty minutes, the pilot estimated when Pale asked how long it would take. The longest twenty minutes of his entire life.

"You have to know this might not be the place," Kennison finally said into the microphone on their helmets, having already shown Pale the private frequency so the pilot wouldn't overhear them.

Brave, Pale thought, to mention the one thought he himself refused to consider.

“Even if this is the right place, we have to prepare ourselves for what we might find.”

Pale clenched his jaw, surprised further when the other man offered a comforting hand to his shoulder.

“I know we’ve never gotten along, but I want you to know I’m not doing this because you threatened me.”

He fixed Kennison with a doubting look, to which the older man only clicked his teeth.

“Don’t worry, I’m no hypocrite, but I’m not the bigot you think I am, either. I’ve known from the beginning what you are.” Kennison shrugged as if it didn’t matter. “I just happen to think you’re an asshole.”

It was almost enough to make Pale laugh. “Then why?”

“Because I’ve lost a wife and, unlike you, we don’t all get the mercy of dying with them.”

He knew about the bonding?

Kennison nodded slightly. He glanced up toward the pilot then back to Pale. “You were right, what you said earlier about the tracking. And the tagging. They’ve been doing it for a while.”

“And you’re part of that?” Pale couldn’t say he was surprised, exactly. Just oddly disappointed.

Until Kennison shook his head. “No, but I was part of the teams that worked so hard to get rid of you. I think they used to call us death squads. We both were.” The wife, Pale assumed. “It wasn’t supposed to be about exterminating people. That wasn’t what we were told. We thought we were hunting down dangerous creatures, protecting innocents. For the most part, we were. Rampaging males, mostly. Until she was put on a detail that was supposed to be about tracking a rabid female. The female wasn’t rabid, she was defending her children.

We didn't know that until after she was dead. The kids were taken into a research compound—"

"You mean a dissection lab."

Kennison didn't argue the correction. "Kelly started questioning every case. Every death. I didn't believe what she said she found. Didn't want to admit I was part of something like that. But she couldn't go on pretending, couldn't keep looking away from what she knew was wrong. She died freeing those kids. It cost her everything to wash the blood off her hands. That was when I knew she was right. So I got out, started my life over here, where I figured I'd be out of it. Problem was, everywhere I looked, I'd see people I owed. People hiding, because people like me were hunting them down. People *she* gave her life to help." Kennison's haggard face tightened and Pale finally saw the regret etched there. "When they started the new program, they contacted me. Thought I'd be willing to put my experience to work."

"And were you?"

Kennison met his challenge gravely. "You're still here, aren't you?"

Pale grudgingly accepted that.

"The policies are out of my control, but there's enough blood on my hands to last ten lifetimes. All I can guarantee you is that the names on the program lists here aren't what led the Woodsman to his kills. Nothing I've compiled for them would lead to anyone except maybe the Easter Bunny."

No, Jorgensen had made his own list. "That's not good enough. For all you know, someone else is doing the same thing, guessing what those women can do based on the cases they get assigned."

"I can't change them all, Rysen," Kennison snapped. "This is bigger than just me."

"How much bigger?"

Kennison shook his head. "I don't know. No one knows. That's not the point. What I'm trying to tell you is that if we actually find her—"

"She's there," he ground out as evenly as he could. And still alive. As surely as he was.

"Then you need to get your mate and disappear. You want her safe, you get her off the grid. I can keep her out of the files, but it's only a matter of time for the rest of them."

"How much time?"

"There's no way to say. But I wouldn't think long. Sibile have been tracked for years. There's a comprehensive system already in place, an identification list, figuring out which of them are the most dangerous."

A grunt. "They have no idea."

Kennison agreed. "No, they don't. But that's never stopped them before."

Pale digested that, already putting it in the back of his mind for later. The human government was about to start a war they couldn't win. His focus was the war he *had* to win. Kennison fell silent, thankfully, and Pale tried to concentrate on what Jade had been trying to tell him when they were sitting at his desk.

The bodies were *placed*.

The skin in the desk.

The picture, the message on the back.

Placed.

"He wants us to find him." To know *who* he was, if not *what* he was. "He wants everyone to know what he's done."

“Why?” Kennison asked. “He’s gotten away with it this far. There was nothing to lead us to him.”

Pale shook his head, unable to explain. A failed Rouge. A failed scarlet. Jorgensen wanted the Order to see what happened to those they threw away. He’d learned the Sibile law too well—what they fear, they revere. Jorgensen would be feared by those who’d rejected him. Or he’d kill them all.

Five more minutes, baby. Hold him off for five more minutes.

Even as he thought it, a beam of white light, so bright it could be daylight, burst through the trees ahead, blazing up into the sky. A rippling ring of energy came at them in a wave that set the whole helicopter out of kilter. Alarms beeped and the pilot swore, trying to right them, spinning the entire chopper twice and dipping dangerously close to the trees before regaining control. All the while, Pale smiled.

He’d found her.

Jade woke screaming. Not that it did her any good. She was strapped to a table, cold beneath her bare skin. It was metal, by the feel, and she was naked. Freezing. Just like the others. Frost stung her cheeks, framing her face where her hair should be. Her teeth chattered so hard she could barely hear past the rattling. And still, the darkness. Always the darkness. Then she realized why she’d regained consciousness.

He was cutting her tattoo.

“Y-you can’t take that, Challen.” She managed to bite out the words. “I haven’t failed yet.” She screamed

again as the blade dug deeper into her flesh, continuing on its precise path.

“You were *born* a failure, Jade-Scarlet. So much potential, wasting away in this impossible body. And even if you weren’t, you will never be the one to capture me. The Woodsman case will remain permanently unsolved. Or at the very least, it will never make it to trial.” He stayed so calm while he flayed her.

Tears choked her, fear and agony scattering her thoughts. Her claws scraped on the metal with squalling shrieks, but no matter how they dug in, there was no purchase to be found.

“I left a gift for them, though. A reward for all their hard work. They’ll have a name for their murderer. By the time they find it, I’ll already be part of the Tribunal. Chris Jorgensen will no longer exist. The Woodsman will have served his purpose and now, so shall you.”

Finally, oh God, finally, he finished the gruesome task, leaving her gasping. Relief from the digging, at least, but the open wound sizzled with torment. She struggled to make her lips form words either of them would understand. “P-P-Pale will h-hunt us. H-he’ll find me.”

“I’m not worried about your Wolf.” His hand caressed her throat. More correctly, her pulse. She couldn’t even turn her face to snap at him with her teeth. “I’ll pluck his soul right out of him before he has a chance to blink.”

“No.” It wasn’t a sob, but an angry declaration. Pale wouldn’t die because of this monster. Because she didn’t have it in her to fight.

“It’s a much more merciful death than I wanted for him. I wanted to take my time with him. Show him exactly what it means to suffer. Teach him what respect

for power truly is. He's stubborn, though. It would have taken time. Probably days."

She raged against the bonds, but nothing gave. She finally had to stop, dragging in deep breaths to calm herself. Control. Control. She would achieve nothing without control.

"But I have different plans for you, something your Wolf doesn't deserve. A swift death."

"Why? Why me?" she asked, desperate to keep him talking. Talking meant living. Time to think. "Why am I so special?"

"You're not, but the light trapped inside you is. To get it, I'm not going to bleed you. I can't." His voice lowered, became a rasping whisper she knew would haunt her dreams...if she lived to have any. "I have to take it right from the source." A fingertip drew a circle between her breasts. "From your heart."

He knew about the empathy.

"The Order wanted you and feared you all at the same time because of this gift. They lied to you to protect themselves. Crippled you with blind dependence on the moon of all things. In your pathetic weakness, you let them. But the gift is here. Waiting for someone powerful enough to control it. Waiting for *me*."

"No!" She could feel her power, rising high and wild, but in her fear, it was untouchable. Her focus scattered. She tried. Desperately. But with every icy breath on her skin, she shuddered and lost it.

She should have been thinking of how to fight, how to stop this, but all she could think of was Pale. The smile she'd never see again. The sense of safety she'd found in his arms. Those eyes, by turns intense or strangely

vulnerable. She wanted to know so many more things about him. Everything about him and how she might fit next to him. Wanted to experience again the light he'd given her in a few stolen hours. For one day, she'd known what it was to love. Just one.

It wasn't enough.

Wolves live by Instinct, Pale had said. It's kept us alive when everything else has disappeared. Because we accept what we are and we give ourselves over to it.

Accept. She sobbed, but clung to the memory of his voice. Give herself over. Closing out the sound of the unholy thing next to her, she tried listening, but in her heart, she knew it wasn't the same. Accepting meant letting go. Trusting. *It's not weakness...it's a strength.* And if it would keep Pale alive, it wasn't even a question.

She gave, closing her eyes and following wherever the voice would lead.

It started as a whisper. A voice she strained to hear. *Feel.*

The sob that escaped her now wasn't from pain, but relief. She'd almost forgotten the sound of it. A pure voice, one she could trust. One that filled her with security.

Love.

Power surged inside her, bright and streaming with color. The vivid blues she associated with Pale. The brand on her heart, a light all its own. In her mind's eye, she reached for it. Touched it. Wrapped herself within.

Become light, the Instinct boomed in her mind. *Love. Become light.*

Finally, she understood what Jalla had tried to tell her. *Believe in the gift he's given you.* Pale hadn't given her the Instinct. It wasn't even the part of him she felt

inside her, warming her soul. He'd shown her love. The purest emotion she'd ever known...the one she'd forgotten along with the Voice and her parents in her desperation to survive.

No longer.

More love, more life, more moments kept deep in her heart. Jalla's words and comfort. Her father's hands, holding her high in the air. Her mother's voice, a song that she would still hear in that moment as sleep took her away. Pale. Emotions flared, light streaming behind her eyes. Light from *inside*. She gave herself over to it, to the wave building with a roar in her ears.

Become light.

Yes, she knew how now. Opening her hands in surrender, she urged it to crest. Overflow. In seconds, it was free, but not as healing water washing her away. Instead, an inferno burst through her body, swirling into a pillar around her. Every feeling of loss and triumph, pain and power, fueled it to white-hot brilliance.

He'd tried to take this away. Tried to steal her life. Dared threaten her mate. The pillar exploded outward, crashing through wood and steel, love and rage at its core.

The table and its bindings disappeared, the torrent of power crumpling it beneath her while she remained suspended in the air. The darkness slashed away, like a great curtain being ripped in two. It tore, but it was still there, an evil force twined around her.

"Give up, *Lucescere*." Challen's voice reverberated with anger. The bonds of dark tightened on all sides of the colors she swirled around herself. "You can't defeat the dark."

No, he was right about that.

But every darkness had a dawn.

"It ends now, Challen-Rouge."

She gave rein to all her emotions, allowed them to blend and roar through her. All her pain, all her anger, all her love. Her sense of self disappeared, became blinding. Pure, perfect white. Total silence. Exquisite bliss. She hung there, not a person, not a being, time a lost concept. Yes, this was what she'd been meant for. Born for. Brilliant, unending light.

Except...a speck of darkness remained.

She reached into it, felt it struggle futilely, heard it scream with impotent fury, but soon give way. The thread of darkness bled away, burning into nothing, leaving a mewling shell behind. Around her, she felt others, joy, relief...rapture. Before they disappeared, there was one, a sadness, a mother's caress...and then they were gone.

She contemplated the shell again. Its empty uselessness could be burned to dust. Should be destroyed. Yes. Until nothing of it would ever be remembered.

"Jade." A deep voice, less than a whisper and yet, compelling, stayed her hand. "No, Jade. It's enough."

No, it wasn't. That thing needed destroying. Deserved punishment.

"Come back, Jade."

Back to what?

"Come back to me, little Wolf."

Pale. Her heart called out to him, colors flying in all directions. Wolf. *Her* Wolf. She remembered his touch, his kiss, the heated blue of his eyes. Yes, she wanted to go back to that. Back to him.

But the power... The glory of all this power. She could feel it pulling her apart, separating her. She struggled, but the light had taken on a life of its own. Too

long it had been trapped. It raged around her, growing and taking her with it. "Pale!"

But what could he do? She looked down, saw him standing in the glow of her own light, wind she couldn't feel whipping his hair around, his hand reaching out to her.

No, there was something there. Something that shone, reflecting her light into a thousand different colors. More.

She reached for him, drawn to the man, while the power focused on the stone, siphoned into it. As it receded, she could feel herself coming back together. Solid, sentient. Loved. She wrapped her hand around the gem, for the first time realizing that she had truly become something different. Her hand glowed, not as flesh but as clear light. She floated in front of Pale, looking into his haunted eyes. All around him, his own color was a storm of blue, reaching for her with so much longing, so much love, that if she could have cried, she would have.

"Don't leave me, Jade."

"I don't want to." But if she came back, she could never stay. Selfishly, she didn't want to face the pain of life without him. Her mother had chosen to keep her child, keep her mate, and had paid the ultimate price, leaving Jade to face the consequences alone. Could she do that to him? To everyone he protected?

"I love you." He wrapped his hand around hers. She heard it burning, felt his pain, but he didn't let go. He'd *never* let go.

With that knowledge, the decision was made.

Power dimmed, concentrated on his injured hand until the burns were gone, then faded. She drifted down,

slipping into the silken hold of the man who'd called her name. She felt the familiar slide of a cape over her shoulders, fabric he clamped in his hands as he held her against his heart and pressed his nose into her unbound hair. She held on to his shoulders, wishing she could somehow be closer. Touch him everywhere.

"For a second there, I thought you'd left me," he murmured. If his hold meant anything—and she knew it did—he needed to touch her too. To assure himself she was really there.

"An eternity," she whispered, also knowing he could never understand.

"I guess you didn't need my protection after all." He looked around with a self-deprecating laugh.

"Oh yes, I did." She wrapped her arms around his neck. "You protected me from myself." Her eyes fluttered open and she finally realized they stood in a crater. Where had that come from?

She looked up, following his perusal of the cabin, but nothing was as it had been. The blackness was gone, destruction in its wake. Had the light been a dream? Maybe some kind of explosion had knocked her unconscious? No, it couldn't be, that would have hurt, and her body had no pain anywhere. She searched the ground, remembering the shell that had seemed so small. So insignificant. "Where's Challen?"

"If you mean Jorgensen," said another voice she vaguely recognized as belonging to Pale's captain, "he's right here." He was applying handcuffs with what looked like zeal to an unconscious man in the dirt. "What's left of him, anyway." He seemed to have trouble looking at her. Was he afraid?

She glanced around again, not an easy task with Pale holding her so tight. The remnants of a cabin sagged high above, looking as if something had burned a hole right through it. All around her, demolished materials were pushed outward, leaving a bowl shape of fine white ash, disturbed only by Pale and the captain's footprints. The room used to be a basement. Or maybe a prison. Red robes hung in a glass case against an untouched wall.

Not a prison.

A trophy room.

Challen moaned from the ground. The captain helped the naked Rouge to a sitting position. Challen looked stunned. He glared at the cabinets in front of him. When nothing happened for long seconds, he tried to lunge at her, but only managed to slump face first into the ash. "What did you do to me?"

Jade looked down at him, feeling no remorse. Not even pity. Just a weariness that pulled at her to the bone. "I only did to you what you planned to do to me. You've been bled, Challen-Rouge. The spirits you stole were freed. You're empty again. As you were *truly* meant to be."

No more playing at God, she thought. Not for either of them. She remembered how badly she'd wanted to wipe his existence from the earth. From time itself. If it hadn't been for Pale, she would have. She turned her gaze away, unable to think about what she'd almost done. About what she did do.

Challen mumbled incoherently, no longer acknowledging her either. Simply mourning to himself.

"What do we do with him now?" Pale asked.

Jade laid her head on his shoulder. “Arrest him as the Woodsman. He can’t hurt anyone now. The mayor has his killer, he doesn’t need to know about the victims. The Tribunal will see to his judgment for his crimes against the Order as well as the Wolves. It’s over.”

With those words, the last of the adrenaline finally seeped out of her. She melted against Pale, her limbs so heavy she wondered how she didn’t weigh him down. Sleep beckoned, swooping over her like a spell. Her lids closed and she relaxed, safe in the arms of her Wolf.

Chapter Nineteen

“They don’t look right this way,” Jade murmured, rubbing soap over her hands. Her normal, human-looking hands. The claws at each tip had been replaced with normal, nearly flat nails, the pink of her flesh visible through part of them. They felt so...light. So defenseless.

“We’ll get used to them.” Pale massaged soap into her hair, gathering the ragged edges around her face and mixing them into the suds. Challen had cut it off, a fact she hadn’t realized until she’d woken up in the helicopter and found Pale frowning down at a chin-length scrap. She should have expected it, since her hair was as much a mark of a Sibile as her *volo*. Now both were gone. Even healing light couldn’t fix what wasn’t there to repair.

In that way, at least, Challen had his way. She wasn’t the Sibile she’d been raised to be. She never would be again.

Pale massaged gentle circles into her scalp. He’d used too much soap, the bubbles dripping off his hands to plop at their feet or slide down her back. His efforts to make her feel right again were more endearing than helpful. But sweet. Very, very sweet.

She put her hands down, unable to nod under his ministrations. Her tongue sought out the familiar lengths of her fangs, finding only typically sized teeth instead. It was easily the twentieth time she’d done that and been disappointed.

If it weren't for the fact that she could still feel Pale's soul tied inextricably to hers, she'd wonder if any part of her was still a Wolf.

He turned her around, lifting her chin so the soap would rinse out of her hair. She smiled up at him, memorizing his face, even with his brooding concentration. She'd miss it, no matter how much she'd complained. He was right. Brooding was just the way he was made. A part of him she loved. How had he become so important in so short a time? So important that she wasn't sure she had the strength to leave him behind.

She reached out and touched his hair, fingering an end. "I think yours is longer than mine now."

He frowned. "I'll get it cut tomorrow. And yours will grow out in a few months."

She let him rinse her, the sadness in her heart no doubt all over her face because he stopped working his hand through her hair. He just stared at her, the knowledge between them clear as day. They didn't have a few months together.

"It's the only way to protect you," she finally said, wishing with all her heart that there were any other way. "To protect them all," she added, thinking of his brothers, his charges. Even Emmitt, the little boy who had no one else left to care for him. "I have to go back."

"If I had to choose between them or you, there's no contest. They don't matter. One of the others can take over. They're strong enough."

"But the others aren't the Alpha. You are. They'll die without you."

His mouth pressed into a hard line.

“And you know they matter. They all matter to you. Everyone you’re trying to save, everyone you’re *going* to save.”

“I can’t save them all.” His deep voice was more rumble than words. His brows furrowed together and his jaw worked back and forth. “There are more than you know. We started out with just Vayere’s jewels and twenty kids. It took years to get everything hocked for the right value. To get the youngest ones somewhere safe. Then we got to work, trying to turn it into more. All of us. When we had enough money, we bought a mountain out in the middle of nowhere and ever since, we’ve been doing whatever we had to to keep everyone safe there. To make them a life. But I’ve lost count of how many there are now. How many are coming. It’s more than Wolves. If they can shift, they come, and I have no idea how I’m going to save them all. I don’t know if I can, least of all without you.”

She ached for him, but she couldn’t change her mind about this. “You can try. For both of us.”

“What about you?” Those eyes of his burned as he stared into her, demanding as ever. “What happens to you? To our pup, if you’re pregnant?”

She didn’t have an answer that would satisfy either of them. “If I run, they’ll find us. Find you. Find all of them. Could you live happy, knowing that our children will face the same life we had? That we’ll die, and they’ll be all alone, desperate to survive?”

“Death finds us all, Jade.”

“Not like that. Not when there’s something I can do to stop them.”

“Oh yeah? What? What can you do to stop the entire Tribunal?”

Power rose at just the thought of them bringing harm to him. To any part of him. “I’ll destroy them.”

He froze, his gaze both approving and pained. “I guess you’ve finally figured out what you’re worth after all.”

“No,” she answered honestly, thinking of her mother’s choice to stay with the man who was the other part of her soul, just as this man was the other half of Jade’s. She finally understood why. “I just realized that dying is easy. Some things are worth living for.”

His smile was small, but she felt it inside her. He picked up the cloth from the rack and poured more soap onto it. With a heavy sigh, he finally asked the question they both dreaded. “How much longer do we have?”

A heartbreaking acceptance. She tried to smile for him, already sliding her hands up around his neck. Their slick bodies met, breast to thigh, and she lifted her lips for his kiss. “Love me ’til morning, Pale.”

He shook his head once before dipping his lips for a taste, one of his hands framing her face. “I’ll love you for always, Jade-Scarlet.”

His kiss started softly, but wasn’t long before it turned devouring, sending her blood singing, her body warming for him. He turned her back against the wall, hands now making a leisurely path over her to cup her breasts. Her fingers tingled as she tightened her hold around his neck. He jolted back suddenly, tugging her arm down to look at her hand with a frown.

“What?” she asked, breathless. “Why did you stop?”

He lifted her fingers pointedly.

Blinking, she realized her claws were back.

His lips curved, too sexy not to set her heartbeat skipping.

“Does it always tingle when you shift?”

He nodded.

She felt her lips turn up to match his. “Do you think...do you think the light fixed me?”

“I think you’re perfect either way.” He kissed the tip of one claw. “This just means we’ll have more fun.”

She laughed, touched his still-prickly cheek and gave herself permission to forget the rest of the world. For this last night, all that mattered was him. The man she loved. The man who loved her.

As was always the case for things that mattered most to her, the hours passed too quickly. Before long, he was driving her back to the enclave, wordless and grim. The car stopped, the now-familiar cranking sound of the brake engaging as he parked. They sat in silence for endless minutes, both ignoring the wrought iron gates and the brick wall beside them.

“What happens now, for you?” she asked, ignoring the hoarseness of her own voice, picking at the black set of clothes they’d haphazardly washed so she’d have something to wear. “With the squad, now that they know what you are?”

“Nothing,” he said, as if it didn’t matter. “Kennison said he’d throw the trackers off the trail while they wrap up the investigation, but there’s no going back to Moonridge for me. Too many people saw.”

“Can you still...help people?”

The corner of his mouth lifted. “I think it’s time the Alpha took his place in the pack, don’t you? The others

will handle the Underground for me. You never know, it might work better this way. The way it's supposed to." He finally let his gaze touch the gates, his voice coming out almost grudgingly. "You should let them know they're not as safe as they think they are behind those gates. Kennison says the government's already started the tagging. Death squads aren't going in guns-first this time. They learned from the last genocide taking so damn long. When they come for the Sibile, there may not be anything left to save afterward."

Jade gave the gates a disbelieving look, seeing the top of a towering stone building just over the hundred-year-old trees. How hard it must have been for him to give that warning, protecting people he'd spent more than a decade despising. For her.

"If you're going to go, go now," he suddenly ground out, gripping the wheel so hard it should have bent. "While I can still let you."

She wanted to kiss him, to hold him to her one more time, but it was asking too much of both of them. Silently, she opened the car door, lifting the pack that was far heavier than when she'd first left, and stepped out. It was only a few measured steps to the gates. It felt like a hundred miles, each step harder to take than the last.

Normally, she'd need the Rouges to let her in, their power the reason no one could breach them. All she did now was raise her hand and push them open with a burst of heat. It was effortless. Painless.

Walking through them without looking back, though, was what made her feel as if her soul were tearing in half.

The gates closed with a violent clang behind her, but Jade kept walking down the dusty road.

Don't look back. Don't look back. Don't make him bleed any more than you already have...

She was still in the shadow of the trees when a figure ran toward her, cape flying, cinnamon-colored hair streaming. The woman came to a breathless stop in front of Jade, her worried eyes taking in Jade's chopped, uneven hair and the lack of claws on her changed hands. Jade felt a push against her mind, but Sage-Scarlet's telepathic voice didn't invade.

"I can't hear you," Sage whispered, shocked. "Jalla-Rouge said you were here, but I didn't believe her."

Jade didn't have it in her to be surprised anymore. Sage could hear the thoughts of even Rouges if she was close enough, which was why they avoided her like a plague. Only Jalla took the risk, trusting Sage to keep her telepathy to herself.

At least, that's what Jade had always thought. What if Jalla couldn't be heard, either?

"I can feel you though. Your power..." Sage winced. "It's almost too much to take."

"I need to see the Tribunal." Until then, she would wrap herself in power, protect herself until she was sure Pale and his people were safe.

Jade sensed Sage's hurt at her curt words, her confusion, but she could say nothing to soften it. Sage must have understood, because she nodded, shrugging off her unease as if it had never been.

"That's why Jalla sent me. They're waiting for you." Sage looped her arm through Jade's, as they'd done a million times before. For the first time, it felt wrong. Not because of Sage. Because someone else belonged at her side.

“What’s wrong, Jade?” Sage pulled her forward, her haste in every taut line of her body.

She couldn’t know that every yard they crossed, Jade’s heart tore open a little more. This was wrong. Her soul was screaming that it was wrong, the Instinct practically howling in her mind, but she forced herself to keep going. He was hers to protect. *Hers*.

“I can’t hear you, but I can still feel your heart breaking.”

Jade could only shake her head. There was too much and none of it needed to be on her friend’s shoulders. “The Tribunal.”

The road split three ways in front of them as they came out of the trees. Left and right led to the farms and the homes of the others. Straight ahead lay the edifice that had always seemed so grand, so magnificent. The Hall of the Order.

Now it was just a building, a school where lies were taught.

Sage walked with her quietly after that, opening the heavy doors so they could both enter. Together, they made their way through the rooms she’d once thought so large, so imposing with their gleaming dark woods and polished stone walls. Everything felt small now. Too small.

They reached the mouth of the stone tunnel, where Jade stopped. She turned to Sage, at once both sad and relieved that her friend couldn’t read her mind. “Go back to our room. Wait for me there.”

Sage’s green eyes darted down the dark cavern nervously. “What if they don’t let you come back?”

Then they’ll die.

“Um...Jade. I think I might have heard that.”

Good, she'd meant her to. "Go."

Sage hesitated only a second, then turned and ran. When she was gone, Jade opened her hand and imagined a ball of light, ironically the same kind of thing that Challen had been throwing at her to force her into the basement. A good idea was, after all, a good idea.

Satisfied that the orb would light the way, she started down the path, pondering Challen and the monster he'd become. Her exact opposite, but he'd given in to his gift long ago. The conclusion had hit her somewhere in the night. For all his evil, for all that he'd stolen, Challen hadn't been wrong about himself. Not entirely. Because one of the gifts that she removed from him hadn't belonged to anyone else. The darkness, the thing that every stolen gift became tainted by. An *atracere* to her *lucescere*.

Like her, he could draw on it, become it. That was why his signature changed, she decided. The black entity he left behind was a signature of his dark form. That was why he dumped the body parts at dawn or dusk...no one would be able to see the hazy shadow as it teleported in and out. Camouflaged in the twilight.

The small tunnel led to its inevitable end, a round wooden door that had been so terrifying when she'd first been given the assignment to find Pale in Moonridge. Jade raised her other hand and, as with the gates outside, simply pushed it open. Then she walked through, already widening the sphere of light as it floated before her.

The dark stone room illuminated as if she'd brought in the sun. Thirty-three faces watched, expressionless, as the sphere rose to the sloping ceiling, flattening out and allowing them no shadows to hide behind.

Behind the podium, the Magistrate, Verda-Rouge, scowled, but rather than address Jade's blatant disrespect, she moved directly into the inquisition. "Did you complete your assignment, Jade-Scarlet?"

"Yes, Magistrate. The Woodsman has been apprehended, but there's more to the case about which the Tribunal must be made aware."

"What might that be?" Verda-Rouge's dismissive tone meant she probably wanted to get to what she thought was the heart of the matter.

"Because the killer was a Rouge."

Voices echoed from all members, some in outright disbelief, others in simple shock. Jade kept her eyes on Verda. Much safer that way for all involved.

"Speak sense, scarlet." Verda gestured broadly with an open hand in each direction. "As you can see, all the Rouges in the World are here. Waiting on you."

"Not all." Jade lifted her chin. "One more is in the Moonridge City Jail, preparing to face trial for the murder of four unidentified women. Who's to say how many more are out there like him."

"*Him?*" The Magistrate had the temerity to laugh, though it lacked any humor at all.

The laugh died altogether when Jade tossed the pack she'd been carrying in front of the dais. Two rolled robes fell out of the open top. "There are seven more in there. One for each of the scarlets he's killed, including my mother."

Silence filled the room like wet cement.

"He stole their blood, stole their gifts, and used them to kill again and again. Nine scarlets missing and you did *nothing*. Warned *no one*." She looked around the room, but apart from their nervous stares at the fallen robes, they

showed no remorse. “What did you think was happening?”

“It is not your place to question this Tribunal, child.” Verda-Rouge’s powerful voice boomed through the room, bouncing off the walls and curving back toward Jade.

Jade formed a sphere around herself, hardening the light as a shield and deflecting the force away. “Then whose place is it? You left them to suffer in those dead bodies, in *him*. How could you torment them that way?”

Verda’s eyes narrowed with anger, but she kept her gift in check. “What of your Wolf-mate? What does *he* know of this sacrilege?”

“He knows that we face a different danger. The humans are retargeting their war. They’ve been tracking us, pushing some kind of device into the necks of the scarlets they can touch. They’re preparing for an opportunity to strike against us. He told me to warn you.”

“There is no such opportunity.” Verda sounded as if her will alone ensured that, but the faces of the others were starting to express doubt. Seeing that only incensed the woman more. “You useless wretch. You’ve no doubt spilled every secret you know to that shifter of yours, and for what? In bargain for a pointless threat? Is that all he offered you to commit treason against your people?”

“There was no treason. They *are* coming for the Sibile, Verda-Rouge. It’s only a matter of time.”

“You know how this Tribunal treats traitors and outsiders who steal our secrets. The Wolf has served his purpose, the *lucescere*’s power is freed. Let us kill him and be done with it.”

“No,” Jade growled at the woman angrily. “Killing my mate would stop nothing. The shifters are not our

enemies. The humans are. We arm them with knowledge with every scarlet who leaves our gates. Stop the assignments.”

“Nothing stops!” Verda’s attack wasn’t so artful this time. A full frontal wave of sound came at Jade, jagged and ringing with rage. Glaring at the woman, Jade created a wall of her own, scooped and concave, gathering all that menace and firing it right back at the angry Magistrate. The older woman didn’t have time to regroup, raising her arms in front of her face to ward off her own sound. She fell back, even as many of the others rose to defend her.

The giant disc of light above shattered into shards, each one flying at the throat of a Rouge like thrown darts, stopping only millimeters from racing carotids. Power filled the arena, strong enough, fast enough, to whip around them all. She could feel their fear, practically swam in it. Nearly everyone there was wondering if this was how their lives were about to end.

As they should be.

“If any harm comes to my mate,” Jade began, turning the light blades menacingly. “Or any that he holds dear, I will not hesitate to incinerate all that you are and all that you have ever known.”

A long pause later, Verda rose, the tip of Jade’s blade guiding her back to her feet. Blood dripped from various cuts streaking her face and forehead. “You would be traitor to your people?” she asked, her eyes locked on the threat she couldn’t evade.

“You were a traitor to me first.” And they all knew it. “I may be Sibile, but I’m Wolf too, and Wolves believe in revenge. Now swear it. Swear that he and all he protects are safe from your judgments for eternity.”

“There will be a price for this the likes of which you have never seen, Jade-Scarlet,” Verda replied flatly.

“I’ll deal with that when the time comes.” And it would be worth it.

Finally, Verda nodded. Jade listened as the women voiced the promise, thirty-three voices speaking in chorus. It would have been beautiful if it weren’t her own death warrant.

The vow kept, Jade allowed the light to disappear, returning the women to the shadows they lived their lives in. Without another word, she stalked back through the open circular door, toward the light.

“Well, that explains why I was always so sure the Sisters didn’t know anything.” Sage sighed, leaning on her elbows as she looked beyond the wall of their dormitory’s balcony. “They really didn’t.”

For the last twenty minutes, they’d stood rooted in the spot, overlooking the grounds, while Jade relayed the past three days and all its unexpected secrets. The truth about her parents, what Jalla was to her, her gifts and, most important, that nothing they’d learned about the history of their people could be trusted.

“It’s not like it’s a surprise. I mean, you can’t be me and not be used to hearing people think one thing and tell you something else. People lie all the time.” Sage’s smile didn’t have its usual effervescence. “Some lies are important, though. Necessary, even.”

Jade shook her head. “No, I can’t believe that. All lies ever do is hurt, leaving you unprepared when the truth comes along.”

“All I’m saying is that the world, even the little world in this enclave, is complicated. It’s not all black and white. Think about it, what would you have done if Jalla had told you she was your grandmother when you first came?”

“I—” Jade struggled to answer. The truth wasn’t helpful. “I would have asked her about my mother.”

“And if you knew it was her fault your mother died?”

Jade rejected that outright. “It wasn’t. That was on Challen. On the Tribunal. They made the *choice* to kill her.”

“Not to Jalla.” Sage shrugged, peering over the balcony edge again. “To her, she didn’t look far enough ahead. She let her pride lead and it cost her the child she cherished. Do you really think she’d make that same mistake twice?”

Jade stared at the friend she loved like a sister and wondered if she’d ever truly known her.

Sage made a face. “If you’re only going to let me peek in your mind once in a while, could you please not think stupid things? Of course you know me. And before you ask, no, I never read Jalla’s mind about this. But anyone with a brain knows she loves you. Even a few of the morons out there without one. She’s risked everything to protect you. To guide you. The least you could do is trust her.”

Easily said when one hadn’t just nearly died at the hands of a faceless killer intending to rip her heart out of her chest with one strike.

“Ew.”

Jade smiled, unwillingly. But that was Sage for you.

“Do you really think the humans can get past the gates? Past the protections?”

At least on this topic, Jade didn't have any doubts at all. "Yes. I'm not sure how, but if there's a way, they will find it."

"What about revering what they fear? It's kept them in line for over a hundred years."

Jade didn't have to stretch for an explanation. "What happens when you're afraid of something for too long?"

Sage hugged herself, the answer clear. "You look for ways to conquer it."

Jade nodded, her gaze drawn once again to the gates beyond the trees. She couldn't see them from here, but she looked anyway. "They're coming. And everyone here is too sure, too confident in their power to remember what it is to be afraid. The scarlets will keep going out, leaking information they have no idea they're giving. Sooner or later, the humans will have enough to attack, and only God knows where we'll end up then."

"You will be somewhere very far from here."

They both turned, shocked at the sight of Jalla-Rouge standing at the open door to the balcony. In her gnarled fingers she held a large black velvet pouch by its strings. Her Rouge's robe hid the fragility of her form, but Jade could see that Jalla had aged considerably in the last few days. Deep, dark circles underlined her bloodshot eyes. Her color was worse, even, than in the last dream. She looked as if she hadn't slept in weeks.

Remembering Challen's pleased taunts, Jade realized she wasn't the only one who had suffered the last few days.

In the pain of that realization, it took Jade a second to remember the woman's words. "What do you mean, far away? Where else would I be?"

Jalla took the wooden seat, settling tiredly. Her gray eyes were as shadowed as ever, but the love in them was unmistakable. Had it always been and she'd been too afraid to see it?

"I owe you many apologies, Jade, but I hope you understand...the greater good had to come first. Your future had to come first. Not our past."

"I don't understand."

"Defeating Challen is only the first step for you." Jalla's smile had a touch of slightly sadistic glee. "Your destiny has always been to lead the Sibile to a new era. That is why Verda-Rouge fights so hard against you. She doesn't believe we need a new era. But we do. As surely as the sun sets, our time here is coming to an end."

"When? How?"

Jalla shook her head. "No, *chère*. The time will come, that is all you need to know for now. Well, that and that you've been offered a chance to take the Rouge trials. Because of your actions in the auditorium, you've already been granted the title of the *Lucescere*."

The news made no difference to Jade. "They won't change their minds about the scarlet assignments?"

"You knew they wouldn't. That was *their* destiny."

"How do you do this?" Jade leaned her hands, clawless hands she barely recognized, on the edge of the wooden balcony, wanting to pound them instead. "How can you stay so calm when you know so many people are going to die?"

"Because I look into the futures of the ones who can be saved, if the right choices are made. No matter what we do, we can't save everyone."

Jade sighed, not needing the echo of Pale's words just then. As it was, her heart felt like an open wound. She

searched the trees again, even though she knew there was no hope of seeing him still out there.

"The whole world is yours, Jade." The world inside the enclave, anyway. "All you need do is to take what you want."

"What I want isn't here."

"Because this was never where you belonged," Jalla said, rising with effort. Jade rushed to help her, stopping suddenly when Jalla put her hand over her heart. The heart Challen had wanted so badly, which felt shredded in two by her own hand. "You *know* where you belong."

God, how she knew, but her own happiness could never mean more than his life. "I have to protect him."

"You've done what you can. Believe me. This is your season of peace. Your mate will be safe from the Tribunal. They won't go back on their word, I vow it."

"You can't make that promise. Look what happened to my mother. They just waited until your back was turned and found another way to get what they wanted."

"Oh, it won't be so simple this time." At Jade's frown, Jalla smoothed a hand over her cheek. In an instant, Jade remembered that last spirit freed from Challen, the loving touch so like this one. A mother's goodbye. "Apart from fear for their lives should they cross you, I may have given them a vision of a future that hinges on his survival."

"You lied?" the whisper escaped before Jade could stop it.

Looking sad again, Jalla straightened her spine and squared her shoulders. "Destiny isn't done with us yet. There *will* come a day when the Sibile will need strong

allies if we mean to survive the coming war. A place to run to when this one is gone.”

She knows about Pale, about the mountain. Jade could only stand in mute awe as Jalla pressed the velvet satchel into her hands and a kiss onto her forehead. Inside it, she could feel countless hard stones sliding against each other. *Her rebellion goes deeper than anyone knows.*

“This time is precious, Jade. And brief. But it *is* yours and his. Take it.”

Jade clung to her, the only mother she’d ever truly known.

“You asked me about your future, do you remember?”

Jade nodded, mute, afraid to hope.

“You’ve never had a future without him either. This is the path you were born to take.”

“What if you need me?”

Jalla scoffed. “We Sibile are arrogant for a reason. I can reach you, wherever you go, no matter how far. And if that fails, if we need you, we have our ways.” Jalla tilted her head toward Sage, who was doing her very best not to look interested at a possible hint of adventure. Jalla pushed Jade away, as she had a thousand times in the past, her voice firm, but finally Jade knew how much it must have hurt her. “Now go, child. *Go.*”

With those words, responsibility released its hold. She was free. Truly, completely free. She stopped only to hug Sage one last time and then she ran.

Down the flights of stairs, through the grand hall and out into the sun. With every step, every breath, she felt her spirit soaring. Flying. She burst through the path in the trees, racing for the gates. For Pale. The gates opened

but the car she'd hoped would still be there, waiting, was gone.

"Pale?" She turned, looking up and down the road, but he wasn't there. She really shouldn't have expected him to be. If he were truly going to leave this life behind, there wouldn't be any trace of him in any direction. He was gone.

"I thought you could find the coldest trails I wouldn't find on my best day."

She spun, finding him leaning against the brick wall, arms crossed, light eyes glowing. He smiled, those unexpected dimples sinking into each cheek. She'd been flying out so fast, she had gone right past him.

"I'm starting to think you couldn't track your way out of a paper bag."

"You're still here," she breathed, relieved.

He nodded, his reserve ruined by his smoldering gaze. "You came back."

"I couldn't stay."

He finally took a step toward her. "I couldn't leave." Another step, his boots scraping on the ground as if he were being dragged toward her. "If you're not coming with me, Jade, you need to get your ass back behind those gates because I can't let you go twice."

Not dragged. Trying so hard to do what she asked of him.

She made it easy for him, jumping into his arms and wrapping her legs around his waist. "I'm coming with you."

His arms clamped around her, taking her weight easily, one hand grasping the back of her neck to keep her

still while he glared directly in her eyes. "You will never leave me again. *Never.*"

"Pale—"

"No, you just used up all the give I've got. This has been the most miserable two hours of my life. You weren't gone two minutes and I already felt dead inside without you. So you're not going anywhere without me ever again, do you hear me?"

"I'm sure all of Moonridge County heard you."

"That wasn't an agreement," he growled.

She licked his lips. That wasn't an agreement either, but neither of them particularly cared. He kissed her, until tears slipped over her cheeks from a joy she never thought to know. Let him yell. Let him growl and snap and grouse. He still didn't know what to do with joy. But he'd learn. They both would. "Take me home, Pale."

She didn't have to tell him twice.

He carried her across the street, into the wild brush and trees, where he finally put her down long enough to clear the brush he'd placed over the car. It took almost no time, they were so eager to leave. Within minutes, they were back on the road, driving into the mountains. They talked until Jade grew tired, falling asleep watching new snow drift down from the sky.

Hours later, she woke to Pale lifting her out of the seat, her cape hanging free. "We're here," he murmured.

With a start, she looked over her own shoulder to see people milling in the center of a wooded clearing. The trees were huge, so high she couldn't see the tops of any of them, and so wide around the bottom that shelters of every kind were built beneath them. Some were older, built with huge pieces of wood, probably from the trees they'd felled to clear the area. Log cabins... Others were

newer, fashioned to look more like modern houses, made with processed wood and cement. All around, more and more structures hidden under tree limbs and snow, home after home after home.

Men and women of all ages began stepping out onto porches, but what really made Jade's eyes widen were the children. Girls, boys, babies. Dozens of them. Dozens and dozens of children...

She wriggled to be put down, something Pale grudgingly allowed, though his hand stayed firmly around her waist. Back on her own feet, she curled her fingers around his, watching the people—the shifters he'd been working so hard to save—mill around them.

"That's her! That's my lucky star lady!"

She jerked, looking around for the excited voice, piping and small, but excited. "Emmitt?"

The little boy came running, his dark hair gleaming in the winter sun, color in his cheeks and excitement on his face. He crashed into her, a solid little body. She reached down to settle him, his sister's memories suddenly rushing to the forefront of her mind. This was what the girl had wanted so desperately for him. Safety. Hope. A chance.

"I told them you were real, but they didn't believe me." He pointed at a group of wide-eyed kids, most of them utterly terrified at the sight of her red cape. "See, I *told* you sibbos could be nice!"

"She's not a sibbo!" A little girl yelled back. "She's a shifter, just like us. Or she wouldn't be here."

Emmitt looked up at her, clutching a handful of her robe, a touch of nervousness on his face. A hundred faces looked at her expectantly. Not sure what to do, she looked

up at Pale, but he was no help. His face was full of amused challenge. An Alpha's mate needed to be able to lead *with* him, she decided.

She smiled down at Emmitt, winking one eye the way Sage so often did to her. Then she stretched out her hand and drew a stream of colors over the children's heads. Smiling, she only had to think of the Wolf at her back and all the things she was going to do to him when she got him alone. Her fangs lowered, a warm tingle filling her mouth, but no one could miss the shift.

"I'm both," she said, giving in to her urge to finally touch the boy's silky curls.

It seemed enough for Emmitt. "See?" He ran back into the crowd of kids, all of which were talking on top of each other, some pointing at the fading rainbow, others pointing fingers and blaming one another for doubting Emmitt's story.

Pale moved behind her, wrapping both arms around her as adults moved into the clearing. Not with trepidation or fear. Not with anything but acceptance, because, like them, she belonged to him. And he belonged to her.

Pale brushed a kiss across her cheek. "Welcome to Resurrection, Jade."

But as the first of the adults found her, reaching out to offer her welcome, Jade felt the truth. This was more than a camp for the lost. More than a new beginning, even.

This was home.

About the Author

Dee Tenorio has a few reality issues. After much therapy for the problem—if one can call being awakened in the night by visions of hot able-bodied men a problem—she has proved incurable. It turns out she enjoys tormenting herself by writing sizzling, steamy romances of various genres spanning paranormal mystery dramas, contemporaries and romantic comedies. Preferably starring the sexy, somewhat grumpy heroes described above and smart-mouthed heroines who have much better hair than she does.

The best part is, no more therapy bills!

Well, not for Dee anyway. Her husband and kids, on the other hand...

If you would like to learn more about Dee and her work, please visit her Web site at www.deetenorio.com or her blog at <http://www.deetenorio.com/Blog/>.



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