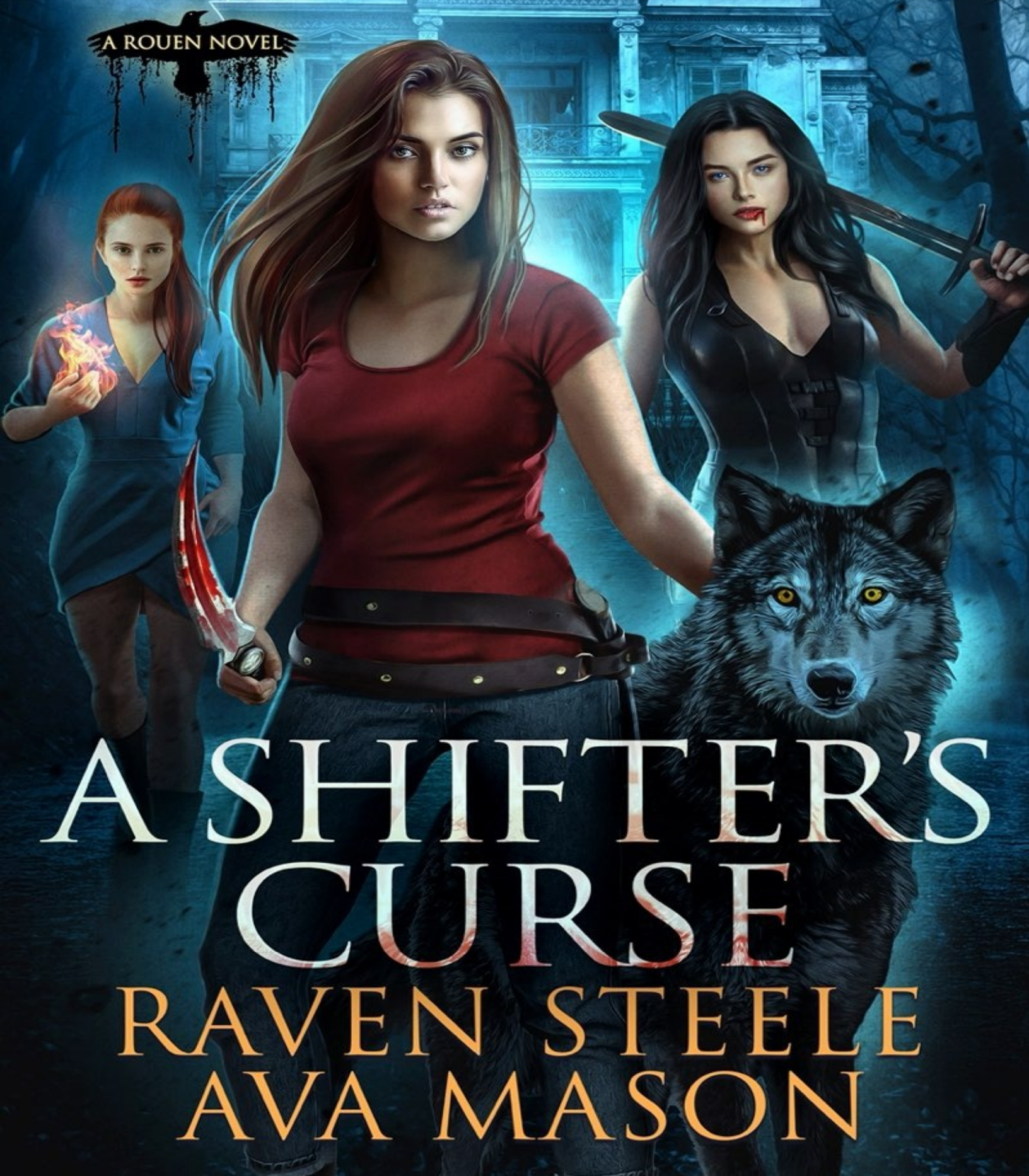


A ROUEN URBAN FANTASY NOVEL 1

A ROUEN NOVEL



A SHIFTER'S CURSE

RAVEN STEELE
AVA MASON

A SHIFTER'S CURSE

A ROUEN URBAN FANTASY 1



RAVEN STEELE

AVA MASON



“I like to go dancing, have a few beers. I like being alone, too. I have days where it's ‘God, get me a shot of tequila.’”

~ Justine Bateman

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CHAPTER 1



He shouldn't be in this place. It was a dick move for a vampire. Everyone knew only shifters hung out at Sinsual, a human dance club. But here the bastard was slipping in and out of the crowd like a shark in a tank full of bottom-feeders. I wouldn't call them that, but it was evident by the vampire's face he sure did. He wore disgust and disdain like a bad Halloween mask. He hated being among shifters just as bad as I hated looking at him. Not that he was bad looking, mind you. With a sharp jaw, roman nose, and big grey eyes, he had the kind of face artists would piss themselves to paint.

"Are you drinking tonight?" a man behind the bar asked for the third time. He had an earring in his eyebrow and a tattoo of a target on his throat. A perfectly round circle plastered on his ridiculously long neck.

"I've been wanting to order all night, but I was waiting for you to stop staring at my tits."

His face reddened, and I snickered. Yeah, I caught you eyeing me, you little pervert. It's not like I was wearing anything super revealing either. Sure, it was tight, but my black tank top came up high enough to cover my ample cleavage line. Thanks for those genes, Grandma Angelica.

"If you're finished, I'll order," I said.

He sighed heavily. "Sorry."

I tried not to show my surprise. "That's more like it, Peeper."

"My name's Mike."

"Not tonight, Peeper. You got to earn my respect now. What's a good

Louisiana drink?"

"A Sazerac."

"Then make me one of those."

He mumbled something under his breath that sounded like "rude prude". Normally I'd call him out on something like that, but getting into a fight this soon after breezing into town would prevent me from doing two things. One, securing a job because, obviously, money is good, and two, finding a place to live. I needed these things if I was going to find the last two most important people on my list, the same list I always kept right next to my ass. Because until I could watch the life drain from their cold, heartless eyes, sitting on them would have to do.

I played with the ring on my middle finger while I waited for Peeper to make my drink, fumbling with the stupid glass like his fingers were all thumbs. Since I was new to Rouen, I wasn't as familiar with this drink, but I could tell that he was adding too much bitters and not enough whiskey. This was going to be too easy.

"Are you Briar?" a bubbly voice shouted behind me, trying to get my attention over the club noise.

I whirled around on the stool. A gal with red hair and a splash of freckles on her nose stared at me expectantly. I eyed her up and down. She looked a couple of years younger than me, maybe twenty-two. "You must be Lynx."

She was skinny. So skinny her clothes hung on her as if she were a coat rack. Yet the way they matched, greens on top, darks on bottom, I wondered if the baggy look was deliberate. Fashion was something I knew nothing about. It was right up there with cooking and sewing.

Smiling, she extended her hand. "That's me. Thanks for coming."

I shook her hand, surprised by the strength in her grip. Maybe she wasn't as fragile as she looked.

She scooted onto a stool next to me. "So you're looking for a place to live?"

"Yup. A month-to-month situation. I'm not sure how long I'll be staying in Rouen." It could even be a couple of weeks, but I wasn't going to tell her that. If I didn't catch a whiff of the men I was looking for, I'd move on.

"How come?"

Peeper slid my Sazerac in a small glass to me, smirking. "On the house."

"That's sweet of you." I winked at him and wrapped my lips around the straw and sucked, then almost spit it out on the counter. Too sweet. I forced the liquid down my throat. Did he know anything at all about making drinks? Better be sure. "How about you make something for my new friend Lynx?"

"I'm not drinking," she said a little too quickly.

I glanced at her from the corner of my eye, taking in her demeanor. People that didn't drink made me nervous, especially if they were in a bar. Usually, it meant they were hiding something. Or they were a recovering alcoholic or a Mormon. Lynx didn't look like either, which meant this chick had secrets. I had my own, but it took a lot of alcohol for me to admit even the name of my home town. No one needed to know my past.

"But I will have a soda, diet. With lemon."

Peeper mumbled another string of words. He probably thought he was having a bad night, but it was only going to get worse when I took his job in a few minutes.

I turned back to Lynx to answer her question about not staying in Rouen, twisting the ring on my finger again. "I don't like to stay in any place for too long. I get bored easily."

She laughed. "I don't think you'll get bored in Rouen. Plus, my house is pretty amazing. I inherited it from my grandma. It was built in the late 1700s and has all these cool secret rooms and passageways. The room I'm renting out is super huge and has its own bathroom. Did you see the pictures online?"

I took another sip of the disgusting drink. "I did. That's why I called you. I need my own bathroom."

Pinpricks raced up my spine, tingling my wolfie senses. I glanced to my left, spotting another vampire. A woman this time, dressed all in black. I swear, sometimes vampires take their roles way too seriously.

That makes two vampires in a known-shifter hangout. Something was up.

"The room is all yours." Lynx accepted her diet soda from Peeper, thanking him with a smile. Her eyes sparkled. I cursed under my breath. Just my luck, I'd

get the bubbly roommate. She pulled out a few dollars and left it on the counter then turned back to me.

"I mean, you look decent enough. You are wearing True Religion clothing after all, so high marks in my book."

"Am I?" I reached behind me and tore the tag off the back of my tank top. Lynx gasped in horror. I stared down at the tag. "Sure as shit."

Her widened eyes were practically tearing. "I can't believe you just did that."

I casually glanced toward the female vampire again, noting she was wearing glasses, something a vampire would have no need of. She edged toward us, and I had a sneaking suspicion she was listening to us with her super-human hearing.

I subconsciously tugged on my ridiculously thick brown hair. I didn't like anyone listening in on my conversations.

"Right, well." Lynx shuffled uncomfortably. "So you're not into fashion. No biggie. I still need a roommate and the house is huge, like seven bedrooms. You'll have your space. In fact, you'll barely know I'm there with my work schedule."

"You're speaking my language, chica." I liked the idea of having a place mostly to myself. People freaked me out with their constant need to talk and their obsessive need to belong. It wasn't me.

The bartender attempted his next mixed drink, and I cringed as he did it all wrong. It took all my willpower not to jump over the counter and yank the glass right out of his clumsy hands. Just as I decided to do that, another prickly sensation alerted my wolf.

I turned around as the female vampire slid onto the barstool next to me. Power radiated off her in waves and pressured the air around us with static electricity. Without a doubt, she could break my neck in a second if I wasn't careful.

My own shifter powers emerged and a soft, but threatening, growl emitted from my throat. A not so subtle warning that I wasn't without my own power and skill. I'd done some neck breaking in my days too.

But the vampire only flicked her electric-blue eyes at me behind her thin glasses, then leaned forward to get Lynx's attention. It was an obvious dismissal

of my warning and pissed me the hell off.

"I hear you are looking for a roommate?" she asked Lynx.

The hairs on the back of my neck heckled. What the? Why was this dead chick pissing on my territory?

Lynx's eyebrows rose, and she smiled nervously. "Um, well—"

I didn't wait for Lynx to finish. "Listen, goth girl. She's looking for one roommate. Me. So go find someone else to mooch off."

She stared down her nose at me. "If you're referencing to living off someone else then believe me, I am no mooch. However, I assert myself when necessary." Her eyes narrowed at me. "And I haven't been called a 'girl' in a long time."

"That's what you're calling me out on?"

Her gaze flickered back to Lynx. "I'm Samira, and I need a place to live for a few months. Your home sounds perfect." Her face was serious, but she forced her lips up in a smile. If she was going for reassuring, she was failing miserably. "I need a place to sleep."

"How did you hear—"

"I'll pay you quadruple what you're asking."

Lynx choked on her drink.

I huffed air past my lips. Typical cliché vampire move. If they can't get their way, they flash a bunch of money. I would be wealthy too if I lived forever.

"I can move in tomorrow night." Samira leaned even closer, blocking me out, and a curtain of long black hair fell across her leathered shoulder. I was tempted to reach out and touch the thick strands. Either that or palm the ends in my fist and yank hard.

I did neither, though the last option could be exciting. Just then, I spotted the bar manager walking this way. It was clear he was the boss by the way he was eyeing everyone nervously. The name tag on his crisp, white, buttoned-up shirt helped too.

I slapped my hand down on the bar. "I'm pressing pause on the roommate wars conversation. I need to get a job."

Lynx wrinkled her small, up-turned nose. "I don't think they're hiring."

"They aren't, yet." I jumped up, sat on the bar, and swung my legs to the

other side. I hopped behind the counter, rubbing my hands together. Where to begin?

"Hey!" Peeper hurried over to me, a blue liquid sloshing outside of the cup he was holding. "You're not supposed to be back here!"

I ignored him and picked up a bottle of bourbon whiskey and amaretto to make some quick shots. I spun them around in my hands as a teaser for the growing crowd.

"Who's up for some capital punishment? 'Cause I'm dishing it out, if you all can take it!" I yelled into the crowd, using a little power from my wolf to gain everyone's attention. It was the only way to be heard over the loud music.

When I knew they would be looking, I tossed both bottles into the air so they spun a three-sixty, and caught them again. Everyone cheered and pushed their way to the bar.

"I'll take more than your punishment," a dude in a tight t-shirt said, eyeing me greedily. The crowd howled with laughter.

"I'm not sure you can handle me." I smiled and gave him a saucy wink.

Making a show of lining up as many shot glasses as I could find, I spun the bottles around again and poured some into each glass to create a round of Capital Punishments. Once all those were gobbled up, I started taking requests.

I had learned the art of mixing drinks when I was a fourteen-year-old kid and landed at a halfway house back East. I wasn't a juvenile delinquent like the other kids, just an orphan lost to the overburdened foster care system.

But those kids had taught me more than just mixing drinks. They had some serious survival skills, especially for normal humans. Eventually, my drink-making skills had surpassed all of theirs, and I'd become the queen of that place. Soon, I'd be royalty here too. It was just a matter of time.

"Let me pass," I heard the manager say to the crowd. He pushed his way through the customers to reach me. He was pissed, but that was all about to change.

Grabbing a bottle of Larceny I saw earlier, I tipped the bottle of Kentucky Bourbon straight into my mouth. I closed my eyes and rolled that first taste around, bathing my taste buds in the buttery caramel flavor. The honeyed-notes

played over my tongue, like a symphony for my palate. I savored the smooth texture before letting it slide down my throat—warm and comforting.

Wanting another taste, I made a show of holding the bottle up, as if to pound the bourbon in a frat boy guzzle-fest. Not going to happen. I had something way better in mind and jumped up to kneel on the bar.

I poured a mouthful and held it there while I held up a lighter for everyone to see. The crowd exploded into cheers, knowing what was coming and chanted, "Do it! Do it! Do it!"

From the corner of my eye, I saw that the manager had stopped to watch. I swallowed a portion of the bourbon and spit out the rest while simultaneously setting it on fire. Creating a flame thrower with my mouth, I aimed away from any onlookers. I couldn't very well set them on fire.

I glanced at the vamp on the stool below who was glaring up at me. Now her, that was a different story.

The crowd went crazy, and I made another round of drinks. I finished pouring the last one requested and slid it down the long bar. The fact that not one drop was lost on the slide home was a testament to the pride Peeper took in his bar. I glanced over at where he sat on the back counter. His shoulders were tightened, and he was scowling.

I smiled. "You can take over now. I'm done."

"Really?" His voice was sarcastic. "Thanks for giving me back my bar."

"No problem." I winked. "Just finish up with the rest of the customers."

"How in the hell am I supposed to compete with what you just pulled?"

"It's not a competition. We're all winners in my book." There was room in this place for two bartenders, especially with the crowds I would draw in.

When he didn't answer, I walked past him toward the manager who'd finally made it behind the bar. He wasn't tall like Peeper, but he was lean with honed muscles like a man on a rowing team.

He leaned his head toward me and yelled over the excited crowd. "What's your name? I'm Eddie."

"Briar. Sorry about taking over your bar. I see rows of alcohol, and I guess I get a little crazy."

"You looking for a job?"

"Not really." Best to play hard to get.

I scanned the audience, making a mental note to keep an eye out for the two vampires and their location. Samira was still chatting up Lynx, no doubt worming her goth self into my room.

Eddie was talking again, but I didn't hear a word because a tingling sensation started at the back of my head. My palms grew sweaty, and my breathing picked up. Something wasn't right.

I did another sweep of the club's patrons, specifically focusing near the VIP lounge where I spotted the male vampire. Even from here I could see his eyes were glazed over. He had that euphoric look vamps got from drinking blood. The hairs on the back of my neck stood, and a low growl began in my throat. Vamps shouldn't be eating out in the open like that. Licking his lips, the vamp leaned over, whispering in the ear of a man sitting on the couch.

As soon as my eyes shifted to said man, my back straightened and time slowed to a stop. Holy titty tongue twister. It was him. I was sure of it. I sucked in a breath through my teeth.

I'd finally found him.

The man I'd hunted for over ten years.

My blood turned to ice, and a blast of nausea churned my stomach. I never considered how I'd feel once I actually found him. I'd been doing it for so long I was used to the slow, angry rage that constantly burned my stomach.

I narrowed my eyes.

Finally, I was going to rid myself of the man I'd dreamed of killing for most of my life.

"I'd love to hire you." These were the only words that slipped through my mind as Eddie continued talking. Pretending to listen, I watched the bastard stand up, button the top button of his suit and walk to the other side of the club.

"I have to go." I dove into the crowd.

"I'll pay you double!"

Pausing for only a second, I tossed him a quick thumbs up sign, then focused all my attention back on the dude still moving through the crowd. It was Silas

Brown, aka, The Rat, and Dominic's beta.

He was one of the men who had slaughtered my whole family.

Now it was his turn, and I couldn't wait to tear him apart.

CHAPTER 2



*S*deftly moved around dancing couples and groups of desperate men, silently stalking Silas. He didn't look that much different than the last time I saw him, with pale skin and light blue eyes. But he did walk with a cane, trying to cover up the motion of a slight limp. His every movement was precise and stiff, as if he had a stick shoved up his southern pucker.

My wolfie powers pulsed through the club. I usually suppressed them, but I was too distracted to care. The vibe in the bar heightened as adrenaline spiked my senses, and an argument broke out near the restrooms. I ignored it; I couldn't worry about how I was affecting everyone. All thoughts, all movement, was focused on the man in my sights.

If Silas was in Rouen, then his Alpha Dominic couldn't be far away.

I shoved my way through the hordes of people, my hands practically shaking in anticipation. I'd dreamed of killing these two for so long that my hatred had become a natural part of me. Almost like breathing or screwing.

But I had to be careful. If any of them discovered I was still alive, they'd break my neck for the chance to get their hands on the Abydos blood. Keeping that safe was the only thing in this world I'd give my life for. It must be protected at all costs.

Pushing aside another customer, my hopes of reaching Silas waned when I crashed into a man's chiseled chest. I growled and moved to get past him, but he stepped in front of me again. Was this jerkoff deliberately blocking me?

I looked up a good six inches, meeting the intense, blue eyes of a man who

looked like he'd just stepped off a Viking ship, minus all the animal skins. With dark rumpled hair and a taut muscle-lined body, he looked every inch the man I would love to have wrapped around me for at least a week. He was about my age too. Almost perfect, except he was staring at me with cold, hard eyes and a look of contempt, which doused my hormones, akin to waking up to a cold shower and a hangover.

"Get out of my way." I glanced over his massive frame; I couldn't see Silas' head anymore.

"You need to turn around and return to the bar." His voice was deep yet smooth, like a hundred-year-old bourbon being poured over rocks. The sound of it surrounded my senses, caressing my skin softly. I cursed.

"What's your deal? It's a damn club. I can go wherever I want."

"I don't like the way you were eyeing my boss, Pup." He folded his massive arms to his chest and stared down at me. So he recognized I was a wolf. Not all shifters could detect other shifters. I wondered if he was able to spot the vampires, too. I couldn't imagine him being too pleased about them.

"Don't call me that. Move." I tried to shove him away, but he knocked my hands to the side before I made impact.

His voice lowered even deeper, and his eyes flashed a warning. "Leave."

"Now you're just pissing me off." Curling my fingers into my palm, I punched him. It wasn't at full strength, but it was effective. He stumbled back, his expression darkening.

He growled, the sound vibrating low in his throat. "I wish you wouldn't have done that."

He lunged for me, but I maneuvered to the side and grabbed an empty chair at a nearby table. I swung it around, hoping to catch him in the back. He anticipated the move and ducked. The chair crashed into a club bouncer instead. Even though the massive dude was a regular human, he looked like he ate coal for breakfast and crapped diamonds at lunch.

The bouncer's expression twisted into a snarl, and he swung two meaty fists at the shifter blocking my path to Silas. Snickering, I got out of the way just in time as the fists connected with the shifter's jaw, one after the other. The shifter

fell backwards into a shorter man, spilling his beer all over his shirt.

The shorter man turned around, along with three of his friends. I expected them to exchange words, you know, trash talk each other, but apparently, I was surrounded by men of action. Before I could take my next breath, the scene in front of me turned into a full-on brawl. It only took a second for more people to jump into the fray.

I shook my head, smiling. Drunk people were stupid. And fun as hell.

The air filled with the smells of sweat and blood, tempting me to jump in on the action, but I was a wolf on a mission and nothing would deter me.

I shoved my way past the fight to pick up Silas' scent, but someone jerked on my shirt. Oh, hell no. I spun around; there were so many fighting that I couldn't tell who had done it.

From the corner of my eye, I spotted Samira. She'd set her glasses on the bar and had joined the fight, throwing around graceful punches and kicks. She had some massive ninja skills. Guessing she was a lot older than I could ever imagine, this fight was probably a walk in the park for her. Lynx however, had shrunk away, her back pressed against the bar, and her eyes wide.

I turned back, looking for Silas, but he was gone. Angry I'd missed my chance, I pushed back through the swarms of people to get to the shifter who'd made me lose sight of my prize, determined to get some information out of him.

His gaze locked onto mine. I cracked my neck to the side, ready to punch his lights out. By his expression, he seemed to be thinking the same about me. He delved into the crowd, aimed in my direction.

As soon as I reached him, I swung at his face. "You screwed me over."

My fist missed its mark. He ducked and grinned. I pivoted and dropped, swinging my leg wide. I swiped his legs out from under him, smiling as his cocky grin disappeared.

He rolled between two tables. I jumped on top of him, straddling my legs on each side of his massive chest. Random legs bumped into me, but I shoved them away.

The shifter's smile was slow and deliberate, and his stare burned into me. He had the musky scent of the deep forest and gasoline. "You've been wanting to

hump me the second you saw me."

I punched him in the jaw. "If I'd wanted to hump you, you'd be in the handicap stall of the lady's restroom right now, hanging on for dear life."

"Ooo, sweet talker. I like it."

I punched him on the chest. "Where does your boss work?"

Faster than I could respond, he jerked me to the ground and rolled on top of me. It was his turn to straddle me. He leaned forward, pressing his forearm just below my throat to keep me from bucking him off. "Why do you want to know?"

I sucked in a quick breath, panic surging within me. I couldn't move. My chest began to tighten and sweat broke on my brow.

Tight spaces and being confined was something I avoided at all costs. This one had taken me by surprise. He leaned toward my face, further restricting my movements.

I struggled beneath him, my heartbeat thundering. "Get off me!"

My frantic words barely escaped my constricted lungs. The present faded, and all I could see was the hazy outline of old stone and moss. I flung my fists in every direction, swinging for anything I could hit. I didn't want to relive that memory. "Get off! Get off me!"

My wolf surged to the front of my consciousness, and she prepared to shift. She would protect me and didn't care where we were. I tried to take in a deep breath to calm her. Shifting in front of all these humans could get me killed the second I walked out the door. Besides, I had too much shit to do to get killed now.

The shifter's thick brows drew together in concern. "You okay?"

I couldn't answer, only suck in tiny sips of air. My lips tingled. Sensing my trouble, he slid off me. The hard look in his eyes was replaced with softness, which only pissed me off more. I didn't need his pity.

I reached for the top of a table and pulled myself up, feeling light headed. I gulped in fresh air, expanding my tight lungs. Finally, I could breathe again.

He said something else, but I was already shoving my way back to the bar. Well, that was embarrassing. I'd never had one of my claustrophobic episodes like that in front of anyone before. Just my luck that it would happen in front of

the second biggest asshole in the bar.

I passed Samira just as she kicked at the chest of a female shifter, a coyote, I believe. The coyote flew across the room, crashing into a table. Another female came up behind her, a chair raised high. Without even looking, Samira spun and grabbed her by the neck. I finished off the female with a single punch to the face. Samira nodded once at me and returned to the fight.

I leaned against the bar next to Lynx and tried to pretend that I hadn't gone all psycho just a second earlier. My lungs still burned. "This place is pretty crazy. Yet, fun, right?"

"I wouldn't say that. Does this usually happen here?"

"Probably only on good nights. So can I have the room or did goth chick beat me to it?"

I flashed my eyes to Samira. She met my gaze knowingly. Damn vampires and their good hearing.

"Actually, I think I might rent out two rooms. I could use the money."

Just then a large table, probably thrown by a shifter, came flying our way. It was spinning too fast. I stretched out my arms to block it, but it was so large, it would probably break my arms.

I closed my eyes, waiting for the burst of pain, but it never came. I opened my eyes. The table was on the ground in front of us. I had only shut them for maybe two seconds. How had that happened?

An electric charge filled the room, bringing with it the faint smell of copper. I could barely detect it, but it was there. I looked at Lynx to see if she was sensing anything strange, but she was staring down at the table, beads of sweat on her forehead. That's when I knew.

"You're a..." I swallowed, not finishing the sentence. Goth girl, among others, might be listening. I didn't care that she was a witch, but others might.

She glanced up at me, eyes pleading not to finish the sentence, as if she knew that I knew. I closed my mouth tight and made the motion of turning an invisible key and tossing it away. She mouthed the words, "Thank you."

No sweat, witchy. Turning around, I leaned back into the bar. The fight was dying down. A couple of humans had some minor cuts, and a shifter feline held

her arm protectively. Overall, a decent brawl.

I scanned the masses for Silas, hoping I'd just missed him earlier, but he was nowhere to be found. My gaze found his employee, the hot shifter. I averted my gaze, too embarrassed to even give him a dirty look, and turned around to face the bar.

"When can I move in?" I asked Lynx.

She was in the middle of downing her soda. With sweat still on her face and the way she guzzled her drink, using magic had taken a toll on her.

"After I do." Samira joined us at the bar and placed her glasses back on the bridge of her nose. She wasn't even breathing hard.

I turned to Lynx. "Are you really going to let goth girl room with us? Come on. It's okay to tell her no. I'm sure it won't hurt her feelings."

"Um...I..." Lynx stammered, unsure what to say.

"Goth Girl?" Samira asked "What does that mean?"

I chuckled and nudged Lynx. "You tell her."

Lynx's face reddened, and she lowered her eyes. First priority of living with this girl—teach her to speak up, especially when being sarcastic. She was a witch, and a powerful one at that. If anyone could turn her into a bitch who could stand up for herself, it was me. She'd be the wickedest witch bitch in no time.

Samira continued to speak. "From what you've told me, the home is five thousand square feet spread across three floors with seven bedrooms and five baths. That is plenty of space for three people."

I touched my forehead. "Stop. You're making my head hurt. Numbers."

Lynx cracked a smile. "There is plenty of room. Some of the rooms are even furnished. You can come check it out tonight if you want. My schedule is open, and you can move in whenever."

"I call dibs on the furnished room!" I needed furniture. Badly.

"Dibs?" Samira asked.

I sighed, and Lynx smiled again. Looks like I had two projects. For a vampire who has probably lived five lifetimes, she wasn't clued in to current culture. She must have been living alone for a very long time. Why would she suddenly want roommates?

"A toast." Lynx held up her glass. Only ice remained.

I made a motion at the bartender. "Hey, Peeper! Give us two shots of Tennessee Honey."

He poured shots of the amber whiskey and handed them to me.

"Thanks, dude. I look forward to working with you."

He muttered something and turned away.

I handed Samira the drink, but she held out her hand in a stopping motion. "I don't drink."

"I'm going to pretend you didn't say that." I forced her to take it. I lifted my glass and glanced at my new roommates. A timid witch who probably had no idea how powerful she actually was and an old vampire who clearly had an agenda. "To new friends."

As I clinked my glasses against theirs, my stomach clenched tightly. It only ever did that when something bad was about to happen, but that was ridiculous.

What could possibly go wrong in a house with a witch, a vampire, and a shifter?

CHAPTER 3



The house was a huge gothic mansion backed up against a rambling forest—the best part of the property. Whenever I wanted, I could slip away and let my wolf run. The dark, angular roof of the home absorbed the full moon’s light, making the old structure appear even darker. An eerie effect that I dug.

A quick glance at Samira told me she wasn't as impressed with the house, unless deadpan was her expression to everything.

We walked up the driveway, passing several large and ancient oak trees dripping with Spanish Moss. A rope swing hanging from a thick limb reminded me of one I used to swing on as a child. I wish I could go back to those days.

Grunting, I pushed away the memory and followed them inside the house.

“This is the shit,” I breathed and looked around the wood-paneled foyer with dark stained baseboard molding. Near the top of the cathedral ceilings was a stain glass window depicting a red pentagram. Interesting.

Samira breezed past me. “Must you always curse?”

“Get used to it, roomie.” I glanced back at Lynx who was standing in the doorway biting at her lip, her complexion pale. “You okay?”

She inhaled a deep breath and on her exhale smiled and said, “I’m good. Feel free to walk around and choose the room you want, except for the master bedroom on this floor. That’s where I’m at.”

I chose the room on the third floor in the northeast corner. It was away from my roommates and more open, two things I wanted. Samira took a room in the

basement. It didn't have any windows and the only exit was through the stairs. It also smelled of rust and several years' worth of dust. Enough reasons to make me hate it.

I walked back down the stairs and into the living room where Lynx stood by the fireplace, fingering a silver chain around her neck. Samira appeared at the same moment almost as if she had been listening for me. I stepped away from her to create space between us.

"Love my room, Lynx," I said. "It's perfect for smoking pot."

When her face paled, I quickly added, "I'm just messing with you, but I'd keep an eye on this one." I shoved a thumb in Samira's direction.

"I don't abuse substances," Samira said.

I dragged a hand down my face.

"I'll get my stuff and come back in the morning."

"I have to leave too." Samira walked toward the door not looking at either of us.

"Will you be back tonight?" Lynx asked her. "I can leave the back door unlocked."

"No. Tomorrow night." She opened the door and darkness swallowed her whole.

"I can not wait to get that woman drunk."

Lynx laughed, but it was quiet and reserved.

I rubbed at an ache behind my neck, taking in her body language. "Is this the first time you've had roommates?"

"Is it that obvious?"

"Don't be nervous. Your house. Your rules. If Samira is too cranky and boring, feel free to kick her out. I'll help. And if you find me too bossy and mouthy, then I'll buy you a bottle of Everclear. It worked for my houseparent at the group home I stayed at when I was younger."

"You were in a group home?"

"Um, once or twice. I should get going." I turned away from her, scolding myself for having revealed personal information. I needed to be more careful.

I said a quick goodbye and headed into the night. I wanted to search a couple

of more clubs before sunrise. Maybe I'd catch a glimpse of Silas again. But, after the rest of the night proved fruitless, I returned to my cheap motel for another restless night of sleep.

The next morning, I was ready to leave the sleazy motel and its prehistoric cockroaches for good. I returned to the house with my two suitcases, ready to move in. Lynx seemed surprised to see me so early, but she graciously let me in with a smile and showed me to my room.

It didn't take me long to settle into my room. I only had one suitcase of clothing, consisting mostly of jeans and dark t-shirts, which I shoved into dresser drawers quickly. The suitcase also held the few things I'd swiped from foster homes over the years. They didn't necessarily mean anything to me, but I kept them anyway. Simple mementos of my time in each place.

The only other suitcase I had was an ugly green one from the seventies. It was a ratty old thing, intentionally left that way so no one would think it was worth anything. The truth was, it held my most valuable possessions. I'd saved up for months to buy the items in here. I'd lovingly nicknamed it my booby trap case.

First, I pulled out my bras that looked pretty average, but if one looked closely, they would see that the material was thick and stretchy, lined with detailed stitching that reinforced the pockets sewn into it. It was bound with flexible whalebone, giving me space to hide my thinnest but sharpest knives. I put my thigh bands away next, also filled with knives of every sort, and shut the drawers.

I was already wearing the one strapped around my waist, holding a knife at my back.

I turned back to my new room. It had an old but comfy bed, a set of drawers, and a shelf for pictures or books. Light filtered in through a large bay window, and I pushed the curtains closed. I liked to let the sun in the room but not at eight am. The room also had a large walk-in closet. I hung up my one nice dress; it looked strange and lonely.

I thought of the dresses I'd owned as a kid, large and frilly, and usually caked with mud. My life had changed so much since then, and the only connection I

had to that life was hidden deep in a cave just outside of town: the Abydos, a thousand-year-old sacred blood that first gifted a human with shifter abilities. It was foretold that one day this blood would either destroy the world or save it. It had been my pack's responsibility to protect it for centuries. And now I was its sole protector.

No pressure.

After some time, I left my room to find something to eat in the kitchen. Lynx was no longer here, and Samira wouldn't arrive until sunset. I could get used to these living arrangements. When I finished eating a package of dry Ramen Noodles I'd found, I headed to town to ask about Silas. Someone had to know something, but everyone clammed up as soon as I mentioned his name, which was annoying as hell. I'd just have to wait until I got to work. My generous boobs and alcohol had a way of getting people to talk.

As soon as the sun set, like the very second its light disappeared, someone knocked briskly on the front door. I peeked out my bedroom window and spotted Samira on the porch. She also packed light, which made me even more suspicious. Female vampires never packed light; they usually traveled with sexy muscle-lined men that moved the antique furniture and delicate items they'd collected over the years.

I packed light because of my jacked-up past, plus I had plans of killing people so I needed a quick getaway. Even though I loved some of my possessions, I had nothing I couldn't leave behind. I hoped Samira's reasons weren't the same, or Rouen would see a lot of blood spilled. I'd have to keep an eye on her.

I waited about an hour before heading down the narrow stairs leading to a hallway next to the kitchen where I heard Samira and Lynx talking.

"Hey, roomies." I walked inside, interrupting their conversation. I opened the fridge and noted how little food there was. "I'll buy groceries with the tip money I get tonight."

I sniffed, smelling something that should never be in a refrigerator. I pushed aside a gallon of milk. Behind it were two glass bottles full of a dark crimson liquid with an attached handwritten label that read: Tomato Juice. Samira's.

Don't drink.

I rolled my eyes, my face chilling in the open fridge. Did she think we were idiots?

I wondered if Lynx had any idea of what Samira and I were. If so, she didn't give any hint of it.

As for Samira, she had to know I was a shifter, just like I knew she was a vampire.

Samira reduced the space between her and me. I slammed the door shut, taking note of her closeness and wondering what the hell she was doing. But I didn't move away. If she was pulling some kind of power move, she'd be disappointed that I didn't back down. Ever.

"Thanks for grabbing some groceries," Lynx said. "I always forget." She didn't seem to notice Samira's and my interaction. "What time do you go to work?"

I continued my eye-lock with Samira but answered Lynx. "Not for several hours. I work the ten-to-two shift. You guys should come by."

Lynx ran her fingers through her hair. She had straightened it today. "I don't know. That fight was a little too much for me. Are you going, Samira?"

Samira finally stepped away. "There were one hundred and seventy-two people on just the first floor. Another fifty-three on the balcony. They were over max capacity by three." She stopped talking, as if that was all that needed to be said.

How the hell did Samira know all that? Was counting one of her superpowers? She should fall into a vat of chemicals somewhere to try and get something different.

"So... are you coming?" Lynx asked, her brow furrowed.

"I will count the numbers when I get there," Samira said. "Chaos bothers me."

"Let me guess. Math was your best subject as a child." I opened a cupboard and found a box of breakfast pastries. I held it toward Lynx, raised my eyebrows as if to say, "May I?" She nodded an approval, and I slouched into one of the kitchen chairs to eat one.

"Numbers can't lie to you." Samira's voice held a clear note of resentment.

I bristled. "Someone's been hurt in the past."

"I'm sure we all have," Lynx said quietly. "Do you want a pastry, Samira?"

"Actually," I interrupted, "I bet she'd love some of her homemade tomato juice." I glanced back at her and winked. She gave me her dead face, which I think translated to, "Screw you."

A knock on the front door had me on my feet, alert and ready to fight. Samira also started, her hand inside her jacket as if to grab a knife hidden inside.

Lynx stared at us expectantly.

When no one moved, I glanced at the door. "Do you want me to get it?"

Lynx cleared her throat and laughed nervously. "I'm not used to visitors. I'm guessing neither are you two." She moved toward the living room. "I can get it. It's probably just a neighbor."

Relaxing, I shoved the rest of the pastry into my mouth, but Samira remained tense. As soon as Lynx left the room, Samira turned toward me. "It's a wolf."

This had my hackles back up, and I gulped down the rest of the food in a hurry, in case trouble happened. "You can sense that all the way in here?"

"He smells bad."

I sniffed, faintly detecting a masculine smell. Like the forest when it turned into fall. I thought it smelled amazing... until I recognized who it was. Frowning, I kicked the edge of the table. "I'll take care of it."

Why would the shifter from the club come here?

As I walked out of the kitchen, I wondered if all shifters smelled bad to Samira. I snickered. Hopefully not, or she was going to have a hell of a time living with me.

I reached the front room. Lynx stood at the open door, laughing.

As soon as I saw him, my body instantly reacted, sending a warmth shooting across my flesh. He filled the entryway with his massive body, and his eyes took me in as I approached. My face tinged pink when I remembered how I'd panicked in front of him.

Sensing my presence, Lynx turned. "Luke's here for you."

Luke, is it? I tilted my head to the side, pretending I was just recognizing

him. "Oh, hi, nice to see you again. Thanks, Lynx."

"Sure." She gave Luke a quick wave of her hand. "See you later."

As soon as Lynx was gone, I pressed my hand to his chest and pushed him onto the front porch. Samira's sleek black car that was probably worth a gazillion dollars sat in the middle of the driveway. A motorcycle was parked next to it. Assuming the bike was his, I understood now why he smelled like gasoline the other night.

"What are you doing here?" I slammed the door behind me and folded my arms over my chest. "Are you following me? I think that could be filed under creepy stalker behavior."

His eyes met mine for a moment, and I heard his breath pick up. He scowled, with eyebrows so intense they met in the middle. "I followed your scent."

"Clearly. And, like I said, stalkery. What do you want?"

His eyes glanced down to my crossed arms, then he quickly averted his gaze. I remembered I hadn't put a bra on yet. Damnit.

"Other shifters at the club sensed you," he said. "A new, and a lone wolf in town draws attention. Do you belong to a pack?"

"I'd rather chew on bullets."

"It's pretty suspicious when wolves roll into town and won't even consider joining. It usually means they have something to hide."

"What I do is my business. I'm a lone wolf and completely happy with the sitch."

He raised his eyebrows, the corner of his mouth turning up. "Lone wolves are usually cowards or bitches. Which one are you?"

"I'll tell you who the bitch is. Did your Alpha bark an order to find me? Do you like being told what to do?" I stepped forward again, moving myself into his personal space so that I was inches from him. "I can order you around too, if that's your thing."

He collapsed the space between us. The heat from his body warmed mine. "Let me make one thing clear. I'm the one who gives commands."

My wolf emerged, snarling protectively, and her power pulsed through my body. "I'd like to see you try."

"There is no try. Only do. And I do it good."

"Oooo, big wolf. Why don't you come inside and show me how well you do it?"

He gulped in a breath, taken back by my forwardness, which is what I wanted, and ran his hand through his hair. "I'm not sure where you were raised, but it's only polite to check in with the local Alpha when moving into a new territory. Come check out the pack first, pay respects to my Alpha. Then maybe I'll think about showing you how well I give orders."

He looked me over possessively, which only pissed me off more. "Screw you."

"If you're not interested in the pack, why were you sniffing around my beta last night?"

Shit. I took a step back, realizing it wouldn't do if he got suspicious. It would draw too much attention to me. Leaning against the door frame, I bit my nail and glanced casually up the street and sighed. "Fine. I'll pay my respects. But I have to work tonight so it will have to be later."

His eyes studied me carefully. "You should think about joining the Silver Claws. We could use more females."

I visibly shivered at the thought. Females. Like we were some specimen. No way did I want to be part of that crap.

But. If I joined the pack, it would give me information a lot quicker than trying to get it on my own. And killing Silas and Dominic wasn't going to be easy. Just because I'd found them didn't mean I could walk in and smash their brains out. Not if I wanted to keep on living afterwards. I'd have to be smart about this.

"Possibly. Where do the Silver Claws hang? And who's the Alpha?" I already knew the answer, but couldn't let on that I did.

"You can always find some of us either at Sinsual or out in the Beechwood Forest. North side of town, near the DuBois Swamps. The big house, you can't miss it. As for the Alpha, I'll tell you if you tell me why you took such an interest in my boss last night. It looked like you wanted to tear him apart."

I shrugged and spit out a fingernail. "I thought I knew him from somewhere,

but I was wrong."

Realizing I was holding my breath, I quickly released it, hoping he hadn't noticed. He searched my eyes, even dropping his gaze to my lips. I turned my head away.

"Fine. I guess you'll just have to make an appearance to meet the Alpha yourself." He took two steps back, as if to leave. "By the way, interesting roommate choice."

"Goth girl?"

"The other one. I'd be careful around her."

I laughed. "You're kidding, right? Lynx?"

His expression darkened. "She's not who you think she is." He turned around and walked toward his bike, pulling his keys out of his pocket. "Gotta run. Take care, Briar."

I stared after him, checking out his fine backside and wondering what he meant. He gave me a final glance before starting the engine. It wasn't until he turned the corner that it hit me.

I hadn't told him my name.

CHAPTER 4



After spending too much time trying to figure out what Luke had meant about Lynx, I returned to my room to get ready for work. Whatever he was getting at, it couldn't have been a big deal. She was way too sweet and innocent for anything devious.

It took me longer than I wanted to choose the right outfit that would get people talking, but I still managed to arrive at work on time. Barely. I swept my hair back into a loose ponytail and adjusted my low-cut, blue tank top to make sure there was ample cleavage showing. I was seeking information after all. My Grams had always insisted our big breasts were to be used only as weapons for good. It was a motto I lived by.

The club was just starting to get crowded. People laughed and huddled together, drinks in hand. I pushed my way through to get to the bar, all smiles.

"You're almost late." Eddie's eyes stayed focused on mine instead of dropping to my breasts. Impressive. Working for him might not be so bad.

"Almost being the keyword." I slipped behind the counter. Peeper was already there wiping down glasses. He glanced at me but quickly adjusted his gaze when he spotted my cleavage.

"How's it going, Peeper?"

"I've had better days, but the night is young."

"I like your attitude." I slapped him on the back, then studied the bottles. They needed to be reorganized; they had to be a certain way for different acts I liked to perform.

Eddie walked around the other side of the bar and tapped the dark wooden top. "When you're finished with your shift, make sure you complete all the employment paperwork. I would've had you do it before your shift, but you came late."

"I arrived on time, remember?" I looked up at him, giving him my best smile. "On time to get this crowd moving, if you'll let me."

"Paperwork's on my desk in my office, which is upstairs. Payday is every other Friday. You keep all your tips, but make sure you report them on your taxes. I don't want any IRS people asking questions."

I raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything. Maybe there was a lot more to Eddie than I originally thought. He was a straight arrow.

"Do you have any questions about where to find anything?"

"I think I'm good. Looks like your standard bar, except for," I looked around, "you have any silly string? I like to use it in one of my acts. Oh, and little smokies."

It was his turn to raise an eyebrow, and he almost cracked a smile. Almost. "I'll get you those items for tomorrow night."

"Perfect."

"One last thing." He pressed against the bar and lowered his voice. "Don't think I didn't notice you instigating that fight last night. I don't want that happening again. There are shady people who come in here, and I don't want my employees getting mixed up with them."

I saluted him. "From now on, I'm Switzerland."

He grunted and walked away.

The night started out calm, and I watched everyone carefully, determining the regulars. I mentally sorted them by humans and supernaturals. Other than a heavy presence of wolves, the bar was just like any other. The guys came in to get laid, and the girls came to have fun with their friends.

I tried to avoid the women as much as possible; I had no interest in friends.

After I got things moving, Peeper and I fell into an easy work flow. I made all the mixed drinks and soft-balled him the easy ones. The later it grew, the more shifters arrived.

This is when I really started performing, using my wolfie powers to help draw the crowd. Soon, the bar was louder than ever, everyone happy with either a drink or a companion by their side. Eddie came up behind me after I had just handed a group of five several drinks. "I don't know how you do it, but you mesmerize the crowd. I bet my sales have tripled."

"Quadrupled, if I did my job right." I flipped a damp towel over my shoulder and threw him a practiced smile.

He studied me for a minute, and I found myself squirming under the gaze for some reason. I rubbed at the back of my neck.

Clearing his throat, he said, before walking away, "Keep up the great work."

I watched him disappear into the swarm of people, then rolled my shoulders back and slammed a shot of tequila. Time to get to work, my other work.

Glancing at Peeper on the other side of the bar, I spotted the perfect shifter. He looked strong and athletic, but miserable. He might just be the right man to have information, and desperate enough to share it after a few drinks.

I adjusted my bra so that I was perky enough, then crossed over to Peeper. "Switch me."

"Why?"

"There's a man giving me the eye. I'll switch you back when he leaves."

"Which one?" He glanced over at my side of the bar.

"All of them. Just go."

He mumbled something but walked over anyway.

I approached the shifter. He had long black hair that did nothing to compliment his narrow face, but his wide green eyes and full lips made up for the bad styling choice.

"What'cha drinking?"

He looked up from the PBR beer in his hands. His green eyes lit up. "Whatever you're handing out."

I smiled, batting my stupid eyelashes. He needed something stronger. I grabbed the bottle of Jose Cuervo, poured him a double shot and slid it over to him. "How long have you lived in Rouen?"

"I grew up here."

I leaned toward him and heard his breathing pick up. "You like it here?"

He paused throwing the shot back and stared behind me as if seeing another time. "Sometimes I think about leaving, but my past is too tied to this place. I think it would follow me if I went anywhere else."

"Pasts are shady that way. What's your name?"

"Ryder." He lowered his gaze to the empty shot glass.

"Ryder what?"

"Ryder Liekos." He looked up at me expectantly, as if I should have some sort of a reaction to his name.

"What?"

"You haven't heard of me?"

"Why would I?" I slid another drink to him.

He drank it down and began talking. "My family is kind of a big deal here. My dad owns a lot of property and businesses. He even shares some business with the Morgans."

Again, he looked at me as if I should know who he was talking about. "You really have no idea who the Morgans or the Liekos' are?"

"I'm new in town, but why don't you tell me." I handed him another drink and leaned over the bar, showing him my generous cleavage. I was glad I'd worn my skimpiest tank top.

His gaze met them for a moment, then he threw back his drink. Judging by the glaze in his eyes and the empty bottles next to him, I would've cut him off by now, if he were human. But wolves can drink a hell of a lot more. Besides, I wanted him to talk.

"The two families have been running Rouen for decades. The Liekos' are a well-known sh—" he stopped himself and frowned, realizing he was about to say something he probably shouldn't. I couldn't have him clamming up on me.

"Shifter family?" I finished for him.

His pretty eyes widened in surprise. "How did you know?"

I leaned over the bar and whispered close to his ear. "I'm a shifter wolf."

He reared back. "No way! I would never have guessed! How do you do that?"

"Bartender chick!" someone shouted impatiently.

I held out my finger to the man and poured Ryder three more drinks, giving him a reason to stay. "On the house." I'd take it out of my tips later. Couldn't have the boss-man pissed off.

Then I turned toward Mr. Impatient and winked. "What can I pour for you?"

Once he was happily drinking his lite beer, I made my way around the rest of the bar, making sure everyone else was liquored up. After counting off enough satisfied smiles, I returned to Ryder.

"So you were saying, the Liekos' are a shifter family, but what about the Morgans?"

He stared at me for a moment, then the liberally served alcohol worked its magic. "They're powerful witches. No one messes with them. They can do just about anything with magic." He visibly shivered. "Both families demand loyalty. Even having your own opinion is seen as traitorous."

Pain created deep lines in his forehead; it was a familiar look. I instantly warmed to him and placed my hand over his. "I'm sorry. Life can be a real bitch sometimes."

He nodded solemnly.

"So tell me, what pack does your family belong to?"

His eyes widened in fear, and he blurted, "Don't join."

I stared at him, surprised. "I wasn't planning on it. Just curious."

"My family are with the Greybacks, but I'm not a member."

Two packs in Rouen? Interesting. It was rare for more than one dominant pack to inhabit the same city, especially if they were as powerful as the Silver Claws seemed. "Why not?"

"Long story." He tipped back another shot, his expression darkening. "I belong to the other pack in town, the Silver Claws."

As much as I wanted to hear what was sure to be a dark tale, I had to stay on track. "What's the name of your Alpha?"

His face soured as if his last swallow of alcohol was too bitter. "Dominic."

My heart pounded so fast and sudden, a sharp pain shot through my body. I sucked in a breath and gripped the edge of the bar, trying to control the

bloodthirsty growl threatening to spill from my mouth. Good thing Ryder was drunk, or he'd have noticed my reaction instantly.

"Is he a good Alpha?" I ground the words through my gritted teeth.

He met my gaze, his eyes intense. "Listen, I don't know what brought you to Rouen, but this city isn't safe, especially for a female shifter who doesn't have a pack. You should leave."

I tried to act casual, but the truth spilled out. "I wish I could. But thanks for the warning."

He studied me, and for a brief moment his gaze softened as he saw a glimpse of the pain I carried with me daily. I know he saw it because I also caught a glimpse of his. Somehow, we were similar in many ways.

I quickly shook my head and forced my body to relax. No bonding allowed. I had a job to do.

"Thanks for the drinks," he said, "but I gotta run." Sliding off the stool, he stood up, swaying slightly. He stuffed his hands into his jeans' pockets and flashed me one more saddened look. "See you around."

I nodded a goodbye and distracted myself by washing off the counter. I wondered if his path in life was set from a young age, just as mine was. I frowned, trying not to worry about him too much. If I began to care, that might get me in trouble when it came time to smash heads.

The Silver Claws were definitely trouble. One of their own members wasn't happy and that was never good. An unhappy member becomes a danger to the pack, my father used to say.

The night progressed slowly after that. I attempted to speak to other shifters, but none of them were as loose-lipped as Ryder. I made a mental note to befriend him if I saw him again; he might make a good ally down the road. My shift had almost ended and with the late hour, the crowd had begun to thin.

Eddie came over to me. "You did well tonight. Before you leave, make sure to complete that paperwork. My business has to be perfect."

"Jeez. Is the mob running city council or something?" I wiped at a spill on the counter.

His face darkened. "Or something. Just do it."

"Sure, no prob—" A familiar scent alerted all my senses, and I straightened.

"Are you okay?"

"Uh-huh." I searched the crowd, my heart hammering against my ribcage.

"Can I get off a few minutes early?"

"I don't see why not."

I was already untying my apron and stepping out of the bar, afraid I would lose him again. Silas was in the bar. I could smell him like week-old leftovers.

Maneuvering around the remaining customers, I headed toward the back of the club, following the strong scent of hot dogs masked with cheap pine-smelling cologne. You could dress up a dog, but that didn't change the fact that he was a murderer with cheap taste.

I stepped behind a couple dancing, scanning the crowd. Where was he? I squinted into the flashing lights illuminating splashes of people every few seconds.

Then my racing heart stopped. Cold.

Silas was there again, stiff cane in hand and talking in the shadows with a tall and broad-shouldered shifter. I only needed to see this new shifter's profile to know who it was. The bastard who lead the slaughter against my family: Dominic De'Angelo.

CHAPTER 5



*R*age burned in my stomach, and I gripped my hands in fists at my side, wishing I could tear something apart. I would've done it too, if I wouldn't have drawn attention to myself.

Instead, I pushed forward eagerly, ready to move in for the kill, but out of nowhere Samira stepped in front of me. One second my path was clear, and in the next she was just there. Instinctively, I threw my fist. She caught it in her hand, staring me down. I didn't even know she was here tonight, which was bad on me.

I yanked my hand out of hers. "You shouldn't sneak up on people like that."

I tried to get past her, but she blocked my way again. "What the hell? Move."

"This isn't the time."

Well, wasn't she a nosey little vamp? "Every time is ass-kicking time." I kept my gaze on Dominic, watching his every move. If he left, I needed to know.

She grabbed my arm in a vice-like grip. "There's a better way. You don't know what you're getting into."

This got my attention, and I pulled my gaze away from Dominic for a brief second. "What do you know?"

She let go of my arm. "This is the second time you've attempted to approach the leaders of the Silver Claws since coming to town. You're new here and don't understand the rules. People don't just talk to them. It has to be arranged."

"Leave me the fuck alone." My wolf followed the words up with an angry growl. Spouting off rules to me, as if they matter? I was not part of their pack. I

pushed at her, trying to get her out of the way, but she didn't budge. Stupid, strong vamps. "This is none of your business."

"I don't know you well, but you don't seem suicidal."

Giving up, mostly because I looked like an idiot, I stared into her eyes. "You have no idea what I am."

"If you approach them now, certain death will follow."

"That's my plan. Killing them. Now for the last time, move."

Instead of moving out of my way, she grabbed my arm and pulled me around to face the main part of the bar. "Look around, you fool! Do you think they aren't protected?"

As if on command, the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end, and I instantly knew there was power here I hadn't noticed before. I looked around, eyeing the dancing shifters and humans. Everything looked the same as it was an hour ago. "What are you talking about?"

"Don't be weak. There is great strength in you. I sensed it the moment I saw you. Use your strengths to make you powerful. Look again, but with your wolf eyes."

I raised my eyebrow, and my wolf instincts hackled. Who the hell was she? A vampire Jedi?

She stared me down with a deadly look. Emphasis on the deadly part.

I sighed. "Fine."

After making sure Dominic hadn't moved, I inhaled a breath and called upon my wolf. Her strength surged inside me, and a chill broke across my flesh. Had someone looked at me, they probably would've seen my eyes flash a brilliant yellow.

I scanned the crowd again, this time looking with my supernatural eyes. They were drawn to those with power. I recognized them immediately. Witches. Three of them to be exact. One on the balcony and two down below on opposite ends of the club. They looked eerily similar, with long blond hair and vibrant blue eyes. If I had to guess, I'd say they were related. All three were focused on Silas and Dominic.

Their power weaved through the room and now that I felt it, I was surprised I

hadn't noticed it before. I was always good at spotting magical creatures; it was a gift of mine. And yet, their power was so strong it pulsed and flowed through my whole body to the beat of my heart. It made my face flush with its intensity. They must have cloaking powers, and that made me very afraid. Not of their power necessarily, but that it had worked so well on me.

I gulped in a breath as fear turned my blood cold.

A very powerful Alpha with three kick-ass witches.

Samira stepped closer to me and whispered a dark warning in my ear. "You see them now? They protect Dominic and anyone close to him. At least one of them will always be with Dominic. If you were to approach them without an invite, you would instantly become paralyzed. Then they would take you in for questioning, a most unpleasant experience."

"What makes Dominic so special that he needs such strong witches to watch over him?"

Her eyes bored into mine, forcing me to pay attention to her words. "Dominic is part of the Ministry. He's one of the nine leaders, which grants him certain protections."

My eyes widened, surprised. I'd never met anyone on the Ministry, the governing force over the Principes Noctis. The Principes Noctis was a growing group of supernaturals who held the belief that we should rule over humans. It worried me to know they held a presence in Rouen. I thought they were mostly up north. "And the witches?"

"They're the Morgans. Sisters. And extremely powerful."

"More powerful than you? And me?" I quickly added.

She averted her gaze. "Possibly."

I shivered.

"You should be afraid," she said. "They strike first and ask questions later."

"Why are you telling me this? I don't think it's out of the goodness of your dead heart."

Samira stared at me deadpan, her usual expression. "Because one of them has taken an interest in you."

This got my attention. Luke had said almost the exact same thing. "Come

again? I've only been in town for eight days."

I hadn't been worried about anyone recognizing me because I went by a different name now. Her comment made me rethink that position. I needed to be more careful.

I glanced again at Dominic; Eddie had joined him and Silas. Whatever they were talking about, Eddie didn't look happy.

"You don't know?" Samira asked.

"Know what?"

"Did you not investigate your new roommates before choosing to cohabitate with us? That is terribly lazy." She tsked me like she would a small child.

Anger rolled into my stomach. "I wasn't expecting a nosy, bitchy dead girl to worm her way into my new place. As for Lynx, she's your typical college frat girl obsessed with brand names and—" I clammed up. And magic. "Lynx is a Morgan?"

She nodded curtly. "You coming probably wasn't an accident. If I were you, I'd leave town immediately. You shouldn't become any more involved than you already are."

"What about you? Why are you here?"

She stared off into the distance. "I've been involved for decades."

I wrinkled my nose. "What's that supposed to mean?"

She leaned toward me. "Just leave town. This isn't your fight."

"That's where you're wrong." Dominic and Silas were moving again, heading toward the rear of the club. There must be a back door. Eddie walked the other direction. "Look, I have to go. Thanks for the warning, but it's that time again. Ass-kicking time."

This time, when I stepped past her, she didn't stop me.

Careful not to let the witches know where I was headed, I threaded through the crowd, stopping to mingle to disguise my movements. From the corner of my eye, I spotted the witch who was on the balcony walking down the stairs. Another one had followed Dominic into the back.

Damnit. I wouldn't be able to go after them without being spotted.

Circling back to the front door, I ducked outside and sniffed the air. The

sidewalks were filled with dancing people holding plastic cups filled with beer high in the air. Someone else handed out purple and green beads, along with flyers for the more 'adult' bars. Another woman moved about drunkenly screaming, "Laissez les bon temps rouler!" at anyone who came near her. I had only taken a few years of French in high school. She was either saying, 'Let the good times roll' or 'Let me take you for a roll'.

I tread through the group quickly, searching for Dominic. I spotted him just as he turned the corner, heading toward the alley behind the bar. His dark hair and tan skin blended into the night. I dove into the crowd, using my wolfie powers to walk quietly and lithely among them. I stopped at the corner and leaned against the wall, casually glancing around. No one was paying any attention to me.

Risking a glance around the building, I spotted Dominic just as he was getting into the backseat of a stretch limo. Silas was already in the car. I could see the back of his head leaning against the rear of the seat. Only one of the witches joined them.

I needed a car.

I yanked out my phone, pulling out my Uber app. A car was in my vicinity, and I tapped to order it. Less than a minute later, a black Audi stopped in the middle of the street.

I jogged toward it. "You the Uber?"

"Yup. Get in."

The inside of the car was of a soft black leather and had that new car smell. The Uber driver, a woman with dark red, wavy hair and a matching set of hazel eyes turned toward me. "Where to?"

I pointed at the limo, which had just pulled out of the alley. "Not to sound all cliché, but could you follow that car?"

She chuckled, a surprisingly pleasant sound. "No problem. You'd be surprised how often I'm asked that." She waited a moment before pulling behind it, driving slow enough to keep a safe distance away. She glanced at me in the rearview mirror. "Are we following your boyfriend?"

"Sure. I think he's cheating on me. How'd you know?" I leaned forward on

the seat, not letting the vehicle out of my sight. Already two cars had come between us, and the fact that her eyes were on me, instead of the limo, had me nervous.

"That's usually the reason. Either that, or someone wanting to follow the most powerful shifter in the city."

Startled, I met her gaze in the mirror, now realizing how piercing her eyes were. "How'd you know?"

"There aren't too many limos driving around in this part of the city, and Dominic's is quite noticeable. Plus, it helps to have a little bit of magical blood running through my veins."

"You're a witch?" My eyes dropped to her license tag hanging from the car's radio nob. Her name was Roma. I looked up. "Hey, they're getting away."

She waved her hand. "Nah. I've spelled the car. I can track them anywhere now, at least for the next hour anyway." She glanced over her shoulder at me. "What's a nice wolf girl like you trying to track down Dominic? It will only get you into trouble, that I can promise."

"One, I'm not a nice wolf and, two, I've got a bone to pick with him."

"Tell me something new. You and half this town have some kind of grudge against him, but I've got to be honest with you. Those who do something about it, disappear. I'd hate to see that happen to you. I've got a good sense about people, and you are one of the good ones." She wrinkled her weathered brow and turned a corner. "But I also sense darkness inside you. It could be your downfall if you're not careful."

I huffed. "Don't be doing any of that witch mumbo-jumbo on me. I don't want to know my future or about any monsters inside me. The only monster I want to know about is Dominic."

"Fair enough." She turned another corner as if she knew exactly where she was supposed to go. Her sleeve shortened briefly, revealing a tattooed symbol on the inside of her wrist. It was a black circle with what looked like barbed wire around the outside with the outline of a bird on the inside.

"Dominic lives in a huge place called Fire Ridge on the outside of town," she began. "It's where the Silver Claws hang out."

"I haven't seen it yet, but I have met one of their pack members." My loins burned just thinking about that hot shifter.

She lifted her eyebrows. "And they didn't take you in? A lone wolf?"

"How do you know I'm a lone wolf?"

"Because you reek of independence and insubordination."

I leaned back against the seat, spreading my legs. "That's probably the best thing you've smelled in years."

She cracked a smile. "I admit, it is a pleasant scent I don't often enjoy in this city."

I turned and stared out the window while Roma turned onto a long stretch of road, one darker than the last. There were no street lights, and the car's headlights swallowed the road as we drove. "They appear to be heading toward Fire Ridge. Do you want me to keep going?"

"How much further?"

"Two miles up the road."

"Can you let me off here?"

She pulled the car over to the shoulder and parked. "I must warn you. My stomach doesn't feel right."

"Don't vomit on the seats," I said. "I did that once and had to use a squeegee to get that shit out."

"No, I mean, that's how I feel just before something bad happens."

I avoided her gaze and opened the door. "I'm sure I'll be fine."

She startled me by grabbing my hand suddenly. "Here." She handed me her card. "Call me if you ever get into trouble. I don't sleep much."

I slid my hand out from under hers. I didn't like people touching me, but a car on hand could be convenient. "Fine."

I programmed her number into my phone and slipped outside, closing the door before she could give me any more premonition crap. That's the last thing I needed. Nothing could derail me from my goal. The hate for Dominic and Silas had long ago wrapped my heart in a cold shell.

As Roma drove away, I quickly shed my clothes. I only had maybe five hours until sunrise. That should give me enough time to survey the place. I

needed to learn how many shifters hung out at Fire Ridge, and do it all without getting caught.

I was only three steps into the darkness of the forest before my body shimmered, then shifted into a large wolf in less than a second. My transformation was far quicker than other wolves, a result of having my wolf emerge at an early age. Having everyone I loved ripped from my life had brought out the worst of me. Not that my wolf was bad, by any means. She had protected me from many terrible things that would've happened had I not had her incredible strength and power.

But with that strength, came a temper and a hunger for violence. She was a beast that would not be tamed.

I began my run, and a thrill coursed through my body. The bite of the wind against my fur, the taste of the forest on my tongue... all filled my senses, satisfying the urges of my wolf. I needed to do this more instead of keeping her pent up. I'd felt her growing restless lately. If I didn't give her a release, my wolf would get the best of me, and I'd end up doing something rash. Something I couldn't afford right now if I was going to kill Silas and Dominic.

Resisting the urge to howl in pleasure, I followed the scent of wolves into the woods. They'd probably smell me later, but by then I'd be gone.

It didn't take me long to find Fire Ridge. I don't know what I had been expecting. Maybe a shack in the woods surrounded by broken down trucks, old tractors, piles of wood here and there. Maybe a fire pit made out of river rock. A lot of packs were like that. But there was none of that here. It was like I had stepped back in time to the eighteenth century.

The home was far bigger than Lynx's house and depicted the old Southern mansions you see in the movies. Crisp, white columns lined the front steps to the red brick home, which sprawled out over several thousand square feet. There was also a huge guest house out back, with what looked like a triple car garage.

In the rear of the property, a large fire pit, the largest I'd ever seen, was ablaze. Flames reached for the night sky at least ten feet high. A crowd of maybe twenty gathered outside with loud rock n' roll music blaring. From this distance, I couldn't see individual faces, but one of them, by his massive frame and the

way he moved, was familiar: Luke.

I swallowed the urge to moan and shook my fur. I needed to get closer but worried about being detected. If they found me, they would question why I was scouting the place. I couldn't let that happen. I needed to know more about them before they uncovered anything about me.

I cursed. I had to get closer somehow. An idea came to me, but my wolf bristled at the thought.

I know, bitch. I'm going to hate it too.

CHAPTER 6



I stared at a big pile of horse shit and urine in horror.

I wasn't happy about it, and my wolf was even more pissed. But I had to disguise my scent somehow. I'd smelled the farm not far away and knew horse manure would be here.

Before I could second guess myself, I rolled into the mess, covering my fur with its strong scent. Ugh. This was the worst. I'd done this once before, years ago, when tracking down what I thought was a viable lead. In the end, it just ended up being a shitty day and nothing else.

I'd sworn I'd never do it again, but here I was, rolling around in horse crap.

My wolf snarled, and had it been possible, she would've bitten me for putting her in this position. I could feel her resistance as I made her roll a few more times. As soon as I gave her back a little control, she leapt from the pile and sprinted into the forest. Whenever I felt her urge to drop and roll in the grass, I stopped her.

We had a mission.

Soundlessly, I raced through the woods back toward Fire Ridge. When voices tickled my ears, I slowed and retreated to the thick underbrush.

More people had joined them at the fire. One of them was the witch who had gotten into the car with Dominic. She was talking with four others, laughing and drinking from a wine glass. Ryder was by himself and off to the side, slamming back one drink after another. Several others were seated on a concrete patio behind the house, and in between the house and the detached garage, at least a

dozen men were playing football despite the heavy darkness.

I kept to the shadows as I circled the perimeter, searching for Silas or Dominic, but they weren't there. They must be in the house.

After finding a comfortable spot to sit where I had a good view of the rear of the house, I dropped to the ground and observed. Time drug on slowly, or maybe it just felt that way because I was an impatient wolf who wanted some action. Any kind would do at this point. I watched Luke play football and by the looks of it, he was one of the best players. Heavy metal music came on, and with it came more drinking.

I was beginning to think the night was a bust when all of a sudden the music cut. Everyone stood as if that had been some kind of signal. They set down their drinks and gathered to the side of the fire pit. Shadows cast by the dancing flames illuminated their serious expressions, a sharp change from moments before.

A moment later, Dominic walked outside. He was followed by Silas and one of the sister witches. The fur on my neck stood on end, and a soft growl sounded in my throat.

Dominic walked to the front of the crowd like he was going to speak to them, but he stopped abruptly and turned my way. Instinctively, I flattened myself to the ground. He scanned the forest for a moment, his face not stopping to rest on anything in particular. He turned in a full circle, still looking at the trees.

My pulse raced, and every nerve hummed. My instincts told me it was time to go, but I forced them down. Something was about to happen, and I needed to see it, but I'd run as soon as they came my way.

Seemingly satisfied with his inspection, Dominic motioned Silas forward and whispered something in his ear. Silas nodded his head, then returned inside the house, limping slightly with his slick, black cane.

My lips turned downward, and I returned to my feet, ready to bolt. I doubted he could smell me from all the way over there. It would take a powerful wolf to smell through all the horse manure matted into my fur.

Dominic turned back to the crowd. I noted Luke had moved to Dominic's left, a few feet back. This was telling. He held an important position within the

pack, I was sure of it.

Finally, Dominic began to speak. "Thank you all for coming out tonight. I know this meeting was called unexpectedly so I appreciate your willingness to drop everything to attend." He scanned the group, meeting the eyes of everyone. His Alpha powers radiated from him, and all showed the proper respect. "The reason for the gathering is to conduct an emergency blood trial."

The crowd exploded in conversation and activity.

Blood trial? I wasn't familiar with the term. I scooted forward, eager to see what was about to happen.

"The man in question," Dominic began, after the crowd settled, "was found conspiring against the Silver Claws. He was caught with plans on how to take out several key members."

More voices cried out both in horror and surprise.

"Bring him out!" Dominic ordered and stepped back.

Two tall and muscular shifters escorted a man toward the group. The man was slumped over, his hands tied behind his back. He was smaller than many of the others present, and by the streaks of silver in his dark hair, older too. Several in the crowd gasped as if they recognized him. Some shouted a protest. Even from where I sat, I could feel their anger radiating from the pack. But not necessarily directed at the bound man. They were upset he was being accused. Interesting. More division from within.

The two shifters dragged the man to Dominic and threw him at his feet. Dominic kicked him in the stomach. The man yelped in pain. Several of the braver pack members disapproved loudly, but with a mere look from Dominic, shut their mouths.

"You were one of us. Why did you betray your family?" Dominic rammed his boot into the older man again. A strand of hair on his head fell out of place. He quickly smoothed it back as he turned to Luke. "Bind him to the post."

I crept closer, focused on what was going to happen next. It couldn't be good.

Like a good little soldier, Luke pulled the man to his feet. The man's head flopped forward as he struggled to walk. It was clear he had already taken some hits; his eyes were swollen, and his face smeared with blood.

Luke had to practically drag the man across the ground, heading for a large wooden post.

My blood chilled at the sight. It was stained a dark crimson and held several deep nicks in its wooden surface as if it had been hit repeatedly. Probably by a whip if I had to guess.

Luke motioned to another shifter, who scrambled to help tie the man to the post. Everyone else watched on, some with looks of disgust, but none were shocked. They'd done this before.

The need to help the man was so ingrained in my blood, I had to hold back from running into the circle. I couldn't stand by and watch them kill the man, if that was their intention. The thought of doing so brought back too many painful memories. Hopefully, murder wasn't part of their plan. A good beating I could handle, but not straight-up killing a defenseless old man. If they dared try, I'd have to blow my cover to save him.

Dominic stood in front of the older man, a sliver of a grin splitting his face. "Secure his head. I want him to see the faces of those he betrayed."

Luke nodded and lifted the man's head to the pole while another shifter used duct tape to secure it. Holy hell, what was wrong with them?

I cocked my head, staring at the man's face. There was something about his features—the high cheekbones, straight nose—that were strangely familiar. I sniffed the air, trying to sort through the smells to see if there was one I recognized. Where had I seen him before?

Dominic faced the pack. "Silver Claws, all of you already know this man. Many of you are his friends. But this is a blood trial. You all know the rules. We must uncover the truth." He paused for dramatic effect. "The trial for Vincent Moretti begins now."

My blood drained to my paws, and I stumbled forward in shock. That name. I didn't believe it. It had to be a coincidence.

I shuffled forward to squint at the man again. It had been years since I'd heard that surname. It was the same as mine, and one I hadn't used for over fifteen years.

I swallowed hard. It can't be. It just can't.

My breathing quickened as I stared at the older man's familiar face in wonder. That's when the truth hit me, and my mind was flooded with hundreds of memories all at once. I nearly lost my balance.

I thought everyone had died. I thought I was the only survivor. And yet, not far from me tied to the pole, sat my uncle, and my father's most cherished brother.

I wasn't alone after all.

CHAPTER 7



One by one, pack members approached my uncle and began to question him. When he didn't give them the answer they wanted to hear, they took turns punching him. Most half-heartedly hit him in the stomach, but a couple of shifters beat him in the face.

What the hell had he done? Had he really betrayed the pack? It must've been bad, otherwise why not confess?

My stomach churned. In all my travels, and I'd seen a lot of packs, I'd never heard of such a cruel practice. I had to force myself from jumping in there to smash some heads. The only living family member I had was right there, only a few hundred yards away, and I couldn't stop them from beating him.

The only thing that kept me from rushing in to help him was the fact that I knew for a certainty he could handle it. My family blood was strong, and it would take more than a few hits to kill him.

When one of the last people took their turn, this time branding a long knife, I knew I had to do something. I couldn't let them kill him. I'd just found him!

I had to think. If I rushed in there, it would blow my cover, and I might never have a chance to kill Dominic and Silas again. But I had to do something. The pain in my chest was crushing.

I squat on my hind legs, surveying the property. I'd go around the front of the house. Less people would see me that way. Maybe I could—

"Enjoying the show?"

I yelped, jumping. I swiveled around; crouching to the ground, growling, my

hackles raised.

Two bulky men stared down at me, a snarky grin on each face. These suckers had ten seconds before I ripped them to shreds. How did they know I was here? And how the hell had anyone snuck up on me?

I swung my head back to the pack, realizing that one of the witches was staring in our direction as if she could see us through the forest. Shame washed over me.

I was so stupid. Somehow, Dominic had sensed me and the witch had cast a spell to muffle the noise of the men. That's the only way these elephants could have got the jump on me. Damn it.

I backed up, still growling and considering my options. I was pretty sure I could outrun these two. But I thought of my uncle and that knife. I couldn't run away.

Besides, I'd talked myself out of worse situations.

The biggest beef-head leaned down, and I was tempted to snap at him. He smelled like cheap beer and piss.

"Are you going to be a good little wolf and come with us? Or, are we going to have to muzzle you?"

Groaning, I shifted into my human form.

My very naked human form.

Covered in shit.

They both chuckled. The biggest one spoke again. "I didn't think it was possible, but you look worse than you smell."

"And I didn't think it was possible to see a monkey's ass on someone's face, but there you are!"

He bawled his fat fingers into a fist and swung it at my cheek. I easily ducked and rammed my closed hand into his gut. He expelled a fast breath, gripping his stomach.

His short, fat friend laughed out loud. "She just got shit on you, Terrence!"

I turned to him, smirking. "There's plenty of that to go around."

He raised his hands and stepped back.

"Let's get this over with, shall we?" I put out my hand in his direction. "Give

me your jacket."

"No way. You'll get crap all over it."

"I will anyway when I jump on top of you and choke you out in a second."

Tubby looked at Terrence for backup, but Terrence, who had finally straightened from me hitting him in the stomach, motioned with his hand. "Just give it to her. We can beat her up later. Boss is waiting."

I huffed. Clearly Terrence hadn't learned his lesson.

As soon as the jacket was wrapped around me and zipped up good, I stepped into the clearing.

Don't bend over. Don't bend over. Flashing my cooter to a pack of wolf shifters probably wasn't a good idea. The cool breeze gusting up my nether regions would be a good reminder.

The pack, Dominic and Silas included, watched us approach. My breathing picked up as I got closer, and I struggled to keep it steady.

I was so close, so close to my enemy.

I wanted to rip them to shreds, right here in front of their own pack. Just as they'd done to me.

But I had to keep my cool. Otherwise, I'd be wolf meat by the end of the night. I forced myself to chill the hell out so, instead, I put on a snarky grin.

I'd hoped my first meeting with the Silver Claws would be a little more respectable, but at least I would be memorable. Naked and covered in horse shit. I knew I wouldn't be forgotten anytime soon.

I didn't mean to catch Luke's eye. His jaw was flexed tight, and he stared at me with an intensity that made the breeze on my ass even colder. Yet as I returned his glare, my heartbeat picked up. I forced my gaze away.

Planting a practiced grin, I approached the pack, holding out my hands. "I heard this is where the party's at. I hope I'm not late." When no one said anything, I added, "Shoot. Am I too dressed down?"

Silas chuckled but Dominic's thick eyebrows pulled together, and his dark brown eyes stared down at me. "We don't take kindly to shifters who spy on us. Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

"I'm just a new gal in town scoping out the local packs. I heard this one was

really banging and wanted to check it out." I gave Luke a pointed look. "I was told to come pay my respects." I turned toward my uncle, eyeing him curiously. His head was slumped to the side. Blood dripped from his chin onto his bare chest, but he was still alive. "A little extreme for what I'm used to, but I'm kind of digging the whole aggression vibe you got going on."

"Shut up." Dominic frowned. "I hate lone wolves. They have far too many opinions, and they always feel the need to share them."

"Jeez. What's up your ass besides gimpy here?" I motioned at Silas who was standing next to him. It made me happy to insult them both. A few of the shifters behind me chuckled.

"Enough! Tie her up and put her in the basement. We can question her later, after the blood trial."

"What the hell? I was told to come here."

"You came here to spy."

Luke cleared his throat and stepped forward. "I would like to question her now. I fear she may be spying on us to give information to the Greybacks."

This got Dominic's attention. He looked from Luke to me, the wheels of his brain turning painfully slow. I glared at Luke. He takes me for a snitch? One more thing to put on his shit list.

"Fine. Take her over there and get what you can out of her. Be quick about it." Dominic moved toward me, his movements slow and deliberate as if treating me like prey. Little did he know I was the real predator here. "I don't know why you've come, but let's hope for your sake this is all just a big misunderstanding."

"A big fat misunderstanding."

Behind him, Luke was retrieving rope from the rear of the house. All the while keeping his eyes on me.

Dominic reached up and brushed my cheek with the back of his fingers. I didn't flinch, knowing that's what he wanted—to see fear in my eyes. If it weren't for the witch standing nearby, or the more than two dozen shifter wolves, I might've killed him right then. I'm pretty sure I had enough strength to ram my fist right through his chest, crushing his heart.

He studied my face, his eyes narrowing. "There's something about you..."

"It's my bitch face," I said quickly, hoping to stop his train of thought. I doubted he would recognize me. I had been ten the last time he saw me, but still. "It probably reminds you of one of your ex-wives."

"I was never married."

"Damn. A damn shame."

"Listen, if you truly want to join the pack," he was circling me now, his voice a purr, "I can find a position for you." His eyes dropped to my bare legs. "You just have to be open to it."

Blood rushed to my face, and I clenched my hands to my side, ready to smash them into his perfectly formed nose.

Before I could do anything stupid, Luke was beside me, pulling me roughly from Dominic. "Let's go."

I jerked free from his grip, so mad I could barely walk. There's no way in hell I was going to let that dickface victimize me again. I had to get Dominic alone somehow.

Dominic faced the crowd again. "Let's continue the blood trial."

As I walked alongside Luke toward the side of the house, he wrinkled his nose and blew out air. "You smell terrible. What did you do?"

"What any self-respecting woman would do when trying to sneak up on a pack of wolves. It just happened to backfire in my face."

"More like exploded." He guided me to a tree far from the group, but still within view of my uncle. "Let's get this over with. Sit down."

"Is this really necessary? I will answer your stupid questions."

"I prefer you tied up."

"I bet that's how you like all your women."

"Only the good ones." He winked and took hold of my arm. I managed to enjoy the warmth of his fingers for just a few seconds, before he jerked me to the ground.

My butt hit the ground hard, and I became very aware of the dirt on my nether regions. I snarled and resisted the urge to kick him in the crotch, but the witch was still watching me intensely. She saw too much. I might need to find a way to take her out before I could get to Silas or Dominic. Maybe my new

witchy roommate could offer some assistance—as soon as I told her what I really was.

Luke stood over me, the rope in his hands. "Lean back."

I pressed my back into the trunk, eyeing the rope nervously. I hated being tied up. It made shifting into a wolf near impossible, plus it made me feel claustrophobic. But if this is what I had to do to get the pack to trust me, then bring on the panic.

"I don't like doing this," he said as he began wrapping the rope first around my stomach and the tree, then slowly moved up and around my upper torso. I sucked in a large breath, hoping to give myself some room, but he pulled it against me tightly. Alarms rang in my head, and my breath came out in shaky puffs. He wrapped it twice, three times. "If only you would've listened to me."

The air caught in my throat. I couldn't breathe.

"Don't get me wrong, I like tying up my women but not like this." He moved the rope around me another time until I thought I was going to explode.

"Please." My voice cracked and hell, heat warmed my face. I was simultaneously embarrassed and panicked at the same time. My hands began to shake.

"Please, not around my chest."

He hesitated and searched my eyes. I hated that he could see even a flicker of weakness in me, but the fear was near debilitating.

His gaze dropped and instead of continuing to wrap it around my chest, he unwrapped it a few times so the rope was just around my stomach. I inhaled a deep breath, relieved.

So, little soldier boy had a heart after all. Or was he the tin man? I'd yet to determine how big of a heart he actually had.

Moving behind the tree, he grabbed one of my arms at the elbow and slowly slid his hand down to mine. He did the same to the other until both my hands touched. There was something about the motion that calmed my racing pulse. Gently, yet tightly, he tied my wrists together. It was uncomfortable, but a lot better than the alternative.

When the task was done, he appeared in front of me. I pressed my knees

together, wishing they'd let me dress first. The jacket came three fourths up my thighs. Any higher and we'd be playing peek-a-boo.

"Why are you here?" he asked.

I gave him an exasperated sigh. "Are you mental? You invited me."

"Not like this. You were supposed to come escorted. You know pack rules. Spying on one another is bad form."

"I'm not part of the pack so I don't have to follow your rules."

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. If you had any genuine interest in joining, you would've followed protocol. I have a strong impression you came here tonight for a completely different reason."

"Are you psychic now? If so, you suck at it."

"How's that?"

"The truth is, I am interested in joining. I just wanted to see how the pack really is and not some dressed up version of it put on for my benefit." My gaze flickered to my uncle. A woman was shouting at him. "And by first impressions, I'd say this is a pack that demands loyalty and respect. They thrive on torture to get what they want and use fear to silence its members." I looked up at him. "Does that sound about right?"

His jaw muscles rippled as he ground his teeth together. "Why are you really here?"

"I already told you. I'm interested in joining. I've always wanted to see what it felt like to be team bad guys."

He lifted his hand as if to hit me, but lowered it just as quickly. "You have a big mouth. It's going to get you into trouble."

"Tell me something I don't know." I flattened my expression, realizing I had to be convincing. "Look, Luke, I just want to join your stupid pack. So tell your little Alpha to release me so I can cheer on the others as they torture an old man." I gave him a meaningful look, hoping the fire in my eyes would burn right through him.

"You shouldn't feel sorry for him." He looked toward my uncle, his expression unreadable.

"Now why would I feel bad for an old dude who's tied up while thirty people

take their turns beating him up? Only a caring person would do that, and I don't see any of those around here."

"You could be right about that." The way he said it, his voice flat and distant, made me think he didn't want to be here either. He straightened. "I'm going to tell them you weren't honest with me. There are others a lot meaner than me that know how to get information out of stubborn shifters."

"I can handle myself."

"Suit yourself."

"I'm suited."

He stared down at me, a storm raging in those deep blue eyes. He shook his head and walked away. Good riddance. I'd been in tougher situations.

Luke approached Silas and said something in his ear. Stupid ass-hat tattletale. I continued to murmur to myself as I looked around me, pretending to get comfortable.

Meanwhile, my uncle was being punished all sorts of ways. I had never heard of a blood trial, but I hoped it didn't mean death.

I fought against the restraints. Luke had made them ridiculously tight. I sighed and dropped my head to the side, glancing to the ground near my bum. There was a foot-long stick. If I could push it back—

My uncle screamed in pain, and I jerked up. I looked over just as a woman withdrew a knife from his side. I yanked at the rope, now thrashing against them. I didn't care that I looked like a maniac. I had to stop them. I pulled and yanked, but couldn't get out of Luke's stupid restraints.

Blood poured from my uncle's chest, and he slumped forward.

I stared in agony, tears sparking my eyes.

Just like when I was a kid, the feeling of absolute hopelessness washed over me. I couldn't believe this was happening.

I was being forced to watch my family die. Again.

CHAPTER 8



An hour later, I leaned back against the tree. My breathing had calmed, and my cheeks had dried. Groaning, I stared up at the night sky. The moon had already dipped below the tree line and dawn would be here soon.

My uncle was still alive. When I saw him move, I was so relieved, I'd nearly passed out. I thought he would be dead within minutes but amazingly, he'd healed.

I was also proud. Us Morettis were tenacious bastards.

It also meant they hadn't used a silver knife. He was still tied to the pole but the pack, now done, had moved back into the house. Most of them had left, and I was ready to get the hell out of here. How much longer were they going to keep me tied up?

I'd expected someone to come out and question me further, but no one ever came. Many times, I tried to free myself from my bonds, but Luke fucking must've been a sailor or a Boy Scout or something. The knots weren't budging, even with me using my wolf strength.

This wasn't my first rodeo with being tied up, and after a while I realized there was something different about the rope. Possibly something supernatural that prevented me from breaking free. I thought about this a lot during the night, having nothing else to do. My guess was one of the witches had screwed with them.

Since when did packs start using magic to conduct business? It sure changed the rules of the game. I'd have to be more careful going forward.

I dropped my head back against the tree and closed my eyes. I inhaled a great breath but instantly regretted it. I did smell like shit. I couldn't wait to go home and shower, assuming they were going to let me go free. Luke may not have believed me, but I felt confident that whoever else came to question me would be easier to fool.

It wasn't me I was worried about anyway. It was my uncle. He must have gotten himself into some deep trouble. I thought I had spotted him looking in my direction once or twice, but it had been such a fleeting glance that I wasn't sure if he had even seen me.

A branch snapped behind me, and then another. Someone was coming.

"Who is that?" I asked.

A second later, I heard the sound of a knife running through the rope. The bands fell from my hands, and I slumped forward. My muscles complained as I brought my hands in front of me and rubbed at my sore wrists. They were surprisingly red and swollen, with parts of my skin bleeding. I didn't think Luke had tied me that tight, but he must have. Prick. Unless it was the magic...

"Leave now. Hurry."

I jerked my head around at the familiar voice. Luke stood in the shadows, a knife gleaming in his hand.

"Don't say anything. Just go."

I opened my mouth to argue because, well, that's what I do, but a cool look from him silenced me. Whatever. I could stay silent. He was freeing me, after all. Plus, this wasn't the time. If I had any chance of saving my uncle, this was it.

Remembering to keep my cooter covered, I slowly got to my feet. I kept an eye on Luke, waiting for some kind of trick or something. When he remained still, I took off into the forest.

I glanced back at him briefly, wishing I could read his thoughts. His face was different, almost soft, wistful. Damn, he was so confusing. But there was something else about him, something familiar. It was almost like looking into a mirror.

I pushed those thoughts away. I didn't have time for psych evaluations.

As soon as I got the blood flowing through my body, and my muscles

working again, I sprinted through the forest for a good mile. Then I cut through the woods and circled back from a different direction. Even though I was mostly sure everyone had already left, I was fairly certain one of the witches still remained in the house. She had walked into the back door, her arm linked through Dominic's. She had leaned against him, giggling, and I got the sensation they were dating.

But ewww. How anyone could see anything sexy in that disgusting man was beyond me. Maybe she liked evil and cheap cologne.

I reached the opposite side of the clearing. My uncle was still tied to the pole. Luke hadn't freed him.

There were no sounds within the house and no one outside on the grounds. I sniffed the air to make sure. The place was dead. I considered shifting into a wolf to free my uncle, but it would be better to remain human, in case I was caught. I could simply say I had gotten myself free and wanted to take a shot at the old guy like everyone else. They might even like that.

Ducking low, I ran across the clearing toward a shed. I darted behind it, then moved to another small outbuilding. I kept an eye on the back windows of the house, looking for any movement, but all was still.

I reached my uncle and quickly untied the knots on his hands. When they were undone, he dropped to his knees and slumped over. I didn't say anything as I picked him up in my arms and briskly walked away. He was heavy but not unbearably so. He was smaller than the other male shifters I'd seen, even some of the females. I bet he got picked on a lot.

At one point, as I hurried through the forest, he opened his eyes from all the jostling motions and whispered, "Who are you?"

"A friend." Wow. Eloquent. But they were the only words I could think of to say. I didn't want to reveal my identity until the time was right.

When we were a safe distance from the house, I stopped and laid him in the grass just long enough to assess the knife wound. It had clotted some but still oozed. Being a shifter, he had some natural healing abilities, but with all his many other cuts and bruises, it would take him a while.

He groaned and lifted his arm to his head.

"I think you'll survive. I know this is going to hurt like a mother, but we have to keep moving."

I scooped him up again.

"Thank you." His eyes closed.

I held still for a few seconds feeling things I hadn't felt since I was a child. I had always loved my uncle. He had been the fun one in the family, giving piggyback rides to the kids or sneaking us candy under the large dinner table. He would also hand out quarters, which felt like a lot of money back then.

But, he'd also been intense. I remember overhearing him fighting with my father. I can't remember what it was about, but I remember being surprised to see that side of him. I guess we all had those sides though.

I took off again, jogging the best I could and trying to think about where to hide him. I had no doubt they would come looking for him. And with my disappearance, they'd suspect I had something to do with it. I had to trust that whatever Luke decided to tell them would keep me out of harm's way.

The sounds of a river up ahead was music to my ears. Just what I needed to not only wash myself off but to also help cover our tracks.

When I reached the water's edge, I gently set him down on the bank. "I'll be just a second. Believe me, I'm doing this for both our good."

Taking the jacket with me, I waded into the river that spanned maybe thirty feet across. It only reached as high as my waist but that was enough. I dunked under the water and rubbed at my skin furiously. I ran my fingers through my hair and shook the long tendrils out while still under the surface. I also scrubbed at the inside lining of the jacket before rising out of the water dripping wet and freezing, the jacket feeling like a hundred pound weight. It was a lot colder now, but at least I could stand the smell of myself.

I walked back to shore and scooped up my uncle to carry him across the river. We nearly fell a couple of times, and my feet received their fair share of cuts, but we made it. I continued walking for another mile until my uncle stirred within my arms.

"I think I can walk now."

"You may, but it's still faster if I carry you."

"Where are you taking me?"

"I haven't decided. I could check you into a hotel, but someone might see us. I don't know who in this town works for Dominic." I bit my lip, thinking. "I don't trust my roommates yet, or I'd take you back to my place."

"I have a place. No one knows about it. It's on the east side of town in the warehouse district."

I cringed. "That's really far away. I don't see me carrying you that far." Especially halfway naked, but I didn't say that. "If I let you walk, it would take us all day." I looked up toward the sky, which was beginning to grow light. "I have an idea how we can get there. Someone I think we can trust."

He nodded weakly. "Great."

Relieved that we'd reached my clothes, I set my uncle down and dressed quickly. I found my phone and called Roma, hoping she would be awake.

I wasn't certain I could trust her, but I didn't have much of a choice at this point.

She answered on the first ring, almost as if she'd been waiting for my call. "Yes?"

Weird. "It's your lovely lone wolf, Briar. I need your help."

"I expected as much."

"You did?"

"Sure. Premonitions, remember?"

Oh, yeah. Those. "Can you pick me up where you dropped me off?"

"Sure thing. I'm only a few minutes away."

"How? It's ten miles from town."

"Like I said, I expected your call." The line went dead.

"Who was that?" My uncle gave me a wary look.

"No one we need to worry about. She'll take us where we want to go."

He looked up at me and shook his head. "Why are you helping me? I don't even know you."

I cleared my throat. "This is something I do. Go city to city, saving one shifter at a time."

"You joke about everything, don't you?"

"I like to keep things light."

"Because you've had a rough past." He didn't phrase it as a question. He just knew.

I shrugged and shifted my weight, feeling uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation.

"My name is Vincent. Vincent Moretti. It's nice to meet you. You said your name was Briar?"

I nodded and turned my gaze toward the forest. Only darkness stared back, hiding beneath the canopy of trees, and yet, I couldn't ignore the cold chill kissing up my spine.

"You look familiar. Do I know—"

I grabbed his arm and silenced him with a look. A twig had snapped. Then another.

I pulled him to the ground and pressed my finger to my lips. His brown eyes widened, and his face paled. Whatever I was hearing, he didn't seem to notice. He kept his focus on me, waiting for instructions.

The sound of a car's engine sounded not far away. It had to be Roma.

Movement in the forest was followed by hushed voices. This, my uncle heard, and he gripped my hand with skinny, bruised fingers. I pointed to the road, indicating to crawl forward. We had to be quick, if we were going to escape these shifters.

As if sensing our predicament, Roma's car stopped only feet from the shoulder. She threw open the passenger door. "Get in!"

I shoved my uncle forward, half carrying him to the car. The forest behind us came alive with pounding footsteps and loud voices. My heart beat painfully fast.

Just as I got my uncle seated, two shifters exploded from the trees down the road, fangs and claws shining in the moonlight.

"Drive!" I yelled and did the only thing I could do.

I jumped on top of the car and held on for dear life.

CHAPTER 9



Lying belly flat on top of the cold metal car, I gripped the edge just above where my uncle sat, the door still open. Roma propelled us into the night, driving like the mad woman she was. My uncle held onto the door handle to keep it from shutting onto my hand. Part of me was terrified as I stared into the darkness rushing past me, tears stinging my eyes from the sharp wind, but another part of me, my wolfie side, loved the thrill.

Once we were a safe distance away, Roma slowed to a stop. I slid off the side and into the backseat, grinning big.

Roma glared at me. “Was that necessary?”

I stared at her blank faced. “What? Jumping on the roof?”

She pulled back onto the road, eyeing the rearview mirror. “You had time to get into the back seat.”

“Oh, come one. Everyone loves a dramatic exit.” I grinned and leaned back in my seat, spreading my legs out.

“Listen to this wise woman,” my uncle breathed to me, then winced in pain.

“The name’s Roma,” she said to him. “And you look like shit.”

“I hear that a lot.” He attempted a smile and rested his head against the window.

“Thanks again for coming to get me,” I said, sitting up and turning to look behind me to make sure we weren’t being followed. “And can you head toward downtown Rouen?”

She glanced at me in the mirror. “Do I want to know what happened?”

“Do you?”

She huffed and grabbed the steering wheel with both hands. I stuffed my hands into my jacket pocket, and we settled into an awkward silence.

I stared at the back of my uncle’s head, silver streaking what used to be all black hair. His shoulders were slumped, further than most people’s. Life had beaten him down. Maybe he’d be as relieved to see me as I was him. Someone else to share our burdens with.

Roma glanced at me a few times in the rearview mirror, her expression unreadable. I was surprised by her demeanor. Before, she’d been super friendly and talkative, but now, she didn’t seem to want to have anything to do with my guest. I respected that and didn’t force the issue. I had no idea who my uncle had become, or how he treated people. Who knew what kind of reputation he had.

Once we reached the city, my uncle gave Roma an address. She nodded again and took off in that direction. After another ten minutes of driving, she parked the car next to a warehouse that looked like it was abandoned. In fact, the whole area looked dead.

Perfect. No one would see us.

It was still early, but a line of orange fire had touched the horizon. Seeing the sun rise next to my resurrected uncle made a warm glowy feeling worm its way into my chest. It was uncomfortable. I didn’t like how vulnerable it made me feel.

"Thank you." I paid Roma with some of my tip money. She took it, then touched my hand. “Just consider me your good luck charm, Briar. Call me whenever you need something.”

I thought that was kind of a weird thing to say, but it was true that I’d been pretty lucky tonight. And she’d stuck around. If I believed in that crap, I’d say she had a point.

She shot me a look, concern evident in her eyes. I gave her my own reassuring glance.

We exited the car, and I watched as she drove away. Maybe I’d make her a batch of cookies or something.

Who was I kidding? I couldn’t bake. Maybe I’d give her some beer. I could

do that. It was lame, but I was okay with that.

"It's over here." Vincent turned down a narrow alley between two warehouses, walking on his own but limping. When he reached the side door, he punched a number into a keypad. It beeped and the door opened. He glanced back at me. "I've never shown anyone this location. I don't know you, but you did save my life so I figure I can trust you."

Hmph. If he only knew the truth about my real reason for being in Rouen. I didn't say anything as he opened the door to let me by.

The room was smaller than I expected. It had worn gray carpet with several dark stains. A single bare mattress was pressed against the wall next to a circular table. Several old papers were scattered over the top.

I turned around. "You want to tell me why the Silver Claws nearly killed you last night?"

He shrugged one shoulder and slowly lowered onto the bed, hissing through his teeth at the motion. "I'm good at pissing off the pack."

I resisted the urge to smile. Pissing off people must run in our blood. "What did you do?"

"I tried to have Dominic killed. Well, not really. I was just caught discussing it. The guy is destroying the Silver Claws. Everyone knows it, but no one can do anything about it with those damned witches around all the time."

"Why don't you just leave?" I walked to the table and scanned the papers on its top. There were several receipts and a bunch of spreadsheets with rows and rows of numbers. When he didn't answer, I looked up and groaned. "Don't tell me you still have loyalty toward the pack that just tried to kill you."

"I belong to them. I think I can smooth things over."

I laughed out loud. "You want to go back?"

"I want to return to the pack, not Dominic. It was great once, and I want to get it to that place again."

"Why would they ever take you back?"

"Because I'm the guy with the money."

"You're rich?" From what I remember of him, he never had much money. He had owned a construction crew, but there wasn't much building going on at the

time. He'd often borrowed money from my father.

He cocked his head to the side and studied me. "What is it about you? Are you sure we've never met?"

That's my cue to leave. Until I knew more about him, I couldn't tell him my true identity. "I don't think so. Unless you were at Sinsual the last two nights. I'm their new bartender. Speaking of which, I might have to work tonight, so I better get going."

He rose from the bed quickly. "Thank you again for saving me. I owe you one."

I attempted to swallow a growing lump in my throat, but it was rock solid. Every part of me wanted to tell him the truth, but I imagined a sock in my throat instead. At least until I got to know him better.

"It was nothing." I walked to the door and opened it. "Maybe I'll see you around."

"We'll meet again, Briar."

Glancing back at him, I smiled. "Dramatic. Just how I like it."

I stepped outside into the early morning light, feeling the sun's rays kiss my face. I tilted my face upward to greet it and inhaled a hitched breath.

I wasn't alone anymore.

It took me nearly two hours to walk home. I was exhausted, and I had a blister forming on my heel. That and being tied to a stupid tree all night made me want to collapse into bed and knock myself unconscious. I'd hoped to sneak inside the house unnoticed, but Lynx was sitting at the kitchen table, a mug of coffee warming her hands.

She gasped when I walked in. "What happened to you? Are you okay?" She jumped to her feet and hurried over to me.

I swatted her hand away. "I'm fine, mom."

"No, you're not. You look like—what is that smell?"

"I guess the river bath didn't work," I mumbled, then sighed. "I rolled around in horse manure is all."

"You're kidding?"

"I wish I were."

"But why?"

I brushed hair away from my face. "You'll find the more you get to know me, those kinds of experiences happen more often than you would expect."

"What about those wounds on your wrist? Is that a normal occurrence for you, too?"

For the first time, I noticed the angry marks. I knew they had been tight, but geez! Parts of my flesh had literally been torn off. I don't remember them being this bad in the car. It's like the wound was getting worse. It also hurt like a screaming banshee now that I was staring at them.

"Come here." Lynx motioned me toward the sink.

I stared dumbly at my hands. I was normally a quick healer so what the hell was going on?

She sighed impatiently, so I did as she asked.

Lynx turned on the water and waited for it to warm. "Stick your hands under this while I go grab some bandages." She hesitated, and her eyes met mine. "Actually, you already know I'm a witch so do you mind? I can heal this pretty quickly."

That's when I remembered how magic had kept me bound to the tree. No wonder I wasn't healing. Man, how could I forget that? I must really be tired.

"That would be awesome, if it isn't too much of a bother."

"Not at all. What are friends for?" She smiled at me and grabbed a towel to dry my wrists. She patted them gently.

"You're more talkative today," I mused. "What changed?"

"I just needed a little time to get used to the idea of roommates. I mean, I know I was the one who sought you guys out, well, you anyway. Samira was just a bonus—"

"—or a parasite."

"But when I saw both of you in my house, I guess it made me nervous at first, but after a good night's sleep, I decided it's going to be fun."

She carefully brushed at my wrist. My insides squirmed at her tender touch, and I rolled my shoulders back. I had never had anyone take care of me before. It was a strange feeling. But it was kind of nice, too.

Who knew I could be so emo? Three times in one night.

"Who did this to you?" she asked, her voice soft, yet the words wielded a sharp edge.

I chewed on the inside of my cheek. I didn't want to get her mixed up in my business. Plus, she might not want a roommate that's a shifter. Some humans, the ones who knew about us, were not too fond of supernaturals.

"It was nothing. I was just playing a game with a friend."

"That involved horse crap and ropes?"

"He's a little off."

"Can you cut it out already?" She laughed. "I know you're a shifter."

My eyebrows lifted. "How?"

"Some witches have the ability to detect supernatural creatures. I happen to be one of them."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because some supernaturals like to pretend they are normal because of horrible things they've been through. I wasn't about to call you out in case you were one of those, but after seeing these," her gaze dropped to my wounds, "I think you're okay with being different."

"And you're okay living with a shifter?"

"I let you move in, didn't I?" She turned my wrists over. "Now hold still. This might sting a little."

With her thumb on the tender part of my wrists, she lowered her head and began to whisper. It sounded like some kind of ancient language. I hissed when my skin began to burn as if someone was touching it with an invisible hot iron.

"That really hurts." I clenched my teeth.

She let go of my wrists. "Did magic do this to you?"

"I think the rope was spelled."

Lynx frowned. "Stupid bitches."

"Do you know who did this?"

"Blond sisters, right?"

"How did you know?"

Her gaze lifted to mine. "They're my cousins. I'd recognize their work

anywhere."

I remembered Samira saying Lynx was a Morgan. Of course, they'd be related. I touched my wrists tenderly. "I hear they're a pretty big deal in this town."

"They're a big pain in my ass is what they are. But let's not talk about them." She waved the topic away. "I can still heal you, but it's just going to hurt a lot. Or, you could wait a few days, and the spell will probably go away on its own."

I shook my head. "I have to work tonight. It's probably bad form to be bartending with rope marks on my wrists. People might get the wrong idea." I raised my eyebrow. "Actually, that could be a little fun."

"And dangerous." Lynx walked to the cupboard and pulled out a bottle of whiskey. "I don't usually drink but there are exceptions. I was saving this for the night when I finally decided to tell my mother where she can stick it. You know, the whole liquid courage thing. But I think it will be better used in this situation."

"Thanks." I accepted it from her and unscrewed the lid. After a nice long swig, I said, "I'll get you a new one. Or better yet, I'll teach you how to tell people off without any liquid courage. People say I'm pretty good at it."

She laughed. "That's probably what got you tied up to begin with." When I didn't argue, she took hold of my wrists for the second time. "Let's try this again. Try not to move."

The pain was just as bad, but since I knew what to expect, I kept my composure. The whole process lasted a full two minutes. When she was finished, my skin looked as good as new.

I held them up to the light and examined them. "Thanks. I think you even got rid of an annoying mole I used to have. Speaking of which, I've got this thing on my ass—"

"Stop!"

We both laughed and shared a swig from the whiskey bottle, despite it being seven o'clock in the morning.

"Well, I better get to work." Lynx picked up a fancy looking purse from off the counter.

"Where do you work?"

"My mother owns a clothing boutique store on Main Street. I'm the manager. I get a pretty good discount if you ever want anything."

"Boutique? The word gives me chills." I visibly shivered.

"Somehow, that doesn't surprise me." She smiled as she turned to go.

I stood up. "Is Samira here?"

"She came in about an hour ago." She walked toward the door. "And for the record, I know that's not tomato juice in the fridge. But I think it's kind of funny she labeled it, so I'm not going to say anything."

She walked out the door, and I smiled, realizing that Lynx wasn't going to be as bad as I thought. I think we might actually get along. Too bad it couldn't last.

After I achieved my goal, I doubt anyone in this city would ever talk to me again.

CHAPTER 10



I thought about going to talk to Samira before crashing, but realized I should probably shower first. It wouldn't surprise me if she had already smelled me. In fact, now that I thought about it, she probably heard my whole conversation with Lynx.

Sure enough, after I came out of the shower, Samira was standing at the foot of my bed as if she'd been there the whole time.

"Do you believe in privacy?" I snapped as I walked to my closet, keeping a tight grip on the towel wrapped around me.

She followed me to the doorway. "What happened last night?"

"Just ran into a little trouble with the Silver Claws." I pulled a t-shirt over my bare chest. I hated sleeping in bras. I glanced back at her. "Did you know our roommate is related to the three witches from the bar?"

"Of course. I'm not an idiot."

I mimicked her under my breath as I pulled on a pair of underwear.

"Why are you interested in Dominic?" She still hadn't moved from her position, not a fraction of an inch. It was unnerving.

"How do you know I am? And why do you care?"

"You're going to get in the way."

"If anything, you're going to get in my way." I brushed past her, then jumped onto my bed and stretched out. My bed was warm, and I snuggled into it. When she didn't leave, I narrowed my eyes. "Why do I get the feeling that you know a lot more than you're letting on?"

"Because I do know a lot more."

"Like what?"

She folded her arms. "I have no intention of telling you. You're not part of the equation. Stay away from Dominic and the rest of the pack. There are bigger things in play than you realize."

I puffed air through my lips. "Listen, goth girl, I don't know what your deal is, but I've got my own reasons for going after the Silver Claws and there's nothing you can say that will keep me away. I've searched my whole life for Dominic. I'm not walking away. Now please leave. I'm tired."

I closed my eyes, but I could still feel her staring at me. "Seriously. You're like a fucking gargoyle statue and it's creeping me out."

A second later, the sensation left, and I opened my eyes. Samira was gone.

I slipped out of the bed to turn off the lights. When I laid back down, I stared up at the dark ceiling thinking of my uncle. How had I not known he had survived?

The thought had occurred to me to ask him, but something held me back. I may remember him as the fun-loving uncle, but time changes people. It had definitely changed me.

Besides, the pack didn't trust him. That should tell me something.

However, he did have information I could use. If he didn't like Dominic, he would probably spill all their secrets. He might even know something about Dominic's schedule that would allow me to get closer to him and end this once and for all.

Just the thought of it brought a smile to my face. This was the beginning of the end. And with the discovery of my uncle, it could also be the beginning of my redemption.

I rolled over onto my side wondering what it would be like to not have revenge fuel my very existence. Would I even be the same person? Would it be possible to live a normal life?? And love? Children? Would my uncle play with my kids as he had played with me?

Those things were on the same level as fairytales to me and yet, with Dominic and Silas so close, the chance for a normal life actually seemed

attainable.

These thoughts warmed me as I drifted into a sleep.

I slept for exactly six hours. My internal clock was as accurate as Big Ben. I rose from bed, listening closely to the sounds of the house. Empty. I placed my hands behind my head, reveling in the feeling.

Ahh, peace. And no cockroaches, unlike the many motels I'd stayed at. After a minute, I jumped up and threw open the curtains. I undressed, throwing my clothes onto the floor as I studied the woods behind me. It seemed private enough, a good place to run when I needed to burn off excess energy.

The deep sleep had helped my body heal and, while I waited for the shower to warm, I stretched my tight muscles. My wrists were just as perfect as before. I raised my eyebrows at them, impressed with Lynx's abilities. No one at work would ever know.

I slapped my hand to my forehead. Shit! I had left the bar without completing the paperwork for Eddie. Again.

I should probably go back in. He had seemed especially anxious about it, as if he might lose his business if I didn't. I sighed. Too dramatic for my taste, but I needed to keep my job.

After I dressed and ate, I booked an Uber to take me into the club. I considered calling Roma, but she'd had a late night just like me. I'd give my new witchy friend a break.

It was early afternoon when I arrived. And locked. I should've figured it would be closed this early in the afternoon. Eddie just seemed like the type of guy who was married to his job.

I sucked in a breath and released it. I guess I was wrong. Having nothing else to do, I headed toward Main Street a few blocks over. Maybe I could go shopping where Lynx worked. It had been several months since I bought any clothes and being a wolf wasn't good for keeping them intact.

The streets were lined with old brick stores, probably the originals built when the city was settled. The air was humid and smelled like fish and spicy jambalaya. Humans walked the streets, smiling and chatting, completely unaware of the supernatural community.

I shivered.

The ignorance could be blissfully amazing and scary at the same time. You'd never know what hit you if a supernatural decided to eat you for lunch, which didn't happen too often unless it was a total douchebag. Humans were off limits.

I passed a shop that smelled like incense and paused for a moment to take in a deep breath. A chill ran through my blood, and I scurried forward. Black magic. Best to stay away from that shit.

A few doors down, I found the boutique shop I thought Lynx might work at. A bell above the glass door jingled as I walked inside. It had looked small from the outside, but my eyebrows lifted when I realized how big it was inside. It was a two-story shop that went much farther back than I expected. Happy pop music blared through the speakers, and I frowned, sure that Lynx had picked the station.

I wandered through the store, dragging my fingers across all the soft and fancy-looking clothing. I checked the tag of a cute top, but dropped it when I saw the price.

A pretty brunette approached me. "Can I help you?"

I grimaced. "I have deer in headlights look on my face, don't I?"

She giggled. "You do seem a little overwhelmed."

"There's too much to look at. I'm getting a headache." I glanced around the store, waffling on whether I should stay or bolt. "I'm looking for Lynx."

"Are you a friend of hers?"

"I'm her new roommate."

She flinched.

I frowned. "What was that face for?"

She quickly collected herself and smiled. "Nothing."

"No way. I saw it. Do you think it's a bad idea to be Lynx's roommate?"

"Of course not. Lynx is a super nice girl. It's just that her family—"

I waved my hand to dismiss her. "I've heard. But I'm not living with them. So, is she here?"

She nodded toward the back. "She's in the office, but her mother is there, too. I would wait until they are done."

My mouth dropped open. "No way! I want to see what all the fuss is about."

Walking away, I pretended I didn't hear the girl whisper at my back. "Your funeral."

I found the office easy enough and knocked on the closed door. It flung open wide, startling me.

"What?" A shorter woman stood in the doorway, her face twisted in a snarl. Her dark red hair was pulled back into a bun wrapped so tight it stretched the skin on her face. She might've been beautiful, with ivory skin and amber eyes, but her expression was darkened with malice.

It only took a second to understand why Lynx might need liquid courage to face her mother.

I glanced over the older woman's shoulder. Lynx sat behind a desk, blood draining from her face.

The woman snapped her fingers in front of my face. "Are you going to say something or just stand there looking like an ass?"

Lynx jumped to her feet. "Mother, this is my roommate, Briar. She's new in town, so please be polite. And, Briar, this is Cassandra Morgan."

Cassandra looked me up and down, wrinkling her nose in disgust as if she could smell the shit on me from the night before. I was half-tempted to smell myself. I'm pretty sure I washed everything.

I raised my eyebrow. "How long are you going to check me out? Because I'm straight, in case you have any ideas."

She blinked. "Excuse me?"

"I said I'm straight."

She glanced back at Lynx in surprise. When she looked back at me, her face was red with angry blotches. "Do you know who you're talking to?"

I slipped past her into the room. "Nope and I don't give a rat's ass." I rapped my knuckles on Lynx's desk. "Do you want to go on a late lunch? I have some time to kill."

Lynx's jaw nearly fell off.

"Now listen here." Cassandra turned to face me. "My daughter has work to do, something you probably know nothing about. I suggest you leave this place

before I call the police."

Lynx's pale cheeks tinged pink. "Mother, that's hardly necessary."

"Oh, I think it is. We should probably search her too. There are nice things in this store, and it wouldn't surprise me if she's taken something."

I took three steps toward her. "Now see here, old lady. No one accuses me of being a thief."

She lifted her hand and flicked her fingers. An invisible force slammed into me, and I crashed into the wall.

Rage burst through me, making my blood boil. I was going to kill this witch just as soon as I could get up, which I seemed to be having trouble doing. Before I could steady my feet, Lynx stepped between us, holding her hands out as if to shield me.

"Leave her alone, mother!"

I stared at Lynx's backside in wonder. I couldn't remember the last time anyone had stood up for me.

Her mother sidestepped her to scowl at me. "Listen to me, shifter bitch. If you ever talk to me like that again, I will put you in your place in a painful way. Do you understand?"

A thousand insults flooded my mind, but I was still trying to catch my breath to spout any of them. Damn it.

Lynx pointed at the open door. "Please leave."

"We'll discuss this incident later. As for you," Cassandra's gaze slowly lowered to me, "you're in over your head. It's best you give your loyalty to the Silver Claws' Alpha as soon as possible. It's in everyone's best interest."

She disappeared before I could respond. Whose interest had she been talking about? And why was she talking to me as if she knew me?

The sudden ache fermenting in my gut told me something was off with that woman. And not off in the sense that she forgot to take her Prozac that morning, but off like she was secretly a demon wearing a flesh suit.

I'd have to keep an eye on her.

CHAPTER 11



Lynx whirled around and helped me to my feet. "I am so sorry. My mother is insane."

I brushed myself off. "I can't believe you came out of her vagina. I wouldn't think it possible with that thick tree up her ass."

"You okay?"

"Are you kidding? You saw me the other night. This was nothing."

She cracked a smile. "What are you doing here anyway?"

"I had to fill out some employee paperwork, but the bar is closed. I thought maybe I'd do some shopping while I waited for it to open."

She squealed and threw her arms around me. "I thought you'd never ask!"

My body stiffened at her touch. Hugging did not come naturally.

She let me go but pulled on my arm instead, leading me out of the office. "This is going to be so much fun."

I groaned, already regretting it.

Fun was not the word I would use for what we did. For the next few hours, she dressed me as if I was a doll. I had to admit though, I sort of liked the attention. It was not something I was used to.

By the time she was finished, three hours had passed and my wallet was several hundred dollars lighter. It was the most money I had spent in years on clothes. Every extra penny I ever earned went into my revenge fund. I liked watching it grow.

When I was finished shopping, I headed back to the club, my arms full of

bags. A familiar motorcycle was parked out front. Oh, hell no. A mixture of desire and anger thrummed through my body. For a second, an image of his naked and sexy body wrapped around mine filled my mind. I gritted my teeth, forcing the image into my brain gutter. Maybe I needed to screw him, just once. That might get him out of my system.

I huffed and walked inside, dumping my bags in the front. The lights were on, but I couldn't see anyone. Voices echoed from the upstairs office. Why was Luke talking to Eddie?

I crept quietly up the stairs, hoping to catch part of their conversation but their voices lowered. Luke probably heard me come in. However, I did manage to catch the words “money” and “deadline.”

As I approached the closed door, their voices stopped altogether. Disappointed, I knocked on it.

"Come in," Eddie's voice called.

I opened it and looked straight at Luke. "What are you doing here?"

"I could say the same for you." His eyes dropped to my wrists, and he studied them for a moment too long. Then he gave me a smug look. "Are you following me?"

I snorted. "I would shoot myself first."

Eddie cleared his throat. "Briar is my new bartender. Customers love her."

Luke picked at an invisible speck of dust on his jacket. "Have they heard her speak?"

I pointed at my mouth. "The crowd lines up to hear what comes out of this hole."

"Only because they've never heard so much bullshit before. Or should I say horse shit?"

"Your face is shit."

"Can I help you with something, Briar?" Eddie said quickly.

I flashed Luke one more cold stare before I turned to Eddie. "I need to fill out the employee paperwork. I keep forgetting."

He huffed and searched through a stack of papers on his desk. "I told you it was important to get that done. There are certain people," his eyes flashed to

Luke, "who get very upset if my records aren't in order. We don't need the IRS sniffing around."

I looked from him to Luke, frowning. "What the hell does this loser have to do with your records? You're the owner, right?"

Eddie handed me a stack of papers. "There was a time when being an owner meant something, but not anymore."

Luke sighed as if he'd heard Eddie say this before. "I'm gonna go, but I'll be back later. Have it ready." He walked by me, eyeing me as he went. My body betrayed itself and shivered at his musky scent. To make up for my body's betrayal, I reached my leg out to trip him, but he jumped over it.

"Nice try." I saw him smile before he left the room.

I waited until I heard him descend the steps before I turned to Eddie. "I hate that guy. What was he really doing here?"

He shook his head. "It's best to stay out of it. He's part of a group that pretty much runs this city. They're backed by a lot of muscle."

"Someone needs to chase them out of town."

"Don't think for one second you are going to be the one to do it. Their group is extremely dangerous. Besides, you're the best bartender I've ever seen. I've made more money with you in the last two days than all last week. I'd hate for anything to happen to you."

"Don't you worry. I'll stay out of trouble. When do you want this paperwork back by?"

"Before your shift at eleven."

"You got it, boss."

"Please, call me Eddie."

"Thanks, Eddie." I moved to leave but turned around to ask one more question. "Do you give out Christmas bonuses?"

"I'm Jewish."

"Damn." I left the office and walked down the stairs. Not like I was planning on staying until Christmas but, so far, I kind of liked having roommates, Lynx at least. And Eddie seemed all right. The jury was still out on Samira.

I walked outside, surprised I was even considering staying in a place longer

than a few months. A lot could happen before Christmas. Because I had all my bags to carry, I called another Uber and rode home. I was going to have to buy a car at some point. These Uber rides were starting to add up.

Samira was in the living room when I walked in the front door of our house. She hissed at the sunlight spilling in through the open door.

"Oops." I hurried to close it.

She scooted to the other end of the sofa, scowling at me.

I set my bags down on a table. "So, you really can't go out into the sun at all?"

"It takes approximately ten seconds for my flesh to begin burning. Another twenty, and I will be dead."

"That sucks balls." I dropped onto the couch and propped my legs up on the coffee table.

"What's in the bags?"

"I went to that boutique shop where Lynx works. It was a pretty cool place but pricey. I wouldn't have bought anything without using Lynx's discount." I eyed her sideways. "You should check it out. The all black thing you've got going on is depressing." She didn't respond except to give me her biggest deadpan, eat shit look, so I continued. "Have you ever met her mother? I don't think I've met a bigger bitch."

She sat up. "Please tell me you did not have an altercation with her."

"Well if you don't call her throwing me into a wall an altercation, then no. We had a lovely time."

She sucked in air through her teeth and shook her head. "You are going to ruin everything. Why are you even here?"

I faced her, turning to cross my legs on the couch. "What could I possibly ruin? This city doesn't need my help with that."

She came to her feet. "So far, all you've done is get in a fight with everyone in your path. There are things you don't understand, politics you can't fathom. You need to stay out of the way or bad things are going to happen."

I stood up to face her, my hands clenched at my side. "Yeah, well, maybe I'm trying to stop some of those bad things. Personally, I think what I'm working on

is far more important than what you've got going on. Why don't you show me your bad thing, and I'll show you mine?"

There was a chance whatever she was planning might seriously affect my plans for Dominic. I couldn't let anyone or anything stop me from killing him. The motion had been put in place the moment he killed my parents and no amount of force could stop it. Anyone who tried to stop me would only end up hurt. By the determined expression on Samira's face, her goal was just as fierce.

So it was going to be like that.

Samira spoke slowly, as if I were her idiot little sister. "You must stay away. It's taken me years to get where I'm at, and all will go according to my plan as long as you leave the Silver Claws alone. This is your final warning."

"I'd like to see you try and stop me." I took a step toward her, my eyes glowing yellow. There was no way I was going to let goth girl stop me, powerful vampire or not. I let my wolf surface and fur erupted on the tops of my fingers. I held my hands out by my side, ready for an attack.

It would take me exactly two seconds to shift, but that would be two seconds too slow for a vampire like her. I had to be ready in half a second. I just hoped throwing a coffee table at her face would slow her down long enough for me to shift.

Instead of fighting, she inhaled a sudden breath and stepped back, breaking the tension in the room. I stared at her in shock. There was no doubt she could break my neck—I could see the raging power in her eyes stronger than any ocean storm—but for some reason, she decided to back down. I was hella impressed.

I followed her lead and relaxed, knowing no good would come from us fighting. She wasn't my enemy, not yet. She just had plans that didn't align with mine.

She attempted a smile, but it only served to show her sharp teeth. "We're roommates and must be civil. At least for tonight, stay away from the Silver Claws."

"I have to work anyway. What do you have going on with them?"

"I have a meeting with Dominic and Silas."

My eyebrows lifted. "You have a job?"

"I'm the Silver Claws' accountant."

I stared at her, blinked a few times. "Okay, so the whole accountant thing doesn't surprise me. Well, maybe a little. You're an old vampire. Don't you have enough money to avoid the general work day in your life?"

"I have more wealth than you could ever imagine, but I happen to like numbers. Plus, it helps me get close to certain people in the city."

"And there's the part I don't understand. Why would you ever want to work with someone like Dominic?"

"That's something I cannot tell you. Just know, I am no friend of his, just like I sense he is no friend of yours."

I nodded. "That's one thing we can agree on. I'll stay away from Dominic's place tonight."

She stiffly lowered her head in acknowledgment. So formal. I wondered what she'd act like drunk, if she'd be able to let loose. I'd have to try it once, just as an experiment.

I left Samira and headed to my room. Whatever she had going on, I needed to figure it out to make sure it wouldn't interfere with my plans. I couldn't have Dominic or Silas disappearing. I needed to get inside the Silver Claws and fast. Maybe I would go visit them tonight, despite what I told Samira. Maybe I could even spy on her and learn what she's up to.

I'd have to be a better spy than before though. Damn those witches.

As soon as I arrived at work, I walked straight to Eddie's office with my paperwork. He stared out a big window that allowed him to look over the club below.

"Every 'T' is crossed and every 'I' dotted. No IRS bastard will be bothering you." I held out the paperwork.

When he didn't take it, I shook the papers. "Jeez, with all the grief you've been giving me, I thought you'd have filed them in two seconds."

He looked up. "Huh?"

I raised my eyebrows. "The IRS. My papers." I gave him a 'duh' look.

"Oh." He took the papers from me. "I wish it was just the IRS who I had

problems with."

I frowned, intrigued he was actually speaking to me about this. "When did Luke's boss become such a problem for you?"

He went back to staring out the window. "It's not just me. It's every business in the city. They insist on taking a portion of our profits in the name of security, saying it's to protect us from outside gangs. Of course, we all know they're just taking our money." He had this weird look on his face, like he was surprised by his sudden confession, but he didn't stop. "And there's nothing we can do. Especially since they have the Morgans on their side."

The hopeless look in his eyes fanned the flames I already had simmering within me.

Eddie may not be a model citizen in the community, but he was one of the best bosses I'd ever had. I could tell only after a few days that he was going to treat me right.

"What about the police? Can't they do anything?" Even as I said it, I knew the answer. What could a human police force ever do to stop a large pack of werewolves and a power-hungry witch family?

He laughed and shook his head. "As if the police mean something in this city. All they're good for is writing parking tickets and altering police reports."

"Maybe things will change soon."

"I hope so, but it's unlikely. Not unless someone with real power challenges them."

I lowered my gaze. I had real power, instilled upon me when I had shifted at an early age, not that I really understood it. But was it enough to break a whole pack and destroy a witch coven? Maybe, but only if I could fracture it from within. An outside attack would never work.

His head jerked up. "Don't get any ideas in that hard head of yours. There's nothing you can do to help. Too big of a problem." When I didn't say anything, he glanced to the bar and stood up. "Bar's getting busy. You'd better get going before butterfingers gets into too much trouble."

We shared a chuckle. So even he knew how much Peeper sucked.

I headed downstairs, thinking about what he'd said. I really liked him. Even

if I didn't stay long enough to get to know him well, I'd stay long enough to help him. I was going to have to do something about this.

Because it was a Friday night, the crowds came early and ready to party. Their excitement rubbed off on me, and I had more fun than usual, inviting people from the audience to join in my show. I even let a couple of guys take a shot from my belly button. This got me a disapproving look from Eddie, but he had to admit, the energy in his club had gone up ten notches.

As the night wore on and it grew closer to the end of my shift, I began to feel antsy. A job to earn money was important, but not as important as my real job.

The bar was settled. I had primed the crowd, and all Peeper had to do was deliver. His tips should be better than ever.

I really wanted to get off early and be more proactive against the Silver Claws. People were being hurt, specifically my supercool boss. I know what I had told Samira, but surely, she would understand this. Besides, I'd be careful.

As soon as I saw Eddie at the bar, I snagged him. "Hey, I know I still have an hour before the end of my shift, but do you think I could get off early? I bet butterfingers can handle the rest of the night." I pointed my thumb back at Peeper, who was trying to throw one of the plastic bottles into the air. I'd given up trying to teach him, but he was intent on learning.

Eddie glanced at Peeper and then looked back at me. "Everything okay?"

"I just have something important to do."

"I guess. This is the largest crowd I've had in a long time, and I think having you here had something to do with that. Even if I may not always agree with your methods." His eyes narrowed, but he was also trying not to smile.

"Thanks, boss. I'll work extra on my next shift or something." I removed my apron and shoved it under the counter.

I was just about to walk out the front doors when I spotted Lynx up on the balcony with her mother. She looked especially upset. Her mother did too, but I had a suspicion that was her permanent expression. Torn, I almost turned around to check on Lynx. She'd already helped me a lot more than most people would've, but the pull to get out of there was greater. I had to get to the Silver Claws and see what I could do to destroy them.

One problem at a time.

Ever since Eddie had told me how businesses were being targeted, I knew I had to do something. This wasn't just about me anymore. I clenched my jaw.

Survival had been the name of the game for a long time. Until revenge became a sweeter option.

And soon, Dominic and Silas were going to see how sweet I could taste.

CHAPTER 12



After hitching another ride from Roma to Fire Ridge, I walked up to the opening of the large, metal gate, blocking the road to the mansion. The sun had set moments ago, yet a warm breeze still blew through the trees smelling like lilacs with a hint of ambrosia. There was no one at the gate, but there was a camera. I bet someone showed up in the next thirty seconds.

It only took ten.

A car came skidding around the corner of the dirt road, its back sliding to the side. A plume of dust trailed behind it. When it came to a stop, two large burly men jumped from the vehicle. They looked familiar, I think I recognized them from the night before.

The darker haired of the two walked toward me, his expression tight with muscles bulging on both sides of his jaw. He was massive, his chest rounded in all the right places. "State your business."

The other shifter, also built like a dump truck, raised a gun and pointed it at me. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end, and I suppressed the growl threatening to erupt from me.

I lifted my hands, trying to calm them and my wolf down. "Relax boys. I just came to let you know that I liked what I saw last night. And I'm all in. Sign me up."

"Hey, Gerald." The light-haired brute elbowed the brown-haired one. "It's that woman. The one who escaped."

Gerald looked from him to me.

"I'm your girl." I tried to look non-threatening. Guns was something I didn't mess with. You never knew if they held silver bullets. "I got a good look at what kind of pack this is, and I'm kind of digging the whole power trip thing. My momma always told me I was drawn to power like a moth wants to fly." I wrinkled my nose. "That's not right. What's the phrase?"

"Like a moth to a flame." Gerald puffed out his chest.

I smiled. "You're not as dumb as you look! So where do I sign up?"

Gerald chuckled, but his friend was a little more hesitant. Maybe he sensed the true strength of my power. Gerald began to open the gate. "You'll be lucky if Dominic lets you wash our dishes. Now be a good wolf and follow us to containment. We have lots of questions for you."

I didn't like the sound of containment. I imagined it a place I might be trapped in for a while. "Take me straight to your Alpha."

Gerald glanced at his friend. "You hear that, Toby? I figured this woman stupid, but I didn't think she was crazy." He turned back to me. "There's no way you're going to meet our Alpha. You're a nobody."

I grit my teeth. "Just take me to Dominic or even Silas."

"Lady, you're not going to be talking to either one of them for a very long time. You have to work your way up the pack's social ladder."

I narrowed my eyes, my gaze flickering to both of them as I tried to assess who the better fighter was. I focused on Gerald. "How about we make a little wager? Let's fight to submission, you and I. If you win, take me to your bunker or whatever containment is. But if I win, you take me directly to Dominic."

Both Gerald and Toby snickered.

"Lady, you have a deal. I would be honored to physically muzzle you while I straddle that tight body of yours."

Ugh. Why were guys always such pigs? I took off my jacket and tossed it to the ground, giving them my crazy smile. "Let's do this. I've been needing a fight all day."

"No shifting," Toby warned. "Human forms only."

"You bet."

Gerald ambled toward me, ramming his beefy fist into his open palm. He

was trying to be intimidating, but he was only letting me know which hand was his hitting hand. My breathing increased as adrenaline poured through my veins. I centered my base and lowered into a defensive position.

Gerald sneered, his nose flaring at the excitement. "I bet I pin you in three moves."

"I bet I get you in one."

Growling, Gerald lunged for me. He swung his fist straight toward my face. I ducked.

Anticipating his follow through hit, I spun on my heel. His second swing missed, and he stumbled forward.

I usually took advantage of this mistake by crashing my fist into my opponent's kidneys, but I wanted to give him his third try.

"That's two," I gloated.

His brows drew thick over his eyes, and he danced on his feet like a boxer. He was quick, but I was quicker.

The next and final swing, I stepped to my left and jabbed my own fist into his throat, collapsing his larynx. His head snapped back, eyes wide. Elation flooded my body.

Money shot.

He leaned forward, sucking in a rattling breath. I slammed into him, bringing him to the ground. Dust billowed around him.

As soon as we were down, I straddled him and punched his face. I growled, trying to get him to submit.

Instead, he pushed at me, trying to throw me off. I leaned forward and slammed my hands on the ground above his head. I shoved my knees up higher around his chest, forcing his arms up around his neck. Moonlight illuminated the shock in his green eyes.

I grinned down at him, breathing heavily. "Look who's straddling who."

He grappled his arms, trying to hit my face, but he could barely move his arms, much less punch me. I shoved my left knee up higher, forcing his head to squish against his shoulder. Now he just looked like an idiot. "Ready to call uncle?"

Instead of waiting for him to respond, I grabbed his wrist and, twisting my body, locked him in an arm bar.

He cried out.

I tightened it, just a notch. He slapped the ground with his free hand.

I put my hand to my ear. "I don't hear you." I arched my back. Any higher and I'd shatter his shoulder.

"Uncle!"

I gave his arm one last tug, just to remind him not to mess with me again. Then I released him.

He yanked his arm out and rolled over. I sat up and leaned over to catch my breath, still keeping my eye on them. Toby stared at me with his mouth wide open.

"What's your problem?" I stood and paced to let out my excess energy. My blood was still roaring through my ears. It had been too easy to take him down, and my wolf was still restless. "Haven't you ever seen your buddy get beat before? Really wasn't that difficult. Kind of a letdown, actually."

I shook out my hands, and my body began to relax.

Gerald moaned and rolled onto all fours. He slapped at Toby's hand when he offered to help him up. "I got it."

"Now take me to Dominic," I ordered. "I want to get this over with." I walked to their vehicle and slid into the backseat, slightly disappointed. Because of Gerald's size, I expected him to put up a bigger fight. I really thought it would take me more moves to neutralize him. Sometimes it wasn't fun being right.

As Toby closed the gate, Gerald moved into the passenger seat. His shoulder was probably hurting pretty good; I hadn't been gentle. Even though he wasn't showing pain, he was quiet.

Toby jumped into the driver's seat, and we headed back down the long lane to the mansion. As he drove, Toby glanced at me several times in the rearview mirror. "You seriously have been a lone wolf this whole time?"

"Think I need a pack?"

"Hell, you could lead a pack."

"And have to deal with buffoons like you guys? I don't think so."

"Then why join now?" Gerald turned to look at me.

"Cold hard cash. I'm sick of working for peanuts. I heard the Silver Claws are the richest pack in the country. I want in on the action."

As soon as we pulled up to the mansion, I threw open the door. I didn't wait for them to ask any more questions. Toby tried to grab my arm, but I yanked it out of his grasp.

He grumbled but didn't try to take it again. I noticed Gerald wasn't getting anywhere near me. Instead, they walked ahead of me, leading me up a set of long stairs and through dark, mahogany front doors.

Toby glanced at me over his shoulder. "He's this way. But don't blame us if he wants to beat you for interrupting his meeting."

"I wouldn't mind another fight."

Gerald just held his lips in a firm line. Toby split off to my left while Gerald moved to the right, motioning me to follow him. We moved down a long hallway. The deeper we moved, the more my body began to hum. I'd waited for this so long. The temptation to rush in and just snap his head from his body was strong. The fight with Gerald had just been an appetizer, but now I wanted more.

Dominic's head on a platter would do nicely.

Gerald knocked on a door at the end of the hall, softer than I thought his massive knuckles could accomplish. When no one answered, he cleared his throat. "Dominic, someone's here to see you. It can't wait."

"Come in." By his sharp tone, Dominic wasn't happy being interrupted.

Gerald swallowed a lump in his throat and turned the doorknob. It swung open wide, motioning for me to pass through first.

I took a step through the door and saw red as Dominic's ugly mug came into view.

All my senses blew through the roof, and my wolf readied herself to shift. I did a quick analysis of the room. There were three other people, besides Gerald. I would go for Dominic first, then the bodyguard to his left, if I made it that far. My pulse pounded in my ears, and my breathing quickened; I couldn't stop my chest from heaving in and out. My knees bent, almost springing me over the desk, and my hand reached for the blade hidden in my bra. My eyes shifted to

the left at the last second. I needed to know how badly this was going to go down.

And then I saw Luke.

My nostrils flared, making me smell someone else. Vampire.

I froze. Shit.

Shit, shit.

Samira sat across from Dominic. Of course. She said she had business with them. Her eyebrows rose when she saw me, then quickly turned to a scowl, making her glasses slide down her nose. Silas sat to the left of her, his deep blue eyes staring into mine.

I shifted my gaze to Luke. He shook his head as if disappointed to see me. Right back at you, pal.

Turning toward Dominic, I ignored the stares of the rest of the people in the room. A slow smile spread across his face when he saw me. "You captured her, Gerald. Good job. Take her to containment. I'm in an important meeting."

I walked forward, putting my hands on his desk and leaning over, just enough so that I was in his space. "Gerald didn't capture me. I walked here all by my lonesome."

He leaned back, his grip on his pen tight, but he raised an eyebrow.

"And then I challenged him to a fight, just for the opportunity to speak to you."

Dominic jerked his eyes to Gerald, who was staring at his shoes. "Are you telling me she beat you in a fight?" When Gerald only mumbled a response, Dominic's eyes returned to mine. "Maybe I hired the wrong security person."

I straightened. "I would have to agree with you. He wasn't much competition. Disappointing, really. Look, I can see you're busy, but I wanted a face-to-face before I got caught up in any unnecessary questioning. It would waste everyone's time. I came here to join. I'm clearly strong enough for your pack. My only mistake was sneaking up on you guys last night, but I wanted to make sure you would be good enough for me. I admit, I liked what I saw."

"You've got some balls, I'll give you that."

"Ovaries, Sir," I clarified.

Samira rolled her eyes at me.

He swirled his middle finger on the desk in front of him, considering me carefully. "That may be, but do you have the heart to do what we do? Or really, I should say stomach." His eyes flashed to Luke's, and he leaned forward. "Let's see if you do. I want you to follow Luke, starting tonight. You are to be his bitch."

An expression I couldn't decipher crossed over Luke's face, darkening it.

Dominic continued. "If you do everything he says like a good little wolf, then maybe, just maybe, I'll put you on Silas' personal security. Anyone who can beat Gerald in a fight deserves it." His gaze lowered to Silas. "Would that be acceptable to you?"

Silas, with his beady black eyes and thin lips, looked me up and down. I resisted the urge to swat at the bugs I swore were crawling on me. His hands curled slowly around the cane resting in his lap. "I can make something out of her."

A flame lit inside of me. If I could become his personal guard, I would have ample opportunities to kill him. It was just too good of an opportunity to pass up.

"I'm all in."

"Dominic said you have to do anything," Luke said, smiling wickedly. It made my stomach somersault. I ignored the growing heat in my lower abdomen, my hormones betraying me.

I raised my eyebrow at him. "You wish." I looked back at Dominic, frowning. "You don't mean I have to literally do everything he asks, right?"

Dominic chuckled. "If you can resist Luke, I'll be a bloodied pirate."

"Then I'll be sure to buy you an eye patch and a wooden peg leg." I bowed slightly, then turned to leave.

Dominic called after me. "Are you forgetting someone?"

I glanced back at Luke. "You coming?"

He walked past me, mumbling under his breath. Dominic's gaze slid to Samira. "That should solve our little problem then, correct?"

Samira shifted her weight in the chair eyeing me sideways. "We'll see what you bring in."

What was Samira to him? How deep into his business was she?

I flashed her a curious look before I followed Luke out the door. He didn't say anything to me until we were outside of the mansion. He whirled on me, embers in his eyes that burned hot. "Every time I think you couldn't get any dumber, you go and surprise me."

"Thank you?"

"Why are you trying to get close to Dominic? Don't you know that man is dangerous?"

"I thought you wanted me to join."

The fire in his eyes cooled, and his voice lowered. "I was ordered to get you to join. Big difference."

I opened my mouth to argue, but he turned on his heel and walked around the side of the house. I followed him, frustrated and confused. He seemed loyal to the pack, doing whatever his Alpha asked him to do, but then why warn me about Dominic?

He stopped in front of a black motorcycle and tossed me a red helmet. "Put this on."

When I glared at him, he added, "Please."

He swung his leg over the seat of the bike and motioned for me to get on behind him, his lips a tight line.

I stared at the bike for a moment as a low thrill rose in my stomach. There were only two things better than the vibration of a bike between my legs: sex and being a wolf. With the latter being the better option.

Luke eyed me curiously, and a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth almost as if he knew what I was thinking. I quickly slid behind him and wrapped my arms around his waist. His stomach tightened at my touch.

"Why did you really come back here?" he asked over his shoulder.

"I already told you. I want to join the pack."

"That is such bullshit."

"What would you know? You know nothing about me or my past."

"And therein lies the problem." He slammed his foot down on the clutch, bringing the engine to life. The loud sound made it impossible for me to respond.

He accelerated, nearly knocking me off backwards, and I had a strong feeling it was deliberate.

This shifter might actually kill me.

CHAPTER 13



I gripped him tighter as he drove fast through town, darting in between cars like a ball being shot through a pinball machine. I couldn't help but think some of this show was for my sake. I hung on for dear life, but inside, my body was on fire. Pressing further into him, a smoldering sensation warmed my chest, and I struggled to control the growing desire toward Luke.

He turned a corner sharply, and when I teetered sideways, his hand dropped from the bike handle and pressed against my arms that were gripping his waist. His fingers brushed over the top of my wrist where the rope had injured me earlier. I wondered if the motion had been deliberate. Maybe he was feeling as equally attracted to me as I was to him.

Usually my love life consisted of one-to-three month whirlwind romances, mostly spent either in bed or eating pizza and watching TV. I never opened up or stayed long enough with a guy to get to know him.

And I never thought I would be attracted to the right-hand man of my enemy. But my wolf was getting possessive of him, and that pissed me the hell off.

As soon as we parked, I jumped from the bike and tore off my helmet. I began to pace, trying to relieve some of the burning in my blood. He glanced back at me with such a heated look, it made me want to jump him right here in the middle of the street. We stared at each other for a moment too long. Then I threw my helmet at him, hard. I didn't want him getting any ideas. He grunted as it hit his stomach.

Except, instead of turning him off, his grin only widened.

Bastard.

“Just tell me what I need to do.” I brushed past him, frowning and ignoring the sound of his deep chuckle that sent a pleasurable chill across my flesh.

I focused on the building in front of me. It was a pawn shop, and not a very classy one by the sight of it. The neon sign was halfway burnt out and read, ‘aw Shop’. Bright yellow and red signs told customers they could get a high price for their gold and diamonds.

Yeah right.

It was almost nine o’clock, and no customers were around. I don’t know why they even bothered staying open, except to rip off the desperate customers who came in at this hour.

Luke’s expression returned to broody and tough as he walked to the front door. “Alright, Briar. You wanted to see what the pack does. You’re about to find out.”

He opened the door for me. I narrowed my eyes and folded my arms. “You don’t think this is a date, do you?”

Huffing his breath, he brushed past me roughly. I grinned, then followed him inside. The interior was worse than the outside. All sorts of trinkets crowded together on shelves haphazardly placed along the wall. The shiniest of the objects laid in glass enclosed counters. Prized possessions and cherished memories easily traded for a dose of silver.

A wilted man sat behind the counter, bald with yellow teeth and fingernails. His eyes widened when he saw Luke, and he jerked up out of his chair. It made me wonder if he knew Luke’s true identity.

“What brings you here, good man?” His left hand fumbled with something beneath the counter. Probably some kind of weapon he thought he could use against us.

“Don’t be stupid, Bill.” Luke walked up to the cash register. “You know why I’m here. Do you have our money or not?”

Bill ran his greasy finger across the glass, staring down at it. “It was a rough week, man. Not many people came in. Can I pay you my share next week? This weekend is supposed to be good weather. That always helps.”

Luke rammed his fist into the glass counter, causing a large crack to race up the side. I jumped at the sudden aggression.

“You know that’s not how this works.” Luke leaned closer to Bill. “We want our money tonight.”

Bill continued to fumble with something on the other side of the counter. “Sure. Whatever you say. You order, I obey. That’s how it is, right?”

“Been that way for two years, and yet you always give me a hard time. Just hand over the money. I know you’ve got it.”

Bill’s eyes flashed to me. “What’s the broad doing here?”

Luke didn’t look at me when he answered. “Oh, you don’t want to get tangled up with that one. She’s worse than me. She’ll carve your heart out with a spoon and feed it to your mother.”

To make a show of things, I snapped my jaws and grinned. Truth was, I was a little nervous with where Luke was taking this. How far did he push until he got his money? I get the Silver Claws being cruel to other supernaturals when needed, but to regular humans? That could spell trouble for all shifters. We are supposed to keep a low profile.

Bill’s eyes quickly darted back to Luke. “I really can’t pay you this time, man. It’s been a rough month. I might even have to close my doors for good.”

“Why do you keep lying? We both know you’re running a profitable side business.” Luke placed his hands on the edge of the counter. Every muscle in his body was wound tight, as if he was expecting something to happen.

Bill’s left eye twitched, and the frightened expression he’d sported a second ago twisted into something dark and evil. “I’m sick of obeying. This is my business, not Dominic’s.”

“Listen,” I said, as the back of my neck began to tingle. Something bad was about to go down, and I really wanted to bring some calm back to the conversation. “Why don’t we all—”

Bill withdrew a gun from beneath the counter and pointed it at Luke. “Get the fuck out of my store!”

Luke lowered his head and shook it. “Bill, Bill, Bill. I was hoping it wouldn’t come to this.”

“I said get out!”

His finger began to pull the trigger but Luke, faster than the next beat of my heart, wrapped his hand around the back of Bill’s neck. He slammed his face into the glass counter, completely shattering the surface. Bill screamed and clutched at his face. Blood ran between his fingers and poured to the counter. The gun, forgotten, fell inside the case.

“It didn’t have to come to this. Too bad.” Luke reached in and grabbed the gun. I took a step back, afraid he was going to shoot him. Instead, he yanked open the magazine to unload the weapon of its bullets. Bill began to cry, but Luke ignored him. “Briar, search the back room and take whatever money you find.”

I stared at him mutely. That sure escalated quickly. Part of me wanted to say what the hell? But the other part, the part that needed to join the Silver Claws, knew I needed to move.

He glanced back at me, and there was something in his eyes that I couldn’t quite place. “Well?”

I jumped to obey. I had to see this through, even though I felt bad for old Bill. The feeling disappeared when I saw what was in the back room. There was an old desk pressed against the wall, resting on frayed orange carpet. A long table sat next to it piled with drugs and several stacks of hundred dollar bills.

Moving in closer, I suddenly felt the need to hurry and get out of here. Some of the stacks were stained in red. I guess old Bill wasn’t as innocent as he seemed. I grabbed a grocery sack off the desk, emptied its contents, and replaced it with money. When I was done, I turned to leave the room but changed my mind. I stared at the drugs wondering where they would end up. I should destroy them. I’d seen too many of my foster friends ruin their lives with that shit.

I walked to the room’s only window and opened it wide. I pushed out the screen and peered out. Piles of garbage lay outside. I could easily scatter the drugs and none would be the wiser.

I returned to the table and picked up several bags. Just as I was about to rip them open and dump them outside, Luke’s voice made me jump. “You better not be destroying those. Bag them up, too. We’re taking them.”

"You can't be serious? Snatching the money is one thing, but we need to destroy the drugs."

"You will do no such thing. You'll bag them up, and do as I say, or I'll tell Dominic you don't really want to join."

I stared at him, the blood in my veins hot. Closing my eyes briefly, I reminded myself why I was doing this and slowly packed up the drugs into another bag. Remaining silent, I walked back into the pawn shop and passed Bill, who was slumped on the floor still crying like a baby. I wanted to kick his face in; all feelings of pity for him had disappeared. How many lives had he ruined? Or for that matter, how many lives had the Silver Claws ruined if they were also mixed up in this?

I walked outside, sucking in a breath of cool air. I focused on the only star I could see, the only one that didn't allow night to suffocate it with its darkness.

Luke put his hand on my arm. "Quit holding those like you're afraid someone's going to rip them out of your arms."

I realized I was gripping the bags tightly to my chest. Luke opened a saddlebag on the bike and pulled out a backpack. He handed it to me and walked off. "This way."

I shoved everything into it and followed him around the corner, throwing the backpack over my shoulder.

We walked three more blocks in silence. Luke stopped in front of a hippy looking herbal shop. The window displayed an old wood sign that proclaimed, "Incense, herbs, and spell kits." Glass balls filled the display window, with lots of colored rocks lined up in straight rows. A tag on one of the rocks priced it at three hundred and forty-eight dollars. I almost choked on my spit.

I pointed to the sign. "Looks like they're closed."

My voice sounded strange. It was the first time speaking since leaving the pawn shop.

He ignored me and entered a code into the keypad on the side. It beeped, and he opened the door. Maneuvering his way around brightly colored clothing racks, he walked behind a curtain and down a flight of stairs. It was pitch black down here, and I had to use my wolf vision just to see at the bottom. We stopped

at a door that looked like a normal supply closet, but I could hear faint voices coming from behind it.

Luke knocked on the door in a specific pattern. A moment later, it opened.

A woman with purple hair and vibrant green eyes looked at Luke seductively. She put her hand to his chest. "Hey there, handsome."

Frowning, I stepped out from behind Luke, eyeing the deep cut of the woman's tight red shirt. Her swelling cleavage practically spilled from the thin material. When she saw me, her lips pressed into a firm line.

"Who's this bit?" She folded her arms across her stomach, pressing her chest up even higher.

Raising my eyebrow, I looked straight into her eyes. "This 'bit' is about to pop the silicone right off those massive zits on your chest."

"Huh?"

Luke chuckled low, but the lady in red was not happy. Frowning, she turned to Luke. "She stays out here."

"She comes inside." Luke pushed the door open and brushed past her.

I did the same, gloating at her as I went, but it disappeared the moment I realized where we were. The basement looked like a drug operation right out of a mob movie. Rows of tables lined the room, with medium-sized bags filled with white powder and money in designated positions. A man in a dark business suit sat next to small green stacks of money. He stood up to greet Luke, eyeing me warily.

Luke shook his hand. "She's cool."

I was a little surprised Luke was showing me all of this. I know he didn't believe my motives for joining the pack, so why show something that was obviously meant to be kept secret?

"When will the truck be here?" Luke looked over the piles of bags.

"In about an hour." The man went back to the stack of money and pushed it into a counting machine. "It should only take my men eight hours to get to Coast City. Victor's men are waiting for us there."

Coast City was a huge metropolis up north. I'd heard rumors that the local government and police force had lost control, and the city was pretty much run

by the mob. If the Silver Claws were working closely with them, then Rouen might soon share the same fate as Coast City.

Leaning against an empty table, I watched Luke. He moved around the room, still talking to the man in the suit, as he eyed every other person. Most of the women gave him a friendly face, and he winked at them, smiling. He seemed familiar with the operations as he talked with the man, going over their schedule for the next week.

It was rare for shifter packs to be involved with drugs or any kind of illegal shit. It usually drew too much attention to our kind, but those who dared risk it were mostly small packs and ran even smaller operations, just a way to make extra cash, but the Silver Claws were something different. They were deeply involved in making and selling, not just in the city, but across state lines. This scared me.

And just thinking about Luke being involved made any attraction toward him grow cold. Even my wolf snubbed her nose at him.

It took another twenty minutes for Luke to finish up business. This gave me time to analyze the workings of Dominic's operation. Not only were there a few shifters, but there were also a couple of vampires mingled in with the humans. They didn't seem at odds with each other, which could only mean one thing: they were making some serious cash.

I stood up. Luke watched me intently as I crossed the room.

"I'm going to catch some air," I said to him in passing.

I was out the door before he could respond. I made my way up the stairs and through the racks of clothes, guilt eating at my insides. Could I really do this? Was I willing to watch drugs being tossed into the streets, just because I needed revenge?

Outside, I sucked in a deep breath and leaned against the brick building. The air was humid, and moths and insects buzzed around street lights. I looked up, searching for my lone star, but it had disappeared. Instead, inky blackness stared back at me. It was vast and threatened to swallow me whole.

I felt small and insignificant in a grimy world. It felt ugly. And I, even uglier for being a part of it. I wanted to scrub the mess from me.

Instead, I waited patiently for Luke. It wasn't long before he joined me.

He didn't say anything as he leaned against the brick wall next to me. His arm brushed across mine, but this time I felt nothing. We were both quiet for a moment, staring at the tagged buildings across the street. One of the words read, "Hypocrite." Appropriate.

I finally broke the silence. "Do the humans know who they are working with?"

He shook his head. "To them, the Silver Claws are just another gang. A scary as hell one. Still want to join the pack?"

I played with the hem of my shirt. "I haven't decided."

He glanced at me sideways, and his hair fell into his eyes. "It's okay if you're not cut out for this. I get it."

"I didn't say that."

"It's not a bad thing, you know." He inhaled a deep breath. "In fact, it's probably a good thing to be repulsed by what we do."

Turning, I faced him. "Why do you do it?"

His eyes met mine. "For a bigger cause."

I groaned, disgusted. "Don't tell me you believe in that pack crap."

"I won't."

I raised my eyebrow. "Then, what?"

Grabbing my arm, he pulled me closer. "Tell me why you want to join." I opened my mouth, but he interrupted me. "The real reason. I'm not buying that other bull."

I didn't, couldn't, answer him. You didn't go around telling people that their Alpha killed your whole family. Instead, I looked away, and I slowly pulled my arm out from his hold.

He sighed. "Yeah, I didn't think so."

"Some secrets aren't meant to be shared. I have my own, just like you have yours. It's better we keep it that way."

He didn't answer right away. When I looked back at him, my face firm, he stood up and nodded to his bike. "Come on. I'll give you a ride home. You can decide tomorrow."

The ride home was different from before. He didn't zip through the streets. In fact, he drove slowly and my hold around his waist was lighter. I couldn't involve myself in his secrets. Especially if they kept me from getting my revenge. I distanced myself, determined to untangle any feelings toward him.

I had to keep things simple and couldn't get distracted.

I had to focus on killing the men who slaughtered my family.

When we pulled up to my house, I slid off the bike and didn't say anything as I made my way toward the house.

"Briar."

I turned around. The look he gave me made my chest constrict. He looked sad, and a little vulnerable. I didn't want to see him that way so I glanced behind him, focusing on the house across the street. When I finally glanced back, his expression was harder, and his hands gripped the bike handle. He took in a breath and I stilled, waiting to hear what he would say.

"Not everything is as it seems."

Before I could react, he sped off, shooting down the road as if he was running from the devil himself.

I ignored the suffocating feeling in my chest and pushed my feelings deep into a place where they couldn't easily surface. I didn't have any room to complicate my life. Especially with a man who was complicated himself.

Turning back toward the house, I shuffled down the walk toward the porch steps when I heard my name. I swiveled around, glaring into the darkness beyond the yard. My wolf eyes saw the outline of a man standing at the tree line.

"Who is it?" I growled this out, the hairs standing at the back of my neck. "Show yourself."

The man took a threatening step toward me. I bent down and swiftly yanked a blade from my boot, my pulse racing.

"If you're looking for a fight, I don't mind spilling your blood."

And I meant it. I was tired of being pushed around today.

CHAPTER 14



“Stop, please,” a familiar voice said. “I didn’t come to fight.”
He stepped into the faint moonlight—my uncle.

“What are you doing here?” I glanced around nervously, making sure we weren’t being watched as I returned the knife to my boot. He might be my uncle, but I still wasn’t sure I could trust him, especially after learning about the Silver Claws’ illegal activity. Anyone involved with them couldn’t be all good.

He motioned me deeper into the forest, disappearing within its darkness. I hurried over to the tree line, but hesitated before following him into the woods. I called upon my wolf to take partial control so she could take in the surrounding area and listen to the heartbeat of the night. She noticed nothing suspicious. I rolled my shoulders back and followed after him.

He didn’t speak for a while but continued deeper into the woods. When we were a safe distance away from the house, he stopped. “You accompanied Luke tonight. What did you think of the Silver Claws’ operations?”

“How do you know about that?”

“I’ve been watching you all day.” He admitted this without any shame. It made my fingers curl into my palm.

“Why would you do that?” My voice remained calm, but my whole body was on alert, ready to take him down if he tried anything. Why would he be spying on me, when I’d saved his ass?

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “Ever since we met, you’ve felt familiar to me. You reminded me of someone, so I had to know. That’s why I

followed you.” He was grinning wide now, and he yanked me into his arms, giving me a hug. “My Isabella, how I’ve missed you! I thought you dead with everyone else! Why did you not find me? Where have you been?”

I squirmed out of his embrace. I had never admitted my true identity to anyone before. To hear him use my real name shook me to the core and made me feel small again.

Inhaling a hitched breath, I squared my shaky legs beneath me. I wasn’t the little Isabella who believed the world was a bright and cheerful place anymore. The world had sharpened me into a deadly weapon. I had fought hard to survive and to find the wolves responsible for my family’s death. I trusted no one and even though it made my life a lonely one, I was okay with it.

But now, with my own family standing in front of me, the realization I wasn’t alone anymore washed over me and made me feel emotions long ago forgotten. The wall around my heart cracked a little.

“I thought you were dead,” he said, his voice full of agony. “What happened?”

I stared into his eyes. Eyes that were an exact match to my own. Eyes that searched mine desperately, needing an answer.

Puffing a slow breath through puckered lips, I said, “Those men, Dominic and Silas, they threw me into an abandoned well. Then sealed it up and left me for dead.”

His left eye twitched, and his fingers curled into his palms. It was a long moment before he said anything, but when he did, his voice was laced with rage. “They are monsters. True monsters. To leave a child in such a horrible place, trapped, alone?” His throat bobbed up and down. “How did you escape?”

“I got out only because of my...” The words choked in my throat, and I gasped for breath. I couldn’t admit everything to him yet. I couldn’t admit to him that my wolf had emerged early, giving me strength I had yet to understand. That secret was still my own.

“It took three days to get out, climbing stone by stone. Freezing and starving.”

Tears flooded my eyes and ran down my cheeks. I clasped my hands into

fists, still angry. This anger I was feeling, it was the kind that simmered and burned. The kind that called for revenge. Not only for what they'd done to me, but for everything that had happened afterwards.

After I finally escaped the well, I had come home only to discover my whole family slaughtered. Every single one, I'd thought. I couldn't even say goodbye. I couldn't touch my mom again, to tell her how sorry I was I hadn't been there for her. Maybe there was something I could've done.

In that moment, I'd wished I was dead with them.

Agony made me run, instead of revealing myself to the cops. I ran and ran, until my feet couldn't take it anymore. I'd already been in the well for three days without food. I ran until my legs were bloody, and my skin stretched over my bones like thin paper. I ran until I couldn't take another step. And then I collapsed, right next to the road.

Police found me one day later, barely alive. And I never told anyone. Not who I was, not about what had happened, not who had killed them. I didn't speak for six months. And in that time, all during the process of finding me a home to live in, I became someone else. Someone filled with rage. Fury fueled my existence. I lived and survived, but only with one purpose.

Revenge.

And when I decided to open my mouth to speak, Isabella no longer existed. By then, I was Briar.

I was vengeance. I was retribution.

I was determined to kill the men who had butchered my family.

And yet, here was my uncle: a survivor. Just like me.

He moaned and pulled me to him in a tight embrace. "I had no idea you were alive. Had I known, I would've searched the ends of the earth for you."

"What happened, Vincent? Why didn't you know?" I was crying now, and I wanted to hit him. To blame everything that happened on him. "Why didn't you save them?"

Tears filled his eyes and grief twisted his expression.

"Dominic took me." His voice betrayed his shame. "He kept me locked up for over a year."

“Why?”

“They thought I knew where the Abydos was, the sacred blood. Do you remember?” I barely nodded. “They tortured me, asking me all sorts of questions about it.”

A cold and violent chill made its way with my spine. I pulled out of his arms and dropped onto a nearby stump in shock.

Of course. I should’ve known. All that killing, every member of my family murdered, because they wanted the ultimate power.

“I told them nothing because I couldn’t,” he continued. “I had no idea where it was. I tried to fight them, but I was powerless. They had those witches, the Morgans.” He spat the name out. “Their power is stronger than my own.” He put his hands out, pleading with me, trying to make me understand, “I wish I could’ve saved them. I loved them.” His hands fell to his side. “And all that for nothing. I couldn’t tell them where it was. And they never found it. The torture lasted months until they finally gave up. I’m glad your father never told me its location. I think I would’ve cracked.”

I said nothing, allowing my emotions to roll over me, giving him time to put himself back together. All these emotions weren’t good. It wouldn’t bring anyone back. It couldn’t change the past.

My uncle inhaled a deep breath, his tears now drying. He knelt to the ground, as if he could no longer support his weight. “I swear to you, Isabella. If I could’ve changed anything, I would have. And your father...” An eerie sound escaped his mouth. “It should’ve been me. I was the older brother. I should’ve been the one protecting the blood. It should’ve been me that died that night.” His eyes darkened. “I was the older brother. But I was stupid and reckless in my youth. My father didn’t think I was fit to protect the blood. Maybe if I’d have been a better child, your father, the whole family, would still be alive.” He was quiet for a moment. “Every day I regret that I wasn’t better.”

I touched his hand. “Then you’d be dead. No one could’ve predicted what Dominic would do.”

He looked at me, determined. “Well, now I can. As penance, I joined up with the Silver Claws, pretending they’d won me over. That I wanted to help them

find the blood. Instead, I vowed to destroy their network.” He lowered his gaze. “I know it may seem like I haven’t done a lot, but I have caused them damage. It took me a long time for Dominic to trust me on my own. For years, I always had someone with me, watching me any time I was near the pack. But slowly, I gained his trust. And with the money left to me by your father, I’ve used it to slowly cut off his network. His reach only extends to Coast City and here, of course.”

He clasped my hand tight. “What brought you here, to this city of all places? It’s not safe for you, especially if they find out who you really are.”

“You aren’t the only one who wants revenge. I’ve been hunting him for a very long time. It took me years to discover the names of those who attacked and killed our family. All I had were their faces.” I pulled my fingers through my hair, taking in a deep breath. “I don’t worry about them discovering who I am. Like you, everyone thinks I’m dead.”

“Except the witches may sense something different in you. You must be careful. Especially because of the Abydos.”

“What do you mean?” I resisted the urge to swallow a growing lump in my throat. Above all else, the blood must be protected from everyone. It was too dangerous in the wrong hands.

“Do you know what happened to it?”

Keeping my expression even, I lied. “I have no idea. I was only ten at the time. My father never told me where he kept it. It may be lost forever.”

He frowned. “No, I suspect he wouldn’t have. The Silver Claws tore apart your place several times and never found it either. I can only hope no one will ever find it again.” He gazed up through the canopy of trees to the darkness above. “I wish there was a way to know for sure, though. It’s dangerous to not know its location.”

“Honestly, Vincent, that’s one burden I don’t want to carry. The ones I shoulder now break my back enough.”

He nodded his head as if he understood. A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth, and he touched my arm, as if he couldn’t believe I was real. “I’m so glad we found each other. It means everything to me. Blood between family members

is unbreakable. You will come before all others. Whatever you need, just ask. And, please, when it's just us, call me Uncle."

I shifted my weight wishing I knew how to respond. I never had anyone I could count on before, but he didn't seem bothered when I didn't respond.

"You must be careful, Isabella. I know you put on a strong front, but you are still a lamb in a pack of wolves." I didn't bother to correct him. To tell him that I was the predator among them. "In a few days, I'll appeal their decision and rejoin the pack. I have no doubt they'll let me back in. When I do, we'll join forces against Dominic and the others and bring them down. Together we can do it. We are Morettis, and no one screws with us."

A slow smile crept across my face. Finally, someone speaking my language. "If we're going to do this, you'd better start calling me Briar."

He smiled, and this time, when my uncle embraced me again, I squeezed him back tightly. If there was ever a time for me to get my revenge, this was it. I could feel it.

Finally, I would destroy the Silver Claws.

CHAPTER 15



I walked into the house and dropped onto the sofa, my chest feeling lighter even though I'd been way too emotional lately. For the first time, I could actually taste victory on my tongue. And it tasted hella good.

"Doesn't anyone sleep around here?"

I turned around. Lynx stood in the doorway, wearing a short, green, cotton robe and holding a steaming mug in her hands.

"I'm part nocturnal. What's your excuse?"

"Couldn't sleep."

"Cop a squat." I patted the couch next to me. She smiled for a moment as she sat down. Silence settled between us. Her eyes were serious, and she focused on the dark liquid in her cup. Not at all like her normal happy self.

"What's on your mind?"

"It's nothing." Frowning, she sipped at her cup.

"I saw you with your mother at the club. Looked like a heated exchange."

Her shoulders dropped, and her expression fell further. "It always is with her."

"What's her deal?"

The liquid in her cup began to swirl on its own. Lynx didn't even realize she was mixing the drink with her magic. I was oddly impressed.

"My mother comes from a long line of witches. And they all have high expectations." She looked up at me. "Our family didn't always hold power in this city. In fact, a generation ago my family was in servitude."

"In servitude? What does that even mean? It sounds primeval."

She chuckled, but the sound was muffled in sadness. "In the magical community, there are hierarchies. Just like a shifter pack, except witches are ruled by family blood. My mom's maiden name is Trite, and long ago her family was weak and poor. That's a label they can't shed no matter how powerful they are. It was only through my mother's marriage to the Morgans that she was able to break those chains. She reminds me of it daily. Especially since my father passed away a few years ago. One wrong move, and the Ministry could strip her of her title. And she's determined that if she's stripped of her title, she'll drag me down with her. We'd be shunned by every witch around."

I shook my head and stretched out on the sofa, throwing my leg over hers. "Sounds like a lot of pressure. So, based on your mother's reaction toward me yesterday, I take it hanging out with shifters is a no-no, right?"

She cracked a smile. "Only mouthy ones."

I laughed. "I guess that leaves me out." I grabbed her drink and took a sip, grinning mischievously, then gave it back to her. "This could be fun."

Her drink burned my throat. Tea with a dab of whiskey. Nice.

The front door opened and Samira strode through it, glaring at me with that dead face of hers.

"What's got you all hot and bothered?"

She narrowed her eyes to thin slits. "You could have ruined everything tonight."

"Ruined what, Sammie?"

She seethed. "Don't call me Sammie."

"Oh, I kinda like it." Holding my legs in place, Lynx curled her legs up under her on the couch and smiled as if getting ready to hear a good story. The liquid in her cup had stopped swirling.

Samira's eyes flashed to Lynx, and her mouth pinched into a tight line. There was something about Lynx that bothered her. Whatever Samira was going to say, she swallowed the words, then spat newer, colder ones directed at me. "I know what Luke does when he goes to collect money. Why would you want any part of that?"

Lynx turned to me, her eyes wide. "Are you going to join the Silver Claws?"

I willed my face not to turn red. I didn't care if Samira knew, but for some reason I didn't want Lynx to know. I had begun to think of her as a friend. And that was something I hadn't had in a long time. I didn't want to let her down.

But I couldn't reveal my true reasons for wanting to join the pack.

So I shrugged, masking the guilt I felt. "Maybe I don't have a problem with it. Maybe I'm just tired of being a lone wolf."

An awkward silence shrouded the small space in the room. Feeling uncomfortable, I shifted my weight, and Lynx lowered her gaze to the mug in her hands. Her pursed lips and wrinkled brow made me feel even worse.

I held back a swallow, knowing Samira would hear it. If they could see through my lie, their reactions didn't show it. Whatever friendships I might've started had ended.

"I'm going to bed," I said, standing. "It's getting cramped in here."

As I walked away, I was reminded of why I didn't get close to people. My secrets were too big for friendship.

* * *

FOR THE NEXT couple of weeks, I kept to myself as I settled into a routine. Go to work, sleep, work with Luke, and hang out at Fire Ridge with the rest of the Silver Claws. They had several side businesses going on, including taking bets for any kind of gambling and a few of the girls ran webcam businesses. They also had a chop shop that I'd heard made them a lot of money. I'd never met a pack who ran as much illegal shit as the Silver Claws.

Some of their activities happened in the guest house, behind the main one. It also had a sweet theater and gaming system set up, so there were plenty of shifters around at all times of the day and night. I hung around the pack, getting to know them. Learning their weaknesses and how I could exploit them for my plans. My smart mouth and willingness to fight made me blend in easily, exactly what I wanted.

My life at home was a different matter.

I could sense the hurt in Lynx every time we were around each other as her moods were easy to read. It wasn't just that I was joining the Silver Claws. It was the fact that I had pulled away. I barely spoke to her unless I had to. It would be easier in the end for the both of us.

Samira, however, seemed indifferent to me much the way a stone wall reacts to vines growing on its surface. And yet, I watched as she purposely drew closer to Lynx, but the action looked forced. She was like a panther trying to make friends with a bunny. It made me wonder what she was up to.

For now, I pushed whatever motives she had to the side, deciding I would address it only if it got in my way.

Just like my uncle said he would, he returned to the Silver Claws, begging for forgiveness. They kept him in containment for a week where they questioned him mercilessly. But by the end, he was finally released and put on probation. For one month, he was the pack's servant. Whatever the members asked of him, he had to do it.

He suffered it all because he knew at the end of the day, it would be worth it. We both did.

In a way, we were in our own little pack, aligned by the same cause. For the first time since my family died, I could see the benefit of having allies.

As for me, I continued to impress Silas and Dominic by bloodying my fists several times against business owners who refused to pay their dues to the pack. For the most part, I didn't feel bad about doing it because many of them were also running illegal shit behind the scenes. It was an elaborate system, protected by secret knocks, passwords, and handshakes. I was only privy to a few of them.

They may as well be rats eating the city from the inside out. If something didn't happen soon, nothing would be left.

The Morgans were one variable I couldn't figure out. They didn't seem the type of people to want to share power, and yet they allowed Dominic to control the city. They even provided him with those three crazy witch sisters who never left his side.

As for Luke, we became cohorts of a sort. Not really friends, but not enemies either. We mostly did our work without complaint. Most times, he was ruthless

and cruel, but every so often he would show me a different side, the side I'd seen that first night.

But I built up my walls, keeping a distance between us. Now that I was so close to burning through the two names at the top of my list, I wasn't going to let anyone get in the way. Not even the man that could make my tits harder than the glacier that took down the Titanic. Especially the man who, with one sweet gesture, could melt my heart.

That shit couldn't happen.

CHAPTER 16



Tonight was my initiation into the Silver Claws pack. It had taken long enough. For the most part, the pack was excited, but there were a few who were apprehensive, probably because I had yet to lose a fight.

I was hanging out in one of the entertainment rooms, propping my feet up on the coffee table when Ryder walked up to me. "Can I join you?"

I smiled and eyed the seat next to me. I liked the boy. A few years younger than me, he was different from the rest of the pack. He didn't have many friends and always hovered on the fringes of our get-togethers. In, but not a part. With how he acted toward us, he should've been a lone wolf, but he needed the pack's protection from the Greybacks. I still didn't know why he had left the same pack his family belonged to. Something real bad must've happened between them.

He dropped next to me, a can of PBR beer in his hands. His eyes were already glazed over; he must've been hitting the hard stuff earlier. "Do you think you will pass the initiation?"

"Flying colors, I expect." I patted his knee, but something in his eye, a flash of fear, had me frowning. "What?"

"The initiation, it's not your typical hazing."

"So they're not going to make me drink ten shots and run through town naked? Damn."

He squeezed my knee, his eyes full of sorrow.

My smile disappeared as I studied his serious face. "What the hell are they going to make me do?"

His Adam's apple moved up and down, and the veins on his neck grew thick. "I can't say for sure, but it will be bad. Real bad. Your time with Luke, shaking down local businesses? That's nothing." He gripped the beer can tighter until it dented. "They made me do something so terrible, I still have nightmares about it."

"That bad, huh?" I rubbed the back of my hand, wondering what I would have to do that could be worse than breaking faces.

He nodded solemnly. "They need to test you, beyond what you've already seen and done. They're going to make you choose—the pack or something else close to you."

I let out a sigh of relief. "Not a problem then. I don't have anyone or anything close to me."

He stared at me, his blue eyes searching mine. "They'll find something."

I swallowed the heaviness growing in my throat. "Why are you warning me? I'm sure it's against pack rules or something."

"Because you're different. I don't know what it is, but you don't belong here." He glanced over my shoulder beyond the glass doors leading to the patio where the rest of the pack partied. "And I think you know it too. It makes me wonder, why are you here?"

"I could say the same to you." I followed his line of sight, watching a couple grind to the music blaring over the wireless speakers. They were all getting pretty hammered. "You're hardly one of them, and yet you stay."

His eyes briefly flared yellow. "I wanted to become a lone wolf, but when I tried to leave the Greybacks, my dad tried to kill me. Where I come from, you don't leave the pack. Ever. I had to turn to the Silver Claws for protection. They are the only thing standing between my father and me."

"Your dad?" I tried to hide the shock I felt.

He nodded.

"How could he do that? How could he have the power to do such a thing?"

He stared at me so intensely, I shivered. "Because he's their Alpha."

His confession nearly knocked me over. "Your father is the Greybacks' Alpha? Well, piss on me."

“If you think the Silver Claws are bad,” he leaned toward me conspiratorially, “the Greybacks would eat their own babies if they thought it would benefit the pack.”

“Baby-eating is messed up. Good on Dominic for letting you join the Silver Claws, but can I ask how? I’d think bringing in the son of a rival shifter pack would be too dangerous.”

“Not when they promise to give up all of their competition’s secrets. How do you think the Silver Claws took over Rouen so quickly?”

My eyebrows lifted. “It’s because of you that Dominic was able to take out the Greybacks’ territory?”

He took a sip of his beer. “Yep.”

“You’ve got some serious brass.”

“It was the only way they’d let me in. And truth be told, I thought Dominic would be better. Hell, anything should be better than staying with the Greybacks, and it was, in the beginning. But, power reveals the monsters in us all.” Guilt bled into his voice.

“And now you’re trapped.”

It was a simple statement, a truth that bound him to this place where not a single fuck was given for him. Until now.

I grabbed his hand, letting my full wolf come to the surface. My chest heaved up and down as I kept her at bay. It was a difficult task when she was this close.

She was strong as hell.

I only showed her to those I felt I could trust. By telling me about the initiation and sharing his past with me, Ryder had shown me he could be trusted. He had risked his delicate position in the pack to do it. In return, I showed him my true strength. Something Dominic would try to kill me for, if he knew.

My power overwhelmed the room, and Ryder tried to mentally pull away. But I held him firm.

“I’m going to help you. This place will not always be your prison. Be my eyes and ears, and I swear to you, in time, you’ll be set free.”

He nodded dumbly, his mouth agape.

“Swear it.” My nail grew into a long, sharp point, and I used it to slice open my palm. He held out his hand to me.

As the old oath went, I sliced his palm, a shallow cut, and clasped my hand to his, binding our blood together. We were connected now. If he were ever in trouble, I would sense it.

This pact was not something I had planned on doing tonight, or ever for that matter. So why now?

I looked deep into his eyes, finding the pain and anger I often found in my own. He was worth it.

A clock in the corner struck midnight.

“It’s time.” Ryder slid his hand away from me and straightened. “If you survive tonight, I’m with you a hundred percent.”

The patio sliding doors opened and Dominic appeared, followed by Silas, Gerald, and the others. Only Luke was missing, and my uncle, who had been sent away on a delivery to another town. I wasn’t sure where Luke was.

The smiles and laughter the pack sported only moments ago had been replaced with serious expressions. They filled the room until they made the large space feel small and suffocating.

Dominic stood ahead of the crowd. “Briar Jacobs, rise.”

I obeyed, willing myself not to squirm under the intense gazes.

“Tonight, you have an opportunity to become a full member of the Silver Claws. We do not give this honor to just any shifter. They must prove their worthiness and have the nomination of at least three pack members to be allowed to go through the trials.”

Three? I risked a quick glance wondering who the third wolf could’ve been to nominate me. Luke, Vincent and... my eyes stopped when Gerald winked at me. I hid my smile, glad he didn’t hold a grudge after I had kicked his ass.

“Do you still wish to join?” Dominic asked. “This will be your only opportunity to quit.”

“Quitters are for pussies.” I raised my head, leveling my eyes with his.

Several of the members chuckled and one shouted, “Hell, yeah!”

A smile tugged on the corners of Dominic’s mouth, but not because he

thought I was funny. It was more of a grin that said, “You have no idea what you’re getting into.”

“I couldn't have said it better myself,” he said. “Come on, then. Let’s discover your worth.”

I followed him down a long hall expecting the pack to join us, but only Silas and Gerald trailed behind.

“What about everyone else?” I asked. “Aren’t they coming for the show?”

Dominic didn’t look back at me when he said, “There’s not much room where we’re going, but don’t worry. They’ll be watching from the theater room, eating popcorn and drinking beer.”

I rubbed at the back of my neck, trying to ease the sharp and sudden pain gripping my spine. Something was starting to feel severely off.

He stopped in front of an elevator and when the doors opened, he motioned me to get inside first. Shit. I hated elevators, and this one was especially small. “Can we take the stairs?”

“Get in.” His voice was hard.

Holding my breath, I stepped inside. I kept my eyes forward as the doors shut, trapping us inside the small space. I tried not to give in to the overwhelming panic climbing up my throat. Focus. Think of something else. I’m at Sinsual. Pouring drinks for a hot shifter wolf with a muscular chest just begging to be petted. I lifted my eyes to his face. Luke’s steel-blue eyes stared back at me.

I shook my head to quickly get rid of the image, but then I was stuck back inside the cramped elevator. I sucked in a breath. Air caught in my throat and refused to fill my lungs.

I gripped the sides of the elevator and lowered my head, fighting the clawing, gripping sensation against my chest.

An image ripped through my mind, taking me to a place that existed only in my nightmares. Water, cold and dirty. It swirled around me, continuously moving as if creatures just below the surface had somehow risen from the mud, summoned by my presence. I opened my mouth to scream, but the motion ignited a burning fire in my throat, and I tasted blood. Even my voice had

betrayed me. It couldn't take my constant cries for help.

A voice said my name. The water slowly retreated but even as my consciousness returned to the elevator, my blood and flesh remained cold. I clutched at my stomach as shivers wracked my whole body.

Silas clamped his hand on my shoulder, and my eyes shot open. He said something but the words were distorted. I needed to get out of here! And then, as if I had made it so, the doors opened.

I shot out, putting as much space between me and the elevator as possible in the narrow hallway. Leaning over, I sucked in deep breaths until I could control my shaking.

I looked up to see Silas and Gerald looking at me like I was a complete idiot. I chuckled uncomfortably. "Not a fan of elevators. The whole up and down thing going against gravity. It's unnatural." When that didn't seem to be enough, I tried something else. "And, uh... I may be a little nervous."

Silas and Gerald relaxed, but Dominic's eyes bore into mine as if he could sense my inner turmoil. The set of his face was still, and his thumb and forefinger tapped together as if memorizing something for the future.

"Which way?" I asked quickly, trying to distract him.

Dominic motioned his head to the left. "Not that much further."

I followed behind him taking in my surroundings of the basement. It was cool and damp and smelled like moist earth and rusted pipes. Our steps were loud against the concrete floor. Each footfall made my heart jump.

Dominic took a series of turns stopping only when he reached a large steel door. His hand hovered over the knob. "No matter what you see in here, you are not to react. Do you understand?"

"Yes." My breathing quickened, wondering what they could possibly know about me. Had they found out my true identity somehow? Could my uncle have sold me out?

The door opened slowly.

I stepped inside trying to process what I was looking at. When the pieces came together, and I realized what they were going to ask me to do, my legs grew weak, and I nearly collapsed.

For I realized in that heart-wrenching moment that all my plans had been destroyed.

CHAPTER 17



The smell of fear permeated the small room making the white walls appear darker than they actually were. A long counter had been built into the back wall, and on its top was a series of instruments, the kind you only see in an operating room or a horror movie. Depending upon how one used the tools, they either saved lives or destroyed them.

No lives would be saved tonight.

Luke stood in the corner looking everywhere but at me. I wish he would look at me; I wanted him to see the repulsion on my face. How could he be a part of this?

Finally, I let my gaze settle on the one person in the room that could deter me from my revenge even as my legs grew weak.

Lynx sat bound to a chair with silver chains; her wrists and ankles raw where the shackles held her in place. She had been stripped to her bra and panties. Tear-smudged mascara stained her cheeks, and her lips pressed into a firm line, as if she was stifling more cries. When her eyes met mine, a spark of life ignited inside them.

“Oh, Briar.” Her chin quivered, but she kept her voice steady. “Thank God, you’re here. These animals kidnapped me. Please tell them they have the wrong person and get me out of here.”

“It’s going to be okay.” My voice cracked as the lie attempted to break through. I turned to Dominic, growling. “What the hell is this?”

He linked his hands behind his back and walked toward Lynx. “She’s your

roommate, right?”

“Yeah, so? Why do you have her?”

“Because she is your friend.”

My blood turned to ice, but I kept my composure and shrugged, as if he was asking something as simple as whether I liked the color red. “That’s debatable. We barely know each other.”

Faster than I could blink, Dominic withdrew a small blade from his pocket and slammed it into Lynx’s shoulder. A terrified cry ripped from her lungs.

I took a step toward him, my wolf preparing to attack. She wanted to come out, to destroy everyone in the room. I felt confident I could kill Silas and Gerald fairly quickly, if he tried to stop me. He had a begrudging respect for me, and that would make him hesitate.

The only two I worried about were Dominic and Luke. Luke had strangely shown deep loyalty toward Dominic, and I’d seen enough of his hardened side to know he would try to take me down if I went after Dominic. As for Dominic, he was an Alpha which meant his strength was unmatched. I’d never lost a fight, but I’d also never fought an Alpha. A fight between us would probably last awhile, giving the rest of the pack a chance to get at me.

I don’t think I’d survive that.

I readied myself, willing to take the chance, but the terrified look on Lynx’s face is what stopped me. I’d briefly felt something for her. Friendship. In that split second, I made the decision that I wanted to live. I could have a life after this. Love, family, friends.

Maybe there was better way. Maybe I could talk us out of this.

Though my clenched jaw, I said, my voice a command, “Stop.”

Dominic blinked his eyes, and everyone else in the room stilled. I forced myself to calm down. I couldn’t let him see the real me. Not yet.

I cast my eyes downward in submission, compelling my wolf to retreat. “Please.”

His lips turned up into a grin. “So you are friends?”

“Fine, yeah, we’re friends.”

Tears ran down Lynx’s face, but she didn’t cry out loud. By the way she was

holding her mouth, I'd guess she was biting the inside of her cheek. I admired her courage for trying to appear brave when she must be in an intense amount of pain.

Time to start the verbal dance off.

"You jackasses," I began. "Do you guys know who this is? She's a Morgan, the daughter of the most powerful witch family in the city. I've met her psychotic mother. If she finds out you've kidnapped and tortured her daughter, she's going to blow this motherfucking house down!"

Dominic pocketed the blade calmly. "We know very well who this is. Permission was given. You aren't the only one being tested here."

Lynx lifted her head, her bloodshot eyes wide. "Are you saying my mother knows I'm here? There's no way. She would never..."

Her words stuttered to a stop, losing their strength until the room swallowed them altogether. Realization of the truth paled her face, and her head fell to her chest. She sobbed quietly.

My chest tightened at the sight. I turned to Luke. "This is some messed up shit."

He looked away, saying nothing, but clenched his jaw.

"Are you changing your mind?" Dominic stepped forward, his eyebrow raised.

The question stunned me momentarily. Was I? Could I actually go through this? Lynx was the sweetest, kindest person I'd ever met. She didn't deserve to be tortured. I was tempted to say no. To say, to hell with this, and walk away.

But then a shadow darkened my mind as I remembered the cold water that had encased my legs for days, freezing my bones until I thought they would shatter into a thousand pieces from the smallest movement. I tasted the blood in the back of my throat as if I was back in that old well, alone and scared, my voice broken from screaming over and over.

Dominic did that. Silas was there too. It had taken me years to find their location.

Finally, I was here. Exactly where I needed to be. I couldn't stop, no matter the cost. Everything associated with Dominic and his whole world had to be

destroyed.

I lifted my gaze to Lynx. She was already looking at me, her sad eyes ripping me to shreds.

“It’s okay.” Her voice, so pitiful, came out barely a whisper. “I need this too.”

I stared at her in horror, my stomach feeling sick. I don’t know what was sadder, knowing I was going to go through with this or knowing she was willing to let me.

Dominic made the slightest movement toward me, subtle yet threatening. “Make your choice.”

There was no choice. I couldn’t go backwards.

I swallowed around the tightness in my throat and walked toward him, willing my legs not to give out. I trained my eyes on him and forced the corners of my mouth to turn up into a seductive smile. I resisted the urge to look at Lynx as I drew closer.

Reaching Dominic, I placed my hand on his chest and slowly slid them down to his stomach. My eyes flashed to Luke just over Dominic’s shoulder. The veins on his neck bulged big.

“What’s this?” Dominic frowned, his tight stomach muscles flexing beneath my touch.

I snaked my hand down and around his torso until I reached the dagger in a sheath behind his back. I snapped the weapon out, making him jump. “I prefer to work with this.”

He cleared his throat and recovered quickly. “Whatever you like.”

Turning my back to him, I approached Lynx. My eyes flashed to the camera in the corner, knowing that all the pack was watching me. Most of them were probably eager to see blood. Only Ryder might be disgusted by what I was about to do.

I lowered in front of Lynx and looked up at her, shifting my weight so only she could see me. “This isn’t personal. Joining this pack is everything to me.”

My voice was cold and distant, but I hoped she could see the pain and sadness bleeding through my eyes. I didn’t want to do this. This was a line I

never thought I'd cross, but here I was crashing right through it.

She forced a smile and blinked. Tears spilled onto her cheeks again. "I understand."

"I'll tell you when to stop," Dominic said, and casually strolled to the back of the room, stopping next to Luke. Dominic typed something into his phone, completely uninterested, as if what I was about to do was an everyday occurrence.

That pissed me the hell off.

Luke watched me intently, a look in his eyes I couldn't read. I glanced back at Gerald. He looked indifferent, but it was Silas' reaction that turned my blood cold. He had a finger to his lips, biting his nail anxiously as if I was about to read off a lottery number. His eagerness for violence frightened me.

I gripped the blade of the dagger, my knuckles turning bone white. I turned back to Lynx. "This is going to hurt."

"I've had worse."

This broke my heart even more. There's so much I didn't know about her. The pain in her eyes mirrored my own. No matter what happened after tonight, I would make it up to her.

"Get on with it," Dominic snapped. "I've got a meeting after this."

I ground my jaw together and held my breath. The blade trembled in my palm. I clasped her knee with my other hand. I would hold on to her as I did this and hoped the contact would help her through it. Her eyes were soft on mine.

"Dominic," Luke tore his eyes away from me to look at him. "Maybe I should—"

I slashed the dagger downward, slicing open Lynx's thigh. She ground her teeth and tears slid down her face. I didn't waste any time and swiped the blade again, this time on her forearm and not as deep. No point dragging this out.

As I cut over and over, the handle of the blade grew slippery in my grip, I pushed my mind somewhere else, to a time when life was simpler. A trick I'd taught myself in the numerous foster homes where I'd lived.

I thought of my remote-control monster truck my father had given me on my ninth birthday and I instantly loved it. My brother, James, loved that toy just as

much as I did. We fought over it constantly until finally my dad gave in and got James one for Christmas. For weeks, we raced those trucks through the forest, feeling as at home in the forest as we did in our house. The woods called to us, and we spent hours there playing with those stupid trucks. Until I accidentally steered mine into the river. It never worked the same after that.

Lynx's pain-filled scream brought me back to the present, and I fell back onto my rear. I stared at her, horrified. She had three cuts across her face, several on her arms, and two long ones that reached from her hip to her knees. Had I done that? There was more red on her than white.

I looked up at Dominic, my head swimming. He was still typing on his phone. Luke cleared his throat to get his attention.

Dominic glanced up at me as if he'd forgotten I was there. He pocketed his phone and walked over to me, eyeing Lynx carefully. He shook his head. "Too much red. I prefer blues and purples. I probably should've told you that in the beginning."

"I like it." I jumped, as Silas' voice came from behind me. He had moved so close, he could've touched me. He stared at Lynx as if in a trance, his nose trembling.

I couldn't do anymore. No matter what he said, I just couldn't. My stomach tightened, then flipped. I leaned to the side and threw up.

Silas yelped and scurried to the back of the room, nearly tripping on his lame leg. "Shit, woman." He studied his shoes. "Did she get any on me?"

Dominic chuckled. "You may not have a stomach for this now, but that will come in time. Just the fact that you were willing to do something as jacked up as torturing your roommate is promising. Rise."

I inhaled several hitched breaths to keep from barfing again. As soon as the room stopped spinning, I pushed upward on shaky legs.

Dominic looked from the camera and back to me. "Briar Jacobs, I officially accept you into the Silver Claws family. Kneel before me."

I barely heard him; I couldn't stop staring at what I'd done to Lynx. Her head was slumped over as if she'd passed out, but her toes were curling in and out. She must be feeling considerable pain.

Even though it killed me to do it, I kneeled at Dominic's feet, baring my throat.

He leaned down, his fangs elongating, and bit into my neck to show his dominance over me. I quickly placed my hand over the wound to hide how fast I could heal.

"You will be a valuable asset," he continued. "Because Silas is so enthralled by your talents, I'm assigning you to his guard team. If you do well there, then maybe one day you could be mine."

"This bitch has a lot to work on if she's going to follow me around." Silas sounded disgusted. "I can't tolerate someone with a weak stomach."

Dominic walked past him and patted him on the back. "I have no doubts you'll train her well."

His nostrils flared. "Guaranteed."

One by one, the others filed out of the room, talking about a barbecue they had planned. It was as if I hadn't just tortured my only friend. They might not give it another thought, but I would never forget. Luke stayed behind, shifting his weight back and forth.

I carefully unstrapped the chains around Lynx's feet and hands. I wanted to tell her I was sorry, to tell her how much I regretted it. To offer to let her do the same thing to me. But, even in my head, the words sounded insufficient. Instead, I removed my jacket and wrapped it around her. Tears flowed freely, more than before, and her shoulders shook. I clasped her to me, squeezing her tight, silently clinging, clasping on to the shred of humanity I had left.

I'd tortured her.

I was becoming the monster I hated.

A towel appeared over my shoulder.

"Get out of here." I swiveled toward Luke, angry. "You're one of them—" The words caught in my throat, and I closed my eyes tight. Now, so was I.

"Briar." His voice was quiet, barely a whisper.

I opened my eyes, and all I could see was Lynx's bloodied body.

"Get out," I growled again. When he hesitated, I stood. "Leave!"

His face pleaded with me but instead of talking, he turned around and left the

room. The small space felt even smaller now that it was just Lynx and me.

I patted at her thighs gently with the towel, trying to stop the flow of blood while also trying not to cry. She wouldn't die from the wounds, but her face was paling from the loss of blood.

"This was so messed up." I couldn't look into her eyes. "I'll move out when I get home."

Her hand slowly moved over mine. "Don't."

"No, Lynx. I can't live there after what I did to you."

Her face hardened. "It had to be done."

"Did it?"

"Yes. More so for me than you."

"But why? What kind of horror-show mother do you have?"

"My brother used to say she was the hemorrhoid in Satan's ass." She tried to smile, but when I couldn't return it, her expression fell. "I'm glad it was you and not someone else."

"Why?"

She met my eyes. "Because I know you're strong enough to handle it. To live with what you've done."

Sucking in a breath, tears stung my eyes until they fell down my cheeks. I was horrible. I didn't deserve to live. I should've died with the rest of my family.

I carefully lowered my head to her lap, as to not hurt her further, while she ran her hands over my head to console me.

It should've made me get up. I should be the one consoling her. But I wasn't a good person like that.

I clung to her, tasting her blood on my lips, and tried to pull myself together. They could still be watching.

So I closed my eyes and visualized my mental walls coming back up. I fortified the many painful holes with determination and sheer will. Another trick I'd learned in foster home. Eventually, my shredded heart was impervious to pain, the worst of it anyway.

I leaned back. "You can heal yourself with that voodoo shit, right?" It was the only consolation I had to offer her.

“I don’t do voodoo, but maybe.” She slowly came to her feet. “Let’s get out of here. I can’t be in here a minute longer.”

Together we left the room and the horrible memory of what had happened behind.

CHAPTER 18



Lynx leaned on me as we made our way from the house. That's when I realized our ride home had disappeared. Luke had brought me here, and I'd driven him away by yelling at him. Most of the pack had shifted and left for a run in the forest. The excitement of watching me torture Lynx had probably left them fevered and anxious for action. Along with the pack members, my wolf, whom I normally felt close to, had retreated deep into the recesses of my mind. It was as if she, too, was ashamed of my actions.

I tried to figure out how to get a ride home as we walked toward the front door. I didn't want to wait around for my uber-witch friend. I guess I'd just have to steal one of the extra cars Dominic kept around for senior members. The keys were often left on the front visor.

Screw him. I'd take one anyway.

Ryder was waiting for us in the shadows just outside the mansion. He had a blanket ready and draped it over Lynx to fully cover her.

"Thank you." I tried to give him a grateful look, but his eyes wouldn't meet mine. After eyeing Lynx, like he wished he could do something more, he turned away from us. Saying nothing, he disappeared around the side of the building, all without looking at me. One more person I disappointed. One more person to make things right with.

I was about to head toward one of the pack's extra vehicles, when car lights shined down the long lane. It approached slowly and drove around the long circular driveway until it stopped in front of us. A black Audi. The driver's side

window rolled down.

Light from the front porch illuminated Roma's face. Her expression was serious, but there was a flash of anger in her gray eyes when she saw Lynx. "Hop in."

I helped Lynx into the backseat, then slid in after her. "I thought you never came to Fire Ridge."

Roma's eyes met mine in the rearview mirror. "Your anguish was too loud to ignore."

I nodded my head at her in appreciation, unsure what she meant, but I didn't have the energy to ask.

The car remained heavy in silence the whole way to the house with only an occasional painful grunt from Lynx. Roma handed me back a bottle of cheap wine, which I pressed to Lynx's lips, making sure she took several long swigs.

After Roma parked on the curb, I thanked her, then hurried to catch up to Lynx. She was walking quickly to the front door with her head down as if there were people watching, but it was nearly three in the morning. The only spectators to my crime were us.

That was enough.

We walked inside, and I closed and locked the door behind me. Lynx moved straight into the kitchen and dropped onto a chair. The blanket fell from her shoulders. Of all her injuries, the stab wound from Dominic was the worst. The angry hole in her shoulder still bled.

"First aid kit?" I started opening cabinets.

"Above the fridge. Can you get me some medicine too? It's in a bin next to the kit."

I reached up and pulled out whatever I could grab from above the fridge. The first aid kit had everything I needed: Band-Aids, Neosporin, butterfly bandages, gauzes and alcohol. I noticed the box to the butterfly bandages had already been opened and there were several missing. How many times had Lynx had to do this?

"This might hurt." I poured the alcohol onto her shoulder; the blood ran down her skin in tiny rivers.

She moaned through a clenched jaw. “Meds first, please. My shoulder is killing me.”

I turned my attention to the bin, bypassing the bottles of Tylenol and Advil, until I found a prescription bottle for codeine. “This should do. It’s old, but medication doesn’t expire, right?”

“Just give it to me.”

“Right.” I quickly retrieved a glass of water and handed it to her. She couldn’t lift her right hand so she opened her mouth. I placed two pills on her tongue and she promptly swallowed them down with the water.

A gust of wind blew through the room, and Samira appeared next to me. “What happened? I smell blood.”

She looked at Lynx, noting all her wounds. I winced, expecting to see some kind of reaction from Samira at the sight of all the blood, but it didn’t seem to faze her. Instead, she emanated a cold energy full of rage and murder, if there was such a feeling.

“Who did this to you?” Her voice made my wolf shiver.

Lynx’s gaze flashed to mine. “It’s nothing. Really.”

“You have seventeen cuts on your body, and one stab wound. Who did this?” She slowly removed her eyeglasses and placed them on the table.

She opened her mouth to speak, but I interrupted her. “It was me.”

Samira stilled in the way that only vamps can, a motion worse than death. She slowly turned to me, her eyes a mixture of confusion and fury. “What?”

“I had to do it to be accepted into the pack.”

Samira was not one to waste time with words. Pain exploded through my face as she rammed her fist into my nose. Blood sprayed all over my shirt, and I stumbled back several feet. She closed the distance between us, swinging again. I closed my eyes as her fist crashed into my cheekbone. I collapsed sideways to the floor.

“You like to beat someone weaker than you?” She yanked on my shirt, tearing it as she pulled me back to my feet. She punched me several times, jerking my head from side to side. The room began to spin. I tried to stop myself from falling over once more, but her tightened hand collided with my jaw again.

“Fight me, you coward!”

I didn't block her blows or attempt to fight back. I deserved everything she was giving me, and more.

Screaming, she kicked me in the chest. I flew through the air and slammed into the wall behind me, cracking the drywall. In a blur, she was already at me, punching me several more times until I slumped to the floor. Not once did I attempt to stop her.

“I should kill you,” she spat.

I looked up at her. “Then you should, because this is just the beginning. I will clearly do whatever it takes to get into the Silver Claws.”

“So be it.” Her eyes glowed the color of lightning as she lifted her fist and pushed it forward so fast I lost track of it. It was a hammer when it hit my face. An array of colors burst into my vision, sparking and spurting until my consciousness slowly faded to black.

CHAPTER 19



My eyes opened to a blurry world. Smudges of grays and browns, specks of green. I closed my eyes and moaned. My head throbbed, but I still tried to sit up. Waves of dizzying pain rocked my body, and I moaned, gripping onto the kitchen counter to pull myself upright.

I forced my eyes to open again. It took a few seconds for my vision to clear through the tears stinging my eyes. The liquid leaking wasn't because I was crying, it was because, I remembered now, Samira had smashed my face, knocking me out cold.

Blinking several times, my vision finally cleared. Samira was standing over Lynx at the kitchen table, rubbing something onto the cuts on Lynx's face. Her thinly wired glasses were back on her face.

I clutched my head and slowly climbed to my knees. "That was some punch."

"And you're some friend." Samira's murmur cut through my pain.

"It's not her fault," Lynx said, trying to defend me. She winced when Samira touched a cut over her eyebrow. "I told her to do it. I'm sure if I didn't, she wouldn't have gone through with it."

My heart skipped a painful beat. I wish that was the case, but I wasn't so sure.

"Why would you want to get hurt this way?" Samira asked. She brought her finger to her mouth and bit down on it. Blood dripped from the tip. She pressed it onto another cut on Lynx's forehead.

“My mother. I think she set this up to prove my loyalty to the Morgans. She’s done stuff like this before.”

“Why don’t you run away?” I asked. “Just leave this crappy city and all the people in it.” I pushed upward to my feet, placing my hand on the wall to steady myself.

“Family of witches, remember? There’s very little we can’t do now that we are a full coven of twelve. I’ve got this cousin that can track anyone...” She cleared her throat quickly. “It doesn’t matter. She’ll see I passed her stupid test and leave me alone for a while. It was worth it.”

“One should never allow themselves to be controlled, whether by family, friends, or,” Samira glanced my direction, “revenge.”

Damn. She was insightful.

I walked over to them, still a little dizzy. Several of the cuts on Lynx’s arms had already healed from Samira’s blood, but the knife wound in her shoulder continued to ooze blood.

Samira followed my gaze. “That one is too deep for me to heal. I don’t want to give her too much of my blood, or she’ll start to crave it.”

“I didn’t do that one.” My voice caught as I remembered how Dominic hadn’t even blinked when he’d shoved the knife deep into her shoulder. I cleared my throat and slumped into the chair next to Lynx.

“Can all vampires heal?” Lynx asked Samira.

“No. Only a few have the gift.”

“Lucky you, or really, lucky me.”

“I am not a true healer,” she explained. “All vampire blood can heal small wounds, but it takes a rare kind of power to heal someone entirely. I have only met two vampires with this unique gift. It’s too bad they never used it for good.”

No one said anything else while Samira healed the rest of her wounds. Lynx was too pale and tired, I was too guilt-ridden, and Samira was too pissed. She kept glaring at me every time she healed a new cut.

When it was done, Lynx rose to her feet. “Thank you, Samira. And don’t worry about the one on my shoulder. You at least sealed it. Tomorrow, after I rest, I’ll heal it myself the rest of the way.” She lowered her gaze to me. “Don’t

let this eat at you. It had to be done, not just for me, but for you, too. I could tell joining the pack was important to you. I don't know why, but don't let them get inside your head. Remember who you were when you came to Rouen."

I nodded. "Can I help you to your room?"

"My legs still work, but thank you."

She left us alone in the kitchen. Samira walked to the fridge and removed her "tomato" juice. She drank it all in one swig and sat down at the table with me.

"Help me understand why you did this." Her voice still held a note of raw anger.

I rubbed the back of my neck, mindful not to touch my face. "It's complicated."

"More like dangerous. The pack's reach is far and wide. Whatever you're attempting, it will only get you, or someone close to you, killed. Believe me, I've seen it."

"Then why are you working with them?"

She searched my eyes, not answering for a long time. Finally, she spoke. "Let's just say," she began, her words grazing the truth, "that I am trying to learn as much as I can about Dominic's network."

"Why?"

"Because there are whispers of something great and terrible coming to Rouen." Her normally steady eyes flickered a fraction of a second. Had I not been a shifter, I wouldn't have caught the motion. "I believe Dominic has information about this growing evil."

"What kind of dirty ass answer is that?" I grabbed the bottle of Tylenol and dropped a few into my mouth, swallowing them without water. I was hoping it would stop the buzzing sound in my head.

"For now, that is all I am giving."

Her eyes remained firm. I wouldn't get any more information out of her but at this point, maybe it didn't matter. We both wanted the same thing.

"Your turn," she said. "Why did you seek out the Silver Claws?"

"I want to put their balls in a vice, especially Dominic and Silas, and watch while their world lights on fire. Then I'll squeeze that vice until they're bled

dry.” The sound of my voice, the raw anger and pain, gripped my spine in a violent chill.

“Why would you want this?”

I shook my head. “You keep your truth, and I’ll keep mine. We are on the same side. That’s all that matters.”

She pointedly looked toward Lynx’s room. “We may want the same thing, but we are not on the same side. Doing evil in the name of honor can never be justified. It took me years to learn this, and I will never forget the lesson.”

“I never said I was honorable.”

Her head cocked to the side abruptly. “Someone’s here.”

I came to my feet, my eyes darting around the kitchen for a knife.

“It’s for you.” She rose from the chair but didn’t look alarmed. “It’s almost dawn. I must rest and rejuvenate myself. My cells have been depleted.”

“Sorry,” I mumbled.

She disappeared just as I heard a knock on the rear kitchen door. I pulled the curtain aside. My uncle stood in the shadows of the covered porch, his eyes downcast. I opened the door, rubbing at my arms at the sudden gust of cold air.

“You look like you got the crap beaten out of you,” he said.

“I did, but it was nothing I didn’t deserve.” I stepped out onto the porch and, after closing the door behind me, dropped into a plastic chair. “Tonight, they had me torture my roommate.”

He joined me, lightly settling himself into the adjoining chair. “I was afraid they might make you do something that horrible. I’m sorry.”

“That’s the thing. They didn’t make me. I had a choice, but I chose the pack. I chose to hurt someone I genuinely care about because of my obsession with revenge. It’s messed up.” I lowered my head back against the side of the house and stared up into the dark sky. Stars littered the sky baring witness to my shame. “I think I should just kill Silas and Dominic and be done with it. Leave town. Move on with my life.”

He was quiet for a minute, staring at the sky with me. “That’s what I thought when I first joined.”

I huffed. How many years had he been with them? That couldn’t be me.

“Look.” He shuffled in the chair to face me. “It’s not easy to kill them. Not if you want to keep on living. And if you kill one of them, the other one will kill you before you get a chance to kill them both. You must stay smart about this. Remember, it’s not just your family Dominic has hurt. I lost count of his victims a long time ago. Until you came along, I’d stopped trying to find ways to thwart Dominic. It always got me into trouble. If it weren’t for my money, he would’ve killed me by now. But now that you’re here, hope has returned. Together, we have a real chance to stop him. Not just him, but his whole network. Two Morettis against the world.” He chuckled. “Your father and I used to say that as children.”

I sat forward, running my hands over my face even though it hurt. “But how do I reconcile the person I’m going to have to become to accomplish what we want? I don’t want to hurt innocent people.”

He placed his hand over mine. “I understand better than most. People will suffer, whether by your hand or the pack’s. At least under yours, there is an end in sight. Once the pack is destroyed, all those controlled by Dominic will be free.”

“True.” I ground my teeth together, thinking of how I had hurt Lynx. The images would give me nightmares the rest of my life. But how many nightmares had Dominic given to others? The boogeyman had to be stopped. He held too much power.

Silence settled between us. A thin layer of fog worked its way through the trees, slowly smothering the forest. Frogs and crickets, hidden within, croaked a haunting tune.

“Briar, what changed you that night?”

I turned toward my uncle. I knew exactly what ‘night’ he was talking about.

“There used to be a sparkle in your eyes,” he continued. “I remember chasing you through the apple orchards. You were always so fast and agile. I could never catch you.”

“It didn’t matter in the end, though. I was captured,” I said. “And it wasn’t just my family’s deaths that had changed me, but also the crushing darkness that had come after.”

“When you were in the well?”

“I should’ve died in there.” I shivered, remembering. “But I turned my sorrow into rage. That is what saved me. That is what changed me.”

I jumped to my feet, needing to pace and to release the tightening sensation around my chest.

“I can’t imagine what you’ve been through.” He stood and placed a hand on my shoulder. “Together, I promise you, we will destroy Dominic and anyone who stands with him.”

I spun around and searched his brown eyes. The rage behind their glossy surface mirrored my own. I nodded my head as I remembered how I had broken every fingernail to the quick as I had tried to climb the well’s stone walls.

“Whatever it takes. I’m all in.”

CHAPTER 20



Lynx healed quickly, thanks to Samira. I might not fully understand or relate to the number-loving vampire, but I was glad she was around. She helped right my terrible wrong, though it would be a while before things were right between Lynx and me.

The next day, I became one of three security guards for Silas. Some of the pack tossed me some heat because they resented the fact I had already been given a high position, but Gerald made sure no one messed with me. It was Silas' actions that bothered me the most. He watched me all of the time as if I was a new species he hadn't seen before.

It was nauseating to be so close to the man who had watched as Dominic had dropped me into a grave to die. It took every ounce of strength I had not to rip him apart every time I was around him. If it wasn't for my uncle always tempering my anger, I would've killed him ten times over.

But if I did that, I'd never get a shot at Dominic. The two were never together without several others with them.

Silas was a brutal and sadistic man, more so than I ever could've imagined. He loved inflicting pain and watching it even more. There seemed to be no reason to his madness, which I found more frightening than Dominic's quiet need to control everyone around him.

I tried to figure out what made him tick, but the only time I got him to say something personal about himself was when he mentioned how he had stabbed his father to death when he had taken away the keys to Dominic's brand-new

Mustang. He had laughed after that horrible story. I couldn't tell if he had been joking or not.

At first, being Silas' bodyguard wasn't all that bad. If anything, it was good. I gained a lot of information about the inner workings of the pack. He would attend different meetings with city officials or police, mostly to buy them off for either damage the pack had caused or, damage they were going to cause in the future.

I also learned the pack had a lot of money, something Samira confirmed. But Dominic was never satisfied; he always had new ideas on expansion, which required more money. Money came in from their side ventures; from the funds they collected from local businesses; and, a good portion came from my uncle, especially when they needed a lump sum. My uncle was never given a chance to say no. They demanded, he gave.

And just like that, I watched my father's fortune slowly dwindle to fund their illegal pack activity.

I thought today would be like every other day, but Silas surprised us by saying it was time to visit the Greybacks, the wolf pack who used to run Rouen. When they were taken over by the Silver Claws, part of their surrender was to pay ten percent of everything they made to us. Payment was due three days ago, and Silas was absolutely giddy about going to collect. His excitement worried me.

I leaned against a sleek, silver Cadillac and waited for everyone to arrive before we left. Silas limped up to the car, leaning on his cane more than usual. Lilith had one arm linked through his other one, while her free hand played with her long blond hair. She was one of the witch sisters and also Lynx's cousin.

"Briar, you're driving," he said.

"Alright." I straightened. "Where's Toby?" Normally Toby drove.

"Dominic's got him running an errand." Silas allowed Lilith to open the front passenger door for him.

"Perfect," I mumbled and climbed behind the steering wheel. This meant we were short on security. I hoped that wouldn't bite us in the ass later. From everything Ryder had told me, the Greybacks were impulsive and violent. Not a

good combo.

Lilith sat in the back seat and pulled out a nail file. I'd only met two of the three witches. Lilith seemed to be the more relaxed one, always acting like she didn't care about anyone or anything, but this likewise made her cruel and uncaring. She was also Dominic's favorite to take to bed, so she pretty much got anything she asked for.

"Gerald," Silas barked from the passenger seat of the car. The tone of his voice, shrill and volatile, hurt my ears.

Gerald rose from filling the front tire with air. "Whatcha need, boss?"

"Grab Ryder. I want him with us."

I turned to Silas in shock, my pulse racing.

"But Ryder's never done security before," Gerald said.

"I don't care. Bring him."

"Alright, bossman." Gerald walked away.

"I don't think it's a good idea to bring Ryder," I said, keeping my voice even and gentle. "His father is the Alpha. They might get pissed to see him there."

Silas lowered the visor in front of him and opened his mouth to inspect his teeth. "I need a toothpick."

"I'm serious. Ryder should stay."

"I'm bored." Lilith slid the nail board over her nails again. "Let's get this over with."

Silas opened the glovebox and pushed aside its various contents until he found what he wanted. He lifted his upper lip and jammed the tip of the toothpick into his teeth. "He comes. If they choose to escalate the situation, it's on them. Consequences will follow."

"That's what you want, isn't it?" I asked.

He turned to me, his lips slowly twisting into a grin. It disappeared when he saw something over my shoulder. I turned around. Luke and Gerald walked toward us.

"What's he doing here?" Silas snapped, motioning at Luke. "I said Ryder."

Luke and I hadn't spoken much since that day with Lynx. I missed it a little. Missed him.

He stopped at my open window to address Silas, but not without casting me a fleeting glance. "I thought it would be better if I came along. Dominic doesn't need me today."

"You thought wrong. Get me Ryder and don't make me ask again."

Luke's mouth tightened, and his blue eyes returned to mine. We were both thinking the same thing. He knew as well as I did that it was a bad idea taking the kid, but we couldn't go against Silas' orders. He was second in command.

"Whatever you say." Luke backed away from the vehicle.

A few minutes later, I pulled away from Fire Ridge with Gerald and Ryder in the backseat, Lilith sitting between them. Ryder kept glancing at me nervously in the rearview mirror as if I could somehow get him out of this. Beads of sweat dotted his brow, and I could practically hear his heart beating out of his chest.

I hoped he could see and feel the sympathy in my eyes. If what he said was true about his father, then going to this place was like returning to hell.

The road to the Dreilinger Swamps, the place Dominic had allowed the Greybacks to live, was dismal and depressing. Where the trees at Fire Ridge were lush and full, the trees here were bowed over and painted in a dirty green color, their leaves tinged with brown. By the time we reached their small town, my windshield was specked with green and red splats of dead bugs.

The closer we came, the more my stomach churned; something bad was going to happen.

We drove through the center of town, a stop sign at its center the only sign of traffic control. There was a small convenience store on the corner, but other than that, only small houses lined the streets. Most of them needed new paint and several repairs.

Lilith sat forward in her seat, smacking on her gum. "Hey, let's stop at that gas station. I need a doughnut."

"No." Silas' voice was firm.

"Ugh, seriously?" She flopped back into her seat. "How much further?"

I glanced at the directions on my cell phone. "Another five minutes."

"I'm hungry, Silas."

He didn't answer her, but stared out the front window, twisting the ring on

his middle finger with his thumb. His knee bounced up and down anxiously.

“We’ll eat when we’re done,” Gerald told her. “Where do you want to go?”

While Lilith described her ideal restaurant, I kept my eye on Silas. He started tapping his fingers on the side of the car door, his agitation growing. He reminded me of a balloon slowly being filled. Eventually he was going to pop. And when it exploded, someone was going to get hurt.

We pulled up to a large white home with green shutters. It wasn’t as big as Fire Ridge, but it was still larger than any foster home I’d ever lived in. The paint was flaking and the roof sagged on the front porch.

At our arrival, a couple of shifters came out to meet us. Behind the main house, I spotted several smaller homes, made from rotting wood. They lined up in a row, each looking more decrepit than the other. The only structure that looked to be well taken care of was the barn. It was tall and big; it could probably hold two of the houses inside it. I wondered what they kept in there.

Silas was out the door before I had a chance to turn off the car. I swiveled in my seat and grabbed Gerald’s arm before he left too. “You need to help me keep him under control.”

He scooted toward the edge of his seat to follow after Lilith who had climbed over Ryder to get out. “You know I can’t stop him. He’s been itching for blood ever since your initiation. Either way, he’s going to get it. I’d rather have it be one of the Greybacks than me.” He left the car before I could say anything else.

I exhaled a tight breath, wishing I was anywhere but here.

“He’s right.” Ryder hadn’t moved, and his voice was soft from the backseat. “Silas will have blood.”

“Over a three-day late payment?”

“That doesn’t matter. It’s the blood he craves.” His eyes slowly tracked outside the window, and his face paled at the sight of several people now gathered in front of the house. He probably knew all of them.

“Don’t worry. I’ll protect you.”

“If only you could.” He slid off the backseat and out the door. I rubbed at my chest, sighing heavily, and then followed him.

The group consisted of a mixture of men and women shifters, a lot of them

wearing camouflage shirts or hats. One of the men sported a confederate flag bandana tied around his head and several of the girls wore short shorts and bikini tops.

“Jackson!” Silas roared. He shuffled a few steps, red dust billowing up at his feet, his cane tapping the ground in front of him in measured beats.

A large beast of a man pushed his way through the crowd. He must’ve been at least six feet seven with muscles that stretched his t-shirt thin. Based on how old Ryder was, his father had to have been at least forty, but he looked much younger. His jawline was strong, and his face just handsome enough. He was definitely the best-looking man of the pack. Ryder shared many of his same features.

Jackson took us in and when his cold eyes settled on me, I shivered.

“What the hell are you doing here?” His voice was deep and gravelly, reminding me of the fractured hum of a tractor’s engine. His gaze shifted to Ryder, who was standing next to me. “I see you brought a traitor with you.”

Silas glanced back at Ryder. “I wouldn’t call him that necessarily. He’s more of an opportunist. He knew a winning side when he saw one. This place reeks of mediocracy.”

Jackson growled low, the bass sound filling the air. “What do you want?”

“Payment, of course.” Silas drilled the point of his cane into the earth. “It was due three days ago.”

Jackson’s cold gaze flashed to a skinny man standing ten feet away. “Payment was delivered. Isn’t that right, Tommy?”

Tommy, a man with thinning blond hair and a splash of freckles along his nose, cleared his throat and shifted his weight while staring at the ground. His shoulders moved up in a shrug.

“But it was only half of what you owe for the month.” Silas stopped moving to stare at Jackson.

“As Tommy ‘splained to your man, we were unable to get full payment. You gave us a dying part of the city to run. Most businesses are failing and don't have the kind of money you demand. What you're wanting is impossible.”

Silas eyed him coolly. “Are you telling me you will be unable to pay this

month?"

Jackson's hands balled tight. "Were you not listening?"

"I won't accept excuses. If you can't get it from the local businesses, then find a way to pay it as a pack. There are consequences if payment cannot be met. You know this. The details of our arrangement were clearly spelled out to you from the beginning."

Everyone looked from Jackson to Silas, not one person moved. Like me, they were rooted in place by fear of what might happen. Jackson was much bigger, by almost a foot, yet everyone seemed more afraid of Silas.

"I don't know what to tell you, little man," Jackson spat, trying to gain back the respect of his pack. "Maybe if you give us another week."

Silas laughed out loud, longer than seemed necessary. "Ryder! Come forward."

Ryder looked over at me, and I nodded my head, urging him forward because what else could he do? I didn't like this, but I also had no idea what Silas might do. To go against him at this point would be premature.

Ryder reluctantly approached Silas. His hands were stuffed into his pockets, but he kept his head up trying to appear brave.

"Tell me," Silas grabbed Ryder by the back of his neck, "How long has it been since you've seen your father?"

Ryder looked everywhere but at Jackson. "Two years."

"Two years? And do you still feel the same way about the Greybacks?"

Ryder cleared his throat until he found his voice. "I don't understand."

"If I remember correctly, when you first came to us, you said the Greybacks were weak and beneath your potential. Isn't that right?"

Several in the crowd growled and murmured their disapproval.

Ryder mumbled his answer. "Yes, Sir."

"What was that?"

"Yes, Sir!"

Silas' lips turned up at the corners, wrinkling his pale skin. "Your old pack has been unable to deliver on their promise because they are weak. And the only way to make someone weak is to strengthen them. How do you think we should

strengthen this pack, Ryder?"

Ryder tried to pull his shoulders back, but there seemed to be an invisible weight on them preventing the motion. He knew the answer but was afraid to say it.

So I answered for him.

"Punish them."

Silas glanced over at me, annoyed. "Right you are. We must punish them so they remember what it's like to be strong. Only when one is broken can they rise."

He searched the crowd looking at each of the men, women, and children. Bile rose in my throat at the thought of what might come next.

Jackson stepped forward. "We don't need to be punished. We'll get you your money. Give us a day. I promise."

By Jackson's sour expression, he was not used to begging.

Silas stormed over to him and drilled the tip of his cane into Jackson's massive chest. "You will not have more time. Your pack is lazy and weak." Silas turned the cane away from Jackson and pointed it into a group of people. "I want her."

Everyone followed its direction. It landed on a girl maybe eighteen years old with long brown hair. Her features were delicate, a small nose and blue eyes that sparkled in the morning sun. It didn't surprise me he chose her. She stood out from the rest of the pack, a shining light in an otherwise downtrodden pack.

The best way to destroy a group of people is to kill its brightest star.

CHAPTER 21



Silas motioned the girl forward. She looked around nervously but jumped when he yelled at her. "Get over here!"

Jackson and two other men stepped forward and blocked the girl from going to Silas.

"Silas, please." Jackson held his hands up as if trying to soothe an angry dog. "We can fix this."

Silas glanced back at Lilith and nodded his head once. She grinned and stepped forward, an invisible, powerful force swirling around her. Her eyes turned a brilliant white and a gust of power burst from her, lifting the hair on my arms as if she had surged electricity into the air.

Jackson dropped to his knees and clutched his head in pain, along with the other two men.

The pack reacted, springing into action. Several of them began to shift, but one by one they, too, fell to the ground, writhing in pain.

Silas called out to those who remained frozen in place. "Anyone else want to feel like their brains are being scooped out of their skulls with a spoon?"

When no one responded, he added, "Come forward, she-wolf."

The girl's blue eyes watered, but she lifted her chin and maneuvered her way through the crowd, ignoring hands that reached out as if to stop her. She stood face-to-face with Silas and stared him directly in the eyes, folding her arms. "Whaddaya want?"

Silas glanced at Ryder. "Remove her shirt."

Several of the women burst into tears and fell to their knees, their shoulders trembling. Every muscle in my body tensed, and I took a step forward, but Gerald pulled me back into place.

Ryder's chin quivered as he pleaded with Silas. "Please, Sir."

"Do it."

With trembling hands, Ryder unbuttoned the girl's flannel shirt, his eyes on the ground.

A man from the crowd, most likely her father, sprung forward, shouting in protest. He made it only two steps before he collapsed to the ground, his body twitching uncontrollably. I yanked my arm out of Gerald's firm grip and steeled my eyes forward, ignoring the cries of the men and women twitching and screaming in agony.

"Stop hurting them, and I will do what you say." The girl's voice was small and trembling, but it was loud enough to gain Silas' attention.

He moved closer to her, his hand on his ear. "What's that?"

She swallowed hard and spoke again, her voice louder. "I promise. I'll do what you say, just stop hurtin' them."

He eyed her for a moment, then called back to Lilith. "You may release them, but if anyone makes a move toward me, you can do what you want."

Lilith nodded her head, grinning as if she was watching a show on the comedy channel.

Jackson's body relaxed, and he gasped for air. The rest of the pack groaned and brushed at their heads as if swiping away remnants of the witch's magic. Only Jackson seemed unfazed by the after-effects. He stood back on his feet, straightening tall, and a dark anger pulsed from him, like the onslaught of an approaching storm.

But he made no move to stop Silas.

"Get on with it," Silas said, his voice impatient at Ryder's slow movements.

When Ryder finished the last button, he pulled off the girl's shirt, and it fell to the ground. Wearing only a white bra, she stood before everyone looking anything but ashamed. Whatever punishment Silas handed out, she was prepared to receive it for the pack.

Silas flipped his cane upward and caught it in the air with his other hand. Methodically, he began to unscrew the top handle. "I really do hate that it's come to this. There was a time when our packs were friendly with each other." He sneered, looking up at Jackson. "But then you became power hungry, didn't you?"

He popped off the top off his cane and removed a shiny, silver blade. "I know my actions today may seem rash, but I have thought long and hard about what punishment would be best."

Ryder stepped back behind Silas and gratefully took his stance beside me. By how pale he was, I feared he might pass out or throw up. I slowly pressed my shoulder to his to offer my unsaid support.

Silas moaned as he traced the blade up the girl's bare arm. Goosebumps broke on her flesh, and a fresh tear ran down her cheek, but she remained silent.

I swallowed my own bile threatening to expel itself from my throat.

I couldn't watch.

Instead, I found the face of a girl about ten years old, the same age I was when I was thrown into the well. Her mouth was agape with wide green eyes. Like me, she would remember everything that happened today. The images would raid her dreams, robbing her of prettier and happier things.

Silas began talking about honor and brotherhood among wolves, all the while his silver blade continued to trace the girl's skin until it reached near her neck. I thought this would be the end, and he would slit her throat, but the silver moved upward, finally slowing near her narrow cheekbone.

He paused there and looked back at Jackson. "I've decided to show your pack mercy. The girl will not die."

There was a collective sigh of relief from the crowd, and even Jackson managed to mumble a thank you. But before the words had fully left Jackson's lips, Silas stabbed the knife into the girl's left eye.

She screamed an unintelligible word, a noise so terrible it made me tremble. It was a sound I'd only ever heard from my own lungs.

Others screamed with her and rushed forward, but once again, they fell to the ground, convulsing. The scene shook me to the core, and I bit down, clenching

my teeth until I thought my jaw would break.

Jackson lunged for Silas, fangs fully grown within his large mouth, but before he could reach him, Lilith mumbled a word, and he dropped to the ground, his back arching painfully. He wasn't convulsing like the rest of the pack. Instead, every bone in his body contorted, bending unnaturally and several sickening cracks filled the air.

Silas stared down at the great Alpha's body appreciatively. He said nothing for almost a full minute, only watched Jackson's bones break one by one. The girl continued to wail behind him, the sound like a horror show meant for society's most depraved.

Silas finally looked away. "You may release him now, Lilith."

Jackson's body fell limp. He lay there panting, unable to move, but through chattering teeth, he growled, "I will kill you. I swear it."

Silas smiled, the kind reserved only for devils. "Is that so?"

He walked back to the crying girl and without hesitating, he stabbed the blade directly into her other eye. Abruptly, the girl's cries halted, and she fell to the ground, not dead, but unconscious. Blood pooled on the ground, staining the side of her face.

Silas glanced back at the once noble Alpha lying in the dirt. His voice was harsh, his eyes narrow. "Remember that the next time you threaten me."

My legs weakened, and it was sheer willpower that kept me in place. Ryder, however, had dropped to his knees. I placed my hand on his shoulder, feeling his immense sorrow through our blood connection. It was so powerful and heart-wrenching, I almost burst into tears. Stay strong.

A woman crawled toward the girl, fighting through the pain Lilith had bestowed upon her.

Silas sucked in a breath and straightened. "Does anyone else have anything to say?"

His question was met with deathly silence.

Silas began to walk toward the woman trying to help the girl. His limp was barely noticeable as if the violence had strengthened him.

I narrowed my eyes, watching him closely as his face twisted, and his eyes

grew cold. Something in me told me that Silas hated kindness the most. He was going to do something bloody, something I would never forget, something that might break me. My whole body shook, and my wolf emerged, ready to take out the sick motherfucker. I clenched my hands, trying to control my anger, but I was losing the battle.

As if sensing my agitation, Silas looked back at me and, seeing the fury in them, grinned. He lifted his cane, aiming for the woman's head. He was going to smash her brains out.

I couldn't let that happen.

If he liked crazy, I would show him insane nuts the size of an elephant. I only hoped my actions would prevent the death of the woman who I was sure was the eyeless girl's mother.

Yelling out a sudden war cry, I ran directly into the middle of the Greybacks and started swinging. "That will teach you filthy dirty bitches. We should take out all your eyes!"

From the corner of my eye, I saw Silas straighten, a flash of surprise in his eyes. His left eye twitched, but then he was grinning wildly. He lowered his arm holding the cane and watched my show, mumbling, "Finally! Someone who gets it."

I swung my fist at a large man standing near me. He would feel considerable pain, but he would recover more quickly than the others. He dropped to the ground, and I kicked him in the stomach. "Don't screw with the Silver Claws."

Behind me, Silas laughed.

I spun and kicked another man in the face, dropping him too. Three more fell by my hands.

Silas clapped gleefully. "Fabulous!"

Reaching to my hip, I removed my favorite blade from the sheath on my belt. I pointed it at the crowd. "Who's next?"

I lunged toward a nearby woman and swiped quickly, only scratching her enough to show blood.

Silas' voice called out to me. "As much as I hate to say it, that's enough blood sport."

I turned around, casting him an angry look. "You're going too easy on them."

He returned to the eyeless girl, who was still breathing, but was otherwise motionless on the ground. He wiped his blade off on her bare stomach, coating it in her own blood. "I think they've learned their lesson."

He straightened and screwed the blade back into his cane. "Let's go."

Gerald and Lilith turned around and headed back to the car. After giving me a look of appraisal, Silas practically walked perfectly after them. My stomach heaved, and I turned so that no one would see my face, which must surely be paling.

I barely had the strength to go to the car. I stopped to help Ryder to his feet, but when my gaze found his, the look of horror on his face almost had me joining him.

Pleading with my eyes, I nodded once, hoping he would understand why I did what I did. His eyebrows shot up, and his Adam's apple moved up and down. He forced a small smile in understanding.

As I slid behind the steering wheel, I glanced back at the pack. Most were surrounding the injured, especially the eyeless girl. Only one among them stared after us.

Meeting my gaze, Jackson flashed his fangs, a murderous rage in his eyes.

CHAPTER 22



*B*ecause I'd performed so well at the Greybacks, Silas said I'd earned the privilege to drive one of their cars for the rest of the week, a whole three days. Too disgusted and ready to get out of Fire Ridge, I couldn't turn down the free ride. I immediately grabbed the keys and headed for the front door. As I left, his slimy smile followed me across the room. "Briar?"

I turned around, trying to keep my cool. "Yeah?"

"You did well today. I'd like to give you another assignment."

Terrence, who was standing by him smiled slowly, and I knew I wouldn't like whatever Silas was about to say. Terrence still hadn't gotten over the fact that I'd hit him when we first met. He'd also been cozying up to Silas more and more, trying to get on his good side.

I folded my arms across my chest. "What?"

He frowned, but ignored my attitude. "Tonight I'd like for you to be on my detail when we meet with the Sangre Nocturnas."

The Sangre Nocturnas was the vampire Mexican cartel. One of Dominic's plans for expansion was to open new areas using some drug the Nocs had created. Supposedly it gave users an epic high like no other. In my opinion, anything made by vampires should be avoided like the plague.

"You'll be a valuable asset at the meeting." He couldn't hide the gleam in his eyes. By valuable, he meant I would kill and torture if necessary.

I could tell he expected me to feel some sort of gratitude for his offer, so I gave a thumb's up. "Sounds like my kind of party."

I spun away from him and headed outside. I had officially become the monster living in Silas' shadow. Silas believed I was like him and would use me more often because of it.

And I would go along with it because I could use my fists to soften his butchery.

By the time I reached home, my insides were shaking. I kept having flashbacks of Silas stabbing that girl's eyes out, and it left me raw and bleeding inside. All I wanted to do was drink myself to sleep. Alcohol had been my only comfort during times like this.

I parked the car, but as soon as I stepped out of it, I froze. Luke stood on my porch, his hands stuffed in his pockets. The early afternoon sun kissed the golden highlights on his brown hair. For some reason, the sight of him made me shake worse. I wrapped my arms around myself and walked quickly to the front door. I just had to get inside to where alcohol waited for me like a long-lost friend.

I approached the door. "This isn't a good time."

He blocked my path. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine."

"Silas can be especially cruel. I've seen his work too many times to know that it doesn't leave anyone 'fine.'"

"And yet, you seem to be doing okay."

"Looks can be deceiving."

"You lie well, then," I mused. "Why doesn't that surprise me?"

"Look who's calling the kettle black."

I gave him a hardened look. "If you don't like working for him, why do you?"

He glared back at me, just as hard. "I don't have a choice."

My mouth dropped open, and I almost asked him about it, but my shaking grew stronger. I stepped up, trying to pass by him. He couldn't see me like this.

He lifted his hands and gently placed them on my arms as if to hold me steady. "What the hell happened? You can talk to me."

My gaze slowly lifted to his. "Can I?"

"We may be more similar than you think." Warmth from his hands bled into

my skin and tension buzzed between us.

I stepped back away from his touch, and his hands fell to his side. "I don't think that's a good thing. You should go. I need to get some rest before tonight. Silas wants me to go with him, and I need to figure out a way to scrub my mind before I do."

He bristled. "Tonight? Don't tell me he's taking you to meet the Nocs."

I held my tongue, unwilling to talk about it. If I did, I might slip and tell Luke the truth. That I didn't want to go anywhere with Silas. That the second I got him alone, I was going to kill him. Until then, I just needed to walk through the darkness a little more to finally free myself and others.

"Why would Silas bring you? He barely knows you."

"Apparently, I'm his new favorite pet." The words felt like razor blades in my mouth.

He asked his next question slowly. "And how did you earn that title?"

I didn't like the way he was looking at me, as if I was suddenly holding loaded guns in my hands. I couldn't handle another person being disappointed in me. It was too much. Besides, why was he so worried about me all the sudden? I huffed and pushed him back. "Why the hell do you care? Just get out of my way."

He stepped back, putting more distance between us but not completely moving aside. "You're going to get yourself hurt."

I met his eyes, showing him the rage I held inside. "Probably. But at least I'll hurt others along the way. People who deserve it."

He shook his head. "I can't help you."

"I didn't ask you to, you presumptuous prick." It was clear where his loyalties were, deep up Dominic's ass. "I gotta go."

I moved past him, squeezing through the small space he left between the door, but he grabbed my arm, stopping me. "Find a way not to go tonight."

His nearness made my heart beat faster. It wouldn't take much for me to bend forward and brush my lips against his.

He leaned in, just a fraction of an inch, and I saw his breath hitch. "I've met these vampires. They don't mess around."

"Neither do I."

We stared at each other, frozen in time. He searched my eyes, for what I didn't know. After a long moment, he nodded his head as if he found whatever it was he was looking for. "Okay."

"Okay what?"

"I'll see you later tonight." He let me go, brushing his fingers across my stomach, deliberately making my core warm. Damn him.

I stared after him as he walked toward his bike, wondering what his deal was. He had been working for Dominic for at least a few years now. If Luke truly did have some sort of an end game with Dominic, it should've ended a long time ago.

This thought gave me pause.

What if I got stuck working for Dominic for years? Could I do that?

I planned on having this finished up within a few weeks' time, but already that time had passed. Maybe I had grossly underestimated my plan. Would that mean I'd have to betray and hurt more people to finish this? Continue to keep my secrets?

And what secrets was Luke hiding? Not to mention Lynx and Samira. I turned around and walked back into the house. Everyone surrounding me was full of secrets and lies.

Just like me.

CHAPTER 23



I headed straight for the kitchen, not giving another thought about Luke. I had to rummage around a bit, but I finally found a cupboard with a few bottles of alcohol. I grabbed the first one I touched and ripped off its top. I'd already drunk half of it before I reached Lynx's room.

I stepped into her open doorway; she was sitting at her desk with a pen in hand.

"How are you feeling?"

She looked up at me, and her eyes widened in surprise. She quickly closed the book she had been writing in, a journal probably. She seemed the type.

"I promise I won't read your," I waved my hand at her, "thingee."

She grinned at my already buzzed state (I probably should've eaten something) and pulled her legs beneath her, leaning back to rest her elbows on the armrests. "My shoulder's still a little sore, but other than that I'm doing really good."

"I'm glad to hear it." I tipped the bottle and guzzled nice and long. I offered it to Lynx. "You want some?"

She eyed it thoughtfully, then shook her head. "Rough day?"

"The worst." I dropped onto her bed. "Just because I'm their newest member, doesn't mean I want to be there."

I let the words hang in the air, hoping she could read between the lines.

Her gaze fell to the floral bedspread. "I know you didn't want to hurt me. I could see it in your eyes. What happened that night, I needed it too."

Now her words hovered in the air, right next to mine. I could see through them. We both had secrets, and we both knew it.

I downed another long sip, enjoying the burn of it as it coated my throat.

"Do you work tonight?" she asked.

I shook my head. "But I do have to go with Silas somewhere. Hopefully it won't take long."

She visibly shivered. "That guy is straight up creepy."

I nodded my head in agreement. "Your mother's shit should be named after him."

She laughed. "Perfect!"

"I'm going to go finish this." I held up my bottle. "Then get a bunch of sleep before I go. Do you need anything before I crash?"

"I'm good, but thanks."

I rose from the bed, the alcohol making me sway. It never stayed in my system long, so I had to enjoy it while I could. Drinking fast was the best way.

I staggered to my room, drinking as I went. By the time I reached my bedroom, the bottle was empty. I fell face first onto the bed, my body feeling numb. But more importantly, the eyeless girl was gone from my mind. I hoped I'd never see her again.

One thing I've learned though, is that we never get everything we want.

* * *

I WOKE SEVERAL HOURS LATER, my body refreshed, but my mind felt fractured, like crushed glass. Remains were scattered everywhere. It took me several minutes to gather them up and try to piece them together again. What formed in my mind was an abstract painting of the world, and how it was changing around me. I didn't like it.

After dressing quickly, I bounded down the stairs into the kitchen for a quick bite to eat. Samira was already there sitting on a chair wiping down a long blade. A second one laid on top of the table.

"Ugh. Do you have to do that in here?"

"It's the only place in the house with four lights."

"Aha." I opened the refrigerator. "Where's Lynx?"

"She said she had some family business to attend to. Where are you going?"

"Headed to Fire Ridge soon. What about you, Sammie?" She grunted at her nickname. I sat down, digging into leftover meatloaf from three days ago. It tasted alright. "So?"

"I have a meeting."

"Does it involve those swords?" I nodded toward her blades.

"It could."

"I have a meeting too. I bet one of those sure would come in handy."

Her eyes narrowed. "Who are you meeting with?"

I pushed the meatloaf around with my fork and shrugged. "No one important." I wasn't sure if the meeting was supposed to be kept secret. Probably.

"I am traveling with Silas to meet the Sangre Nocturnas." She said their name the way it was probably meant to be said.

I dropped my fork. "That's where I'm going. Why are you going?"

"It's a business deal. Dominic always sends me on those. I need to make sure the Silver Claws get their fair share." She set the blade next to the other one, gently as if it might break. "How is it that you are going? You're a brand-new member."

"It's a long story, and not one I want to rehash." I watched the meatloaf mash through the little spaces in between the fork.

She picked up her other blade. "That explains the alcohol on your breath. I hope it gets out of your system soon. You're going to need all of your wits about you when you face the Sangre Nocturnas."

I breathed into my hand, smelling my breath, and wrinkled my nose. "Hundred percent sober. I know what's at stake tonight. The Silver Claws are looking at expanding their reach into other states. That'll make it difficult to destroy the beast."

"But even more important, the drug the vampires want to bring into the country is of the likes no one has seen before. It will destroy many human lives, supernaturals too."

I leaned back in my seat, my shoulders dropping. "What do you know about it?"

"The chemicals are similar to heroin, but it's also been mixed with traces of vampire venom. Some claim magic was also used. We're still trying to determine its contents, but it's been difficult to get our hands on a sample."

"We?"

She ignored me and continued to tenderly wipe at the long blade.

Whatever this drug was, Samira was right. We couldn't introduce something like this into the States. I didn't want to bring harm to any human.

But I couldn't outright stop the deal either. If I did anything to mess this meeting up, Silas would kick me off his team, setting me back weeks, possibly months.

First things first. This deal had to go through. I'd find a way to get rid of the drugs later. "We can't stop this transaction."

Her hand stilled, and she leaned forward. "Did you hear what I said?"

I pushed away from the table. "You don't like it, stay away."

"I will do no such thing." She rose to meet me and crushed the space between us. We stood inches apart, each of our powers surging.

Her eyes were furious and ferocious. "Whatever game you're playing, you're going to get someone killed."

I met her fury. "And if you don't start playing the game, you'll be the one who ends up dead."

"It's been a long time since anyone threatened me and lived."

"I don't give threats."

Before I could react, Samira took hold of my shirt and yanked me over the table. She wasn't gentle as she dragged me out the back door. I stumbled down the steps and hit the ground hard. I bellowed out a warning, my fangs growing long in my mouth. This fight was a long time coming.

Her own fangs grew to sharp points and glimmered in the rising moon's light. "You need to be taught a lesson on respect."

I tossed a rock at her, a lame distraction, but one nevertheless. I whirled around and sprinted toward the forest. We needed to take this fight away from

the house. The last thing I wanted to do is hurt anything that belonged to Lynx.

As soon as I hit the edge of the forest, Samira tackled me. We tumbled to the ground, all fists and fury. She clocked me in the jaw three times before I bucked her off and flipped up to my feet. She attacked me again, but I kicked her. She flew backwards and crashed onto the ground, skidding until she hit a tree. She grunted, but the pained expression quickly changed to snarling and showing her teeth. When she went after me again, I landed a punch to her face and as she stumbled backwards, I reverse kicked, catching her chin with my boot. Her body spun through the air and slammed into another tree.

She looked up at me, surprised. "You're not a regular shifter wolf."

I stomped toward her. "There is nothing regular about me."

I lifted my foot to kick her again, but she became a blur and I hit the tree instead, splintering it nearly in half. She swiped at me from behind, taking my legs out from under me. I was in the air for a second before landing; my head slammed against the ground. I spat blood and managed to scramble out of the way when she came at me again.

Anger and rage raced through my blood, surging power into my bones and muscles. For the next several minutes, I fought harder than I ever had before. Samira was the best fighter I'd ever encountered. After a while, I couldn't help but grin. It felt good to release all this pent-up frustration and anger on someone that could handle my blows. I even caught Samira cracking a smile—just before she undercut her fist into my jaw, sending me into the air at least ten feet. Air exploded from my lungs when I hit the ground. The pain from the blow echoed throughout my body.

She stood over me. "Why do you have so much power?"

"Why do you seem so intent on hurting me?" I countered.

"Because you are stubborn and cocky. Those two don't mix well together. It will get you killed."

"What do you care?"

She tilted her head to the side as if she'd never considered the question. Her lips tightened then relaxed. "You remind me of me centuries ago."

That's the only answer she gave me as she extended her hand toward me. I

hesitated briefly before accepting it. She pulled me to my feet. I wiped the blood from my mouth with the back of my hand. "As much fun as this was, I need to head over to Fire Ridge. I guess we'll be seeing each other later."

I walked away, but she called after me. "We're going to have to work together eventually."

I gave her the middle finger.

CHAPTER 24



I arrived at the mansion much later than I intended. I was hoping to have a chance to talk to Ryder before we left, but Silas was already at the front door, looking a million shades of pissed. "You're lucky you showed up when you did. A moment longer and you would've been punished. And," his scowling face turned into a slow grin, "as much as I would've liked that, I want you at this meeting tonight."

Moving past him and into the foyer, I searched the large room for Ryder, but he wasn't there. I turned back to Silas, whose eyes were trained on me. I looked at my wrist, where old people wore watches. "I'm right on time."

His eyes darkened. "Let's just go."

I followed him out the door. "Who else is coming?"

"We are," Gerald said just outside. Toby stood next to him, adjusting his belt as if he'd just taken a piss. I had learned the two of them had been friends since they were ten years old. I rarely saw them apart.

I didn't get along with much of the pack, granted I hadn't taken the time, but I was happy Gerald was coming. With him there, I wouldn't have to watch my back as much. It was good Toby was coming too. He was one of the few members who went out of his way to be nice to me. He had a gentler nature; he also was a lot smarter than about ninety percent of the wolves here. I smiled at him, and he gave me a half-hug in greeting. We fell into line behind Silas and Gerald.

"And what about Lilith?" I asked. "Is she coming?"

Silas smoothed back his wet-looking hair. Did he put gel in it? I noticed he was also wearing a suit. The only time I'd seen him dress up like this was the first night I'd seen him at the bar. Tonight must be something special.

"These vamps are in a blood feud with the Morgans. If we brought her, the deal would be off." He turned around and lifted a finger at me, then flashed it to the other two, his face growing stern. "Let me make this perfectly clear. Nothing can screw this up tonight. The Silver Claws stand to make an obscene amount of money, so be on your best behavior."

I resisted the urge to give him the same order.

"Let's go." He turned back around. "Luke has the car running."

My head jerked toward him. Luke? "Was he planning on coming?"

Silas jerked to a stop, and I almost ran into him. He turned around slowly, giving me a strange look. "Does it matter?"

He searched my face as if waiting for some kind of reaction from me, but I knew better. I couldn't let him know I felt an attraction toward Luke. I feared he might use it against me one day. That's just how Silas was—always looking for people's weaknesses.

"Don't matter in the least," I said. "I was just wondering."

He didn't move as he continued to study my expression. "He came to me a few hours ago, asking to come along. I thought it was strange, but he asked just nice enough that I'm allowing it, after making him run one of my less savory errands, of course."

His eyes stayed on me, but I gave him nothing. Finally, after a random eye twitch, he turned away from us and made his way toward an SUV.

I sat in the backseat, directly behind Luke, deliberately avoiding his eye contact in the rearview mirror. As everyone else piled into the SUV, I bit my lip, thinking. I didn't want Luke to come. I couldn't explain why. I wasn't even sure I knew myself, but I just felt better if he wasn't there. Maybe I didn't want him to see my bad side, if I had to use it. Or maybe I didn't want him to get hurt.

Toby sat next to me, and as Gerald began to climb in, Silas barked at him. "Gerald, sit in the back seat. We're picking up the accountant."

Thirty minutes later we arrived in the center of town and stopped at a

building several stories high. It looked like it had been recently built and had the latest architectural style. I was guessing anyway. I had no idea what was considered the latest in architecture. On the outside, a single word read, "Trevisan."

"Samira lives here?" I stared up and up, looking toward the top.

Luke peered at it through his window. "Yup. The whole building belongs to her."

"Why the hell is she staying in a house with roommates if she's got this place?"

Silas glanced back at me. "That's a great question. Why don't you be a good little spy and find out as much as you can about her. We've already tried and came up empty."

"All I know is she's really good with numbers, and an amazing fighter."

"And that's exactly why we use her, but I don't trust people if I don't know personal information about them. As her roommate, you're in a prime position. Do this and report to me. Anything is helpful."

"She's coming," Luke's voiced warned. Samira might easily hear us even though she was nearly fifty feet away.

She didn't say anything as she entered the car. Toby moved to the back so she could sit next to me. She didn't bother looking at anyone, and no one spoke to her either. We just remained silent as we drove across town. The air felt pressurized with electric energy, probably because we all expected a fight with the vamps and were amped up. The strange sensation was giving me a headache, and I fidgeted with my hands.

"Everything will be fine," Toby said and patted me on the shoulder. He probably thought I was nervous. I was.

Luke glanced at us in the rearview mirror, looking anything but happy. I didn't meet his eye but stared ahead, my stomach knotting, which meant something bad was going to happen.

I wasn't the only one nervous about tonight. Gerald was quiet as he stared out the window, and Luke's fingers were tight on the steering wheel. Even Samira was still, not moving an inch, but then again she was dead.

Silas was the first to speak. "Let me do the talking. All of you are to stand behind me and only move when given permission."

"They will expect to fight." Samira finally turned her head, nearly making me jump.

Silas dropped his visor down and stared at her in the mirror. "And why would they expect that?"

"They are vampires. They will want to make sure that whoever they do business with is strong and can handle themselves in a fight. It's the only way we will gain their respect."

He slammed the visor back to the roof. "If that is the case, I expect you will do your duty. If they want a fight, we'll give them one."

Luke turned left onto an unmarked dirt road that weaved its way through a swampy area. Tall grasses and cattails slowly swayed as we passed, and I even thought I saw the blinking eyes of an alligator. We stopped when we reached a slow-moving river.

As we got out of the car, everyone but Silas went in a different direction to scout the area. A dock protruded into the murky waters and next to it was an old shack with a sign that read "Mike's Boat Rentals."

The moon was bright and its silver skin reflected off the dark water. I walked to the edge and stared down at it, wishing I could be running in the forest instead of being here.

Luke appeared next to me. "You shouldn't have come."

"Back at you." I sighed, not wanting to fight with him. "I guess that makes us both stupid."

"Someone's coming!" Toby's voice called from near the car.

We joined Silas and the rest of them back at the shack. I tilted my head, straining my hearing. The gentle hum of a motor sounded in the distance. It didn't come from the road but from the river. My eyes met Samira's. I hoped she didn't plan on sabotaging this meeting. Because if she did, I would have to stop her. I'd figure out what to do with the drugs later.

A minute later, a large airboat cut through the water. It came to a stop at the dock and twelve, mostly short, but extremely dangerous looking vampires

hopped over its edge and onto the dock's wooden planks. They were pale but still dark, in a weird way. I guess they looked exactly like what they were: Mexican vampires. It was an odd combination. But I didn't dare laugh, knowing their strange look hid an extremely dangerous weapon.

Silas stepped away from us, leaning on his cane. His noticeable limp had returned. "Welcome."

The tallest of the vampires broke apart from the others, and I heard a gasp from Samira as if she knew him. He wore his dark hair long and tied back in a ponytail. With sharpened cheekbones and jawline, he looked every bit an aristocrat of old, as if he had just stepped out of a history novel. "My name is Mateo Sanchez. I am fourth in command of the Sangre Nocturnas coven. I have come to forge a relationship with your pack. If terms are satisfactory, you will stand to make a lot of money."

"Please, Mateo." Silas said. "We've no need for formalities. We are to be friends after tonight and can speak as if we are brothers."

Samira snorted as if she knew this was the wrong approach to take, but Silas didn't react.

Mateo wrinkled his nose. "We are not friends nor will we ever be friends. We do not associate with your kind beyond business. It is beneath us."

Every muscle in Silas' body tensed. "Business it is. Show us your product."

While Mateo explained what was to come next, I studied the group, searching for weaknesses: those who were distracted or seemed bored. Those would be the ones I'd take out first as they wouldn't put up much of a fight. My curious eye caught the attention of one of the vampires, the only other tall one among them, next to Mateo. His complexion was lighter than the others, more moonlight white beneath dark hair. Night's shadows seemed to cling to him, almost as if he'd left their presence, but they weren't able to let him go as easily. He was watching me closely, not in a dangerous way, but as if there was something about me that confused him.

I quickly averted my gaze, only to meet Samira's. She motioned her head forward silently telling me to pay attention to what was about to happen.

Two of the vampires left the others and returned to the boat. A moment later

they returned, dragging a man that looked like he'd been sedated. He was conscious, but barely. His eyes rolled back into his head, and occasionally he attempted to put together a string of unintelligible words.

The vampires dropped him in front of Silas. Mateo removed a syringe of clear liquid from his pocket and knelt next to the human. He looked up at Silas. "What you are about to see is a demonstration of the drug, Scorpion's Breath. The marvelous thing about this drug is it can be injected anywhere into the body. It will react more quickly if injected directly into a vein, but not required. It can also be dried into a powder for those who like to sniff their drugs."

Mateo straightened the man's arm and rubbed the vein at the crook of his elbow. "The high lasts four to six hours."

"That's not very long." Silas frowned.

"Not to worry. The euphoria is powerful enough that users will immediately want another hit." He pressed the tip of the needle to the man's vein and pushed the plunger.

I swallowed the tightness in my throat, anxious to see what would happen.

Mateo stepped away from the man. "Scorpion's Breath gives humans an incredibly powerful feeling. It places them inside of either their most pleasant dream or their worst nightmare, depending upon the state they were in before applying the drug. But in each scenario, they are the hero. Even if they experience extreme pain, in their minds, they will believe it's pleasure."

The man's eyelids opened wide, and he sucked in a great breath, his chest lifting off the ground nearly a foot. His fingers dug into the muddy earth until the knuckles on his hands were bone white.

"I'm curious," Silas said, watching the human with an inquisitive look. "What does this drug do to supernaturals?"

Like Samira, Mateo's expressionless face showed little emotion, but at Silas' question, his brows drew together, and his eyes turned dark. "Scorpion's Breath is not meant for supernaturals as the effects and addiction are ten times worse and could kill someone of our nature if used too frequently. We may not associate with other species, but we would not harm them in this way. It holds no honor. We must remember that humans are our enemy. They are on this earth

only to serve those more powerful and greater than them.”

At this, Samira bristled in her own undead way.

The human jumped to his feet in a move that startled everyone except for the vampires. I took a step back as he squatted on his feet, his head twitching in every direction. His eyeballs vibrated within his large sockets, and he scratched at his arms. His mouth opened to speak, but a string of words, too fast to make sense of, spilled from his mouth. He scooped at the ground frantically, as if trying to gather them back up.

Silas bent over him. "How do you feel?"

The human blinked several times. He spoke in tongues again, a language that sounded half-Klingon and half-Spanish. His arms shot high into the sky, and his fingers waded through the air, all the while smiling ear to ear. He jumped up and began to jog in place.

Silas looked past him to Mateo. "Will he be like this the whole time?"

"Depending upon his dream. It can change at a moment's notice."

"And it truly is addictive?"

"More than anything I have ever seen."

His serious expression made my stomach turn. Now I understood Samira's concerns. This was bad news.

Silas straightened and relaxed. "Let's discuss terms. We would be honored to distribute Scorpion's Breath throughout the country, but we expect a cut. We will incur a huge cost providing men and vehicles for transport."

"As to be expected."

"I will defer to our financial advisor who has crunched the numbers. She knows what our cost would be to do something of this magnitude." Silas motioned with his fingers. "Samira, come forward."

She came next to him and began to blabber about all the manpower that would be required, the trucks involved, and the security needed to get past border control. She spewed out a bunch of numbers that made my eyes bleed.

I tuned her out and directed my attention to the human as he circled around the same spot on the ground. He should be dizzy by this point, but he continued to go round and round, talking in his foreign language. Gerald and Toby quietly

laughed at him, but Luke looked especially tense and agitated as he stared ahead. I followed his gaze beyond the druggie. A few of the vampires were murmuring to each other in voices so soft even my sensitive hearing couldn't understand what they were saying.

The human howled and slapped his face several times. He left his small circle on the ground and shuffled my direction. Snarling, he sniffed the air around me, spit foaming around his mouth as if he'd forgotten how to swallow.

I stepped to the side, hoping to lose his attention, but he followed me, his teeth now chomping up and down rapidly. I backed up several steps away from him and focused on Silas and Mateo, hoping that by ignoring the human, he'd get bored and leave me alone.

I turned back to Silas and Mateo and noticed that the same tall vampire next to Mateo was again watching me. I raised my eyebrows, challenging him. It was his turn to avert his gaze.

Silas scraped the ground impatiently with his cane. "Get to the point, Samira. How much do we need?"

"No less than forty percent."

The human edged closer to me, and I had to alternate keeping my eye on him and the rest of the vampires, who had begun to fan out. That can't be good.

The human leaned forward and sniffed my neck. I cringed and gently shoved him away.

"And yet, you shall only have ten," Mateo said, his voice sharp and cold.

Silas laughed out loud. "Ten? I wouldn't hug my own mother for that. She said forty."

One of the vampires at the back of the crowd produced a shiny dagger from his sleeve. I might've missed it had it not been for the moonlight shining off its smooth metal surface. I made note of my own blades pressed against the small of my back, and the knives tucked into my bra. It would take me a fraction of a second to retrieve one of them and, by the way Mateo and Silas were arguing, I was going to need it soon.

Before I could react, the human jumped onto my back and began to choke me. Luke was suddenly there. He twisted the human off me and threw him to the

ground, driving his booted foot into the human's chest.

The man struggled against Luke, but Luke kept enough pressure on him to keep him still.

Silas glanced back at us, annoyed by the interruption, but Luke wasn't finished.

"We said forty percent," Luke said, his voice firm and full of power.

To back up the strong statement, he removed a long blade from behind his back and tossed it at the vampire who had produced his own dagger earlier. It hit the creature in the stomach and dropped him to his knees. His dagger fell from his hands.

Mateo didn't react, but his deadly gaze fell on Luke. "Fifteen percent."

With surprising strength, the human twisted Luke's leg hard, knocking him off balance. The human jumped to his feet and rushed at me again, but this time I was ready. I swatted him to the ground. "Stay."

"Don't be difficult, Mateo," Silas said, the sound of his voice near patronizing. "You know we can't operate on fifteen percent. Would you like Samira to go over the terribly boring numbers again? I know she's itching to do so."

Samira glared at him, but he didn't notice. She did, however, remove her glasses and place them on a nearby stump.

"Very well. Eighteen percent." Mateo must really not have wanted to hear all that again.

Startling everyone, Samira darted into the fray of vampires, pulling out her sword. In a blur, she sliced off a head. It dropped to the ground, bouncing toward Mateo's feet. The rest of the body collapsed, then slowly crumbled to the ground in a pile of blood and flesh.

"Stop screwing with us and give us what we want," Samira said, appearing back on our side with her sword already slid into its hilt. She was faster than any supernatural creature I'd ever seen. Silas nodded his head at her approvingly, but it was her turn to ignore him.

For someone who didn't want this deal to go through, Samira sure was fighting hard to make it happen. Maybe she came around to my point of view

and thought it would be easier to just destroy the drugs once we had them. I liked the idea of her agreeing with me.

"If we must battle to decide terms, then so be it." Mateo stepped back and unsheathed a sword strapped to his back.

CHAPTER 25



Not wasting a second, the other vampires rushed for us with their fangs and claws extended. My wolf erupted and I began to shift, but I pressed her down. If I shifted now, I could kill most of them in less than a minute. But that would reveal my true strength, and this wasn't the time for that. Instead, I allowed just enough to the surface to make sure I didn't die.

Snarling, Mateo aimed for Silas, but Luke jumped in between the two, defending Silas like a good little wolf. He branded two short blades, and by the way he was expertly swinging them, I wouldn't want to fight him.

A vampire ran toward me, and I reached for the small blade in my bra as I raced toward him. I yanked it out, ripping a big hole in my shirt. "Motherfucker," I grumbled just as the vampire reached me.

I swiped at him, catching him on the shoulder as he attempted to duck. Off balance, he stumbled backwards, tripping over the human, who was oddly flopping like a fish on the ground.

Another vamp rushed me from behind, but, sensing him, I spun at exactly the right moment, and stabbed him in the chest. He fell to his knees. Knowing he would recover quickly, I slashed at his neck, severing his artery to effectively take him out of the fight. For several minutes, at least.

A flash of silver caught my attention. Samira was swinging her long blade, nearly decapitating two vampires in a row. Like me, she wasn't trying to kill, only severely maim, confirming what I thought. This fight was all a show for power.

I don't know what I was thinking, not bringing wooden daggers to a meeting with vampires, which would've made their wounds harder to come back from. Everyone else had them. Toby and Gerald had one in each hand. Even Silas unexplainably had a wooden dagger attached to the bottom of his cane. He used it to stab at any vampire in passing, while Luke and Mateo exchanged blows, neither one gaining the upper hand.

The vampires outnumbered us, but we fought for dominion, not to exterminate. None of us wanted to lose lives, but I figured a few would have to go down to really prove anything. Had we not had Samira on our side, we probably would've been spanked by now.

A vampire slammed into Toby from the side. He spun, his feet getting tripped up, and fell forward. He was so distracted by trying to get his feet under him, he failed to see another vampire who was almost upon him. I rushed forward to intercept, but before I could, the vampire rammed a silver blade directly into Toby's heart.

Toby grunted, and his mouth formed an O. He looked up, his eyes finding mine as the color in his face turned gray. His life, one I happened to like, slowly faded from his watery gaze. I sucked in a breath as the vampire tossed Toby's body aside.

I cried out and rushed the murderous vampire, cutting my way through two who stood in my way. Gerald reached the vamp before I could and slammed his stake into his heart but missed. The vampire spun to dart away, but Luke was suddenly there, holding the vamp in place, while Gerald tried again.

This time he didn't miss.

Bile and blood spilled from the vampire's lips and dribbled down his chin. Before the foul liquid could reach his shirt, his body began to decompose, collapsing within itself.

So far, none of the vampires we had killed had burst into ash, a trait shared only among newbie vampires. This told me the Nocturnas were an older coven who probably didn't like bringing in new recruits. This was both good and bad. Newborn vampires were much easier to kill, but they could be reckless and unpredictable. It made me wonder how many vampires belonged to the coven.

Two vampires surrounded me, the same ones I had just cut through. And they were pissed. They also weren't alone.

The human had returned to pester me, and he scampered around my feet like a puppy who wanted his belly rubbed.

"Beat it," I said, and kicked at him, all the while keeping my eyes trained on the circling vampires. By the way the corners of their mouths were turned up, they seemed to be enjoying the nuisance at my feet.

Just before I lunged for one of the vampires, the human nipped at my heels. Like seriously tried to take a bite out of my fucking ankle. I could feel his saliva cooling my flesh.

I glanced away from the vampires, just long enough to kick at the human again, but it was too long. An elbow crashed into my jaw snapping my head back. Stars exploded in my vision, and I teetered. The action was followed by someone's boot slamming into my chest, sending me flying back several feet. I crashed through the shack. Several boards fell on top of me.

There was the motherfucking wood I needed.

My eyes flashed yellow, and the skin on my back rolled into fur. I shook my head, forcing my wolf down again. Not yet.

I grabbed one of the wooden slats and split it into a smaller slice, one still big and strong enough to go through a vampire's sternum.

No more playing nice.

I jumped to my feet and sprinted across the dirt floor, kicking at the crazed human in passing. He rolled several times across the ground, his face becoming both muddy and bloody.

Just as a vampire swung at me, I dropped and skidded along the ground, shoving my stake upward. It connected with his heart. The motion was so fast, I wondered if anyone had been able to spot it.

While he melted to mush, I whirled around to stab the other one only to be met with his sharp claws swinging at my face. I spun out of the way just in time and swung my arm backward, gripping the wooden slat tightly. It easily slid through the back of his neck. Before he could recover, I yanked it out and lowered my aim directly into his heart.

My execution had been swift and brutal. Overwhelming power, black and raw, grew in my chest giving me a desire to take more lives. I had been in plenty of fights in my life but only killed in self-defense. What I was doing now made my heart stutter.

I sucked in a breath and stepped back. The human was crawling through the chaos toward me again, his face smeared with so much dirt and blood, he was unrecognizable.

The bloodshed needed to stop.

Certain no one was watching, I called upon my wolf's strength, the part of me I kept hidden. My body reacted instantly. It expanded, filled with power and force. My muscles snapped, my senses strengthened, and I became a little taller.

I raced to put myself between Mateo and Silas, who were about to fight each other. Silas didn't look the least bit afraid, which made me wonder how good of a fighter he might actually be.

Mateo reacted to me, but I batted his fist away when it flew my direction and knocked his legs out from under him. He collapsed onto his back and before he hit the ground, I was straddling him with a dagger to his throat.

"Briar! Stop!"

I jerked back, distracted by Samira's voice, and Mateo's eyes widened at her in surprise. Ignoring her, I growled, lowering my face to him so he could see my yellow eyes glowing. "Tell your men to retreat, or I will cut off your head."

He choked on his next words. "Who are you?"

In a loud voice, I called, "Give us thirty percent! Agree to the terms, or you will die!"

The air grew silent. No more growls, no more clinking of weapons. Even the human had gone still. Thankfully.

When Mateo didn't give in immediately, I dug the blade deeper into his flesh so he knew I was serious. "I said thirty percent."

I glanced back at Samira to make sure thirty was enough. Probably should've done that sooner. She nodded her head in approval.

"We have a deal," Mateo said, his voice even but laced with steel. In a quieter voice, he added, "I will find out more about you. A rare jewel like you

will always be coveted."

I punched him in the mouth to shut him up. His lip split and his tongue snaked out to taste the crimson liquid. He grinned seductively, and I climbed off him, rolling my eyes. Vamps. One minute they're trying to kill you, the next minute they're trying to screw you.

I turned my back on Mateo as he stood up, brushing off dark slacks. Off to his side, I caught sight of the tall vampire who had been looking at me curiously before. He wasn't holding a weapon like everyone else, only a briefcase, and his clothes were immaculate, which meant he hadn't fought. Only observed. Somehow this made him feel more dangerous than the others.

Silas approached Mateo, giving me a strange look in passing. It was a calculated glare.

Had I overstepped my bounds?

Luke came and stood next to me. His hands, bloody and bruised, were crossed against his chest. He, too, eyed me with caution, confusion, and almost wonder.

Had they seen what I'd done? Maybe I'd been too careless. I'd have to be more careful going forward.

"Shit," a deep voice whispered

Behind me, Gerald was bent over Toby's body. Samira hurried to them, as if she might help heal him with her blood, but I knew it was too late.

Samira confirmed it with a sigh. She put her hand on Gerald's shoulder. "I'm sorry, there's nothing I can do."

He moaned an anguished cry and drove his fist into the ground. I kept my body faced forward, still watching Mateo closely, but also not wanting to give into the ripping feeling in my chest. In my opinion, we'd just lost one of the best members of the pack.

The vampires had also lost members, but by their stupid dead expressions, they weren't about to show any sorrow for their fallen comrades in front of us.

Silas glanced back coolly at Gerald, probably wishing he would do the same. To Mateo, he said, "Before we sign anything binding, we expect you to leave a sample. We will want to run our own quality tests on Scorpion's Breath."

"Of course. Angel, the briefcase," Mateo said, finally giving a name to the tall vampire who had stood idly by while we all fought.

Angel walked forward with the grace of a panther. His eyes lingered on me a fraction of a second too long, making Luke growl low in his throat. This action seemed to please Angel, and he further agitated Luke by winking at me. I gave him the bird, and almost swung my middle finger in Luke's direction too. What was his deal?

Angel handed Silas the briefcase and stepped back.

Silas held it at his hip possessively. "We will meet in a week for payment on the first shipment. After that, we will require thirty percent of all profit. Is this satisfactory?"

"For now, the terms are acceptable. Same time next week," Mateo said. He turned around and walked down the dock back to the airboat. The other vampires followed.

No one said anything as we watched the boat disappear into the growing fog skimming the top of the water. The night had grown cold, and it seeped through my thin t-shirt directly into my bones. I glanced at my hands, noticing the blood coating them. I shivered and lowered them to my sides.

"What are we going to do with him?" Luke asked.

I followed his gaze. The human was crouched at my feet, looking up at me with hopeful eyes. His arm was in his mouth, and he was absentmindedly chewing on it like a bone. Blood from where he had broken the skin dripped down his chin and onto his bent knees.

Silas gazed at him appreciatively. "We'll take him back to Fire Ridge to see how long it takes for him to recover. Then we'll drug him again. This will be fun to experiment." By the way his voice had dropped on the last sentence, I didn't think the words were meant for our ears.

I repressed a shiver. "I say we leave him here. He creeps me out."

Silas patted me on the back. "There, there."

I resisted the urge to rip his arm from his shoulder.

While Gerald carried Toby's body into the SUV, Luke and I handled the human. By this time, he was less agitated, but his body randomly twitched every

few seconds. One of his spastic movements caught me off guard, and his hand whacked me in the chin.

Luke struggled to hold the man in place. "It's messed up what they did to him. They keep ruining lives without expecting any consequences. We all are."

My eyebrows lifted at his acknowledgment that we were doing something wrong. Maybe there was hope for him yet.

I picked up the human's legs to help heave him into the backseat. I gave him a firm look, my finger pointed his direction, and said, "Sit."

He obeyed the command.

Huh.

I tried again. "Lie down."

Again, he followed the order.

"Roll over."

"Enough," Samira snapped from the backseat. "Let's go."

I closed the backdoor. Silas still stood by the water's edge. Moonlight illuminated the touch of gray in his hair. I could see the whites of his knuckles as he gripped the briefcase tightly. No doubt his mind was churning, thinking of a million different ways he could put Scorpion's Breath to use. Samira was right. We needed to get it out of his hands. But how could we do that without revealing our own duplicity?

Luke put his hand on my arm. "I'm sorry about Toby."

I stepped back. Luke's hand fell to his side. "Um, thanks?"

His brows furrowed. "Oh, I thought maybe you two..."

I shook my head, glancing through the window at Toby's body. Gerald sat next to him, his head in his hands. "Oh no. We never even... He would've been too good for me, anyway."

Luke grabbed my hand and brushed at my middle finger. "You play with this a lot when you're thinking. Where's it from?"

He was talking about the ring I always wore. It was silver and of a bird in flight.

I waved my hand. "It's nothing. Just an old ring I found in a thrift store." That was actually a lie. I'd been given it by the only social worker who had ever

cared for me. It reminded me that one day, I was going to be done with all this revenge shit and be able to fly away.

Or so I'd hoped.

He smiled, still holding on to my hand. "I like it. It suits you."

He stroked his fingers down my palm, causing a shiver to take hold of my entire body. He let go, but his hand fell to my hip instead. He squeezed it, then gently pushed me forward toward the front door.

Insisting I drive back to keep my mind occupied, I slid behind the wheel. Luke joined Samira in the back. I grabbed the hand sanitizer we kept in the car and lathered it over my bloody hands, doing my best to clean them. Then I passed it around.

"Here." Samira handed me two safety pins. I noticed her glasses were back on.

"What are those for?"

"Your breasts." She glanced down.

I dropped my gaze to my chest, just then remembering how my knife had sliced it open. My black bra with my boob practically popping out of it was in full view. Bloody hell. Maybe that's why the vamps and even Luke had hit on me. I quickly pinned my torn material together, my face reddening. "What was that earlier? When you yelled at me. Do you know the vamp leader?"

"If you killed Mateo, Silas' deal would be dead," she said, not really answering my question. "Then Silas probably would've killed you."

"Aww, I didn't know you cared. You should trust me more. I wasn't going to actually do it." When she didn't respond, I looked up at her. "Can I ask you something?"

She gave me her dead-face, which I assumed meant to continue.

"How come you wear glasses? You have perfect vision."

"Better than perfect." She reached up and pressed them up her nose.

"So...."

"These glasses remind me to be human. Without them, it's too easy for me to become a monster. I don't ever want to return to those days." She turned away, ending the conversation.

I stared at her, trying to imagine her as a killing machine. It was easy to do.

We waited in the car somewhat patiently for Silas to return. I glanced back at Gerald who was so quiet, but decided not to say anything. I turned to Silas, frustrated that he was making us wait in the car with Toby's dead body and a wasted human. I was about to honk the horn when Silas finally returned.

Without acknowledging Toby's body, he said, "Let's go celebrate. The whole world's about to change."

CHAPTER 26



S hivering at Silas' words, I wrapped my hands tighter around the steering wheel and leaned into the side of the door. The drive back to Fire Ridge was long and cold, despite the heater running. I felt an ache in my tooth, and wondered if I needed to see a dentist. It also felt more like winter than autumn right now. I glanced at Samira in the rearview mirror. She seemed to feel the chill too. The only one who spoke was Silas when he made a call to Dominic to report our meeting.

Back at the mansion, a party was already in full force. Silas joined them with his arms outstretched, as if he was their savior. He held up the briefcase for everyone to see and yelled, "We're about to get filthy rich!"

The crowd cheered and Dominic slapped Silas on the back, smiling big. "Tell me all about it, brother."

But all grew eerily quiet when Gerald and Luke carried in Toby's body, a blanket covering him. I clamped down on the wave of emotions threatening to overwhelm me at the sight. It reminded me of the dozens of bodies, my own family members, I had seen as a child. Ever since, Death had rooted itself in my shadow, just waiting to kill anyone else close to me.

The party quickly turned into a wake. The shifters who were there when we arrived, gathered around the fire, pulling out more beer. Many shared their stories about Toby. I'd only known him a short while, but I understood the respect and love I heard in their words.

They would drink heavily tonight, then take his body to his family. It would

be up to them if he had a pack burial or a traditional one. No one worried about what the police would think; everyone knew money would exchange hands and lies would be printed in the papers.

I scratched at my neck, an itch I couldn't soothe. I thought of Ryder and scanned the crowd but couldn't find him, even though I had spotted his car out front. I wanted to see how he was doing as I hadn't spoken to him much after we met with the Greybacks. When I couldn't see him among the pack, I began asking around, but no one had seen him for a while. I began to itch at my arms.

After an hour of no Ryder, I slipped back into the mansion to search for him. Something was wrong. I felt it in my bones and began to wonder if what I was feeling was our blood connection. Ryder would be here for this, if only to know how the meeting went with the Nocturnas.

I stepped close to the sliding glass door, facing the rear of the house. Alcohol had soothed the pack's sorrow for Toby. They were back to being loud and obnoxious. They had a different way of respecting the dead than I was used to.

My gaze settled on Silas and Dominic, sitting on chairs away from the pack. Several others migrated to and around them, trying to catch their eye and be invited into their conversation. I frowned, disapproving. I could never live in someone's shadow like that.

They motioned Luke over and he left his friends to speak to Dominic for a few minutes. I wondered what they were saying. Silas and Luke walked off, probably to grab another beer, and I opened the door. For the most part, I tried to avoid Dominic, but I thought he might've sent Ryder off on an errand. So I took a chance and walked forward, rubbing at my arms.

He watched me approach, eyeing me up and down, but didn't say anything, even when I stopped in front of him.

"Excuse me, Sir." Ugh, I hated showing him respect.

He lowered his gaze to the beer bottle in his hand and swirled the liquid. "I heard you were instrumental in securing this deal for the pack."

"I only did what was necessary, just like Silas asked."

His eyes slowly met mine. "And did Silas ask you to press a dagger to Mateo's neck?"

He watched me steadily, his expression giving me no indication of what he was thinking or feeling.

I stepped to the side, watching the pack. "I took the initiative." I wasn't sure if those words would anger or impress him.

"Well, you've definitely impressed Silas. He's particularly smitten with you. But you make me wary. Your eagerness to please has me suspicious."

"It shouldn't, Sir. I'm loyal to the pack."

"You're ambitious, are you not?"

I turned back to him, searching his eyes. He was worried about it, my ambition. I glanced at Luke, wondering if they'd been talking about me. If Dominic knew how fast and strong I was, he would assume I would want to be Alpha. I couldn't have him thinking along those lines of reasoning. "The height of my ambition is to quit struggling for a living and to be bound to a strong pack. Under your leadership, I think I can have those things."

He nodded, accepting my answer. "What can I do for you tonight?"

"I am looking for Ryder. Have you seen him recently?" I resisted the urge to claw at my flesh. Ryder was in trouble; I just knew it. This feeling, the crawling on my skin as if someone had dumped a jar of ants all over my body, had to be our blood connection. And it was only growing stronger. I needed to find Ryder, and fast.

Dominic rubbed the stubble on his face. "I wondered where he ran off to. Is his car out front?"

"Yeah, but I've searched inside and all the outbuildings. I can't find him anywhere."

Dominic tightened his lips. "I sent him on an errand earlier this afternoon. That was the last time I saw him but if his car is here..."

"I'll check the inside of his vehicle then. Maybe there's something there."

"If not, check Sinsual. He goes there sometimes, as I'm sure you know. How is work going, anyway? Is Eddie treating you good? Because if he isn't, we could break his legs." He chuckled, but I couldn't tell if he was serious or not.

"Eddie's great, actually." I left before any more words could be spoken. I had to find Ryder.

I circled the house, a growing sickness in my stomach now. Whatever Ryder had done for Dominic, he had been alone. So much could've happened. Especially since our visit to the Greybacks. They could want revenge for his role in what happened.

Ryder's car was parked further away from Fire Ridge than where he usually parked. I should've noticed this sooner. I opened the front door and looked inside using the light from my cell phone. Nothing looked out of place. It was a newer vehicle, which was meticulously clean, surprising for a shifter. We tended to be a sloppy species. Chalk that up to the wolf inside of us.

I was about to pull away when I spotted a folded up piece of paper on the passenger seat. I leaned over the center console and grabbed it. I slid behind the steering wheel and unfolded it.

"Ryder is a Greyback. He is OURS."

I lowered the note in my lap, my mind scrambling.

They took him.

They took him and brought his car all the way back here, and no one fucking noticed. I balled up my fist and smashed it into the steering wheel several times. Where was our security?

With the note in hand, I jogged back to Dominic. Silas was back and Luke stood a few feet away. I handed the note to Dominic. "They took him."

"Took who?" Silas leaned forward.

I gave the note to Dominic and answered Silas. "Ryder. They took him, and they brought his car back. How the hell did they get past our security?"

Dominic handed Silas the note. Luke stepped closer to read it over Silas' shoulder.

Silas looked at me, his face expressionless. "Well, he is a Greyback."

Dominic lifted his hands. "Let's not jump to conclusions. The note doesn't say anything about taking him. They just said he's a Greyback. Maybe he wrote this note to himself and then split town." There was a gleam in his eye, and the side of his lips turned up, as if he'd just made a joke. The worst one I've ever heard.

I frowned, realizing they really didn't care.

"He would never go back there," I said. "I know how much he hated his father."

Silas flipped the note with his finger. "This tells us nothing. Let's just wait a few days and see if he returns."

Dominic nodded. "I agree. I'm sure he'll turn up naked and with leaves in his hair. Like I said, he probably just went for a run."

"I don't think so. After what you made him do," I looked pointedly at Silas, "to their pack, they'll want revenge. We'll be lucky if they haven't killed him already."

Silas uncrossed his legs and leaned toward me. "Did you just counter your Alpha?"

I lowered my head in submission. "I apologize. I meant no disrespect," I glanced back up into Dominic's eyes, "but the Greybacks will hurt Ryder. He's our pack member. We have a duty to rescue him."

Luke appeared at my side. "I agree with her."

"Of course you do," Silas said, a smile tickling the sides of his mouth.

Luke turned to him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Dominic put his hand out to silence everyone. "We don't know for sure what happened, but I do know I will not risk any more pack members tonight. Not when we've already lost one of our own." He put on a somber expression the way one might slip on a Halloween mask. "But if Ryder is not back by tomorrow night, then we'll send over a couple of our men to talk to Jackson."

When I opened my mouth to argue, he interrupted me. "That's my final answer."

I bit down hard, my jaw aching from the sudden pain. I could try to kill them both right now. Behind me, two men howled into the night. Others joined them. Way too many to fight. Besides, I didn't dare waste a second.

If they weren't going to save Ryder, then I would.

CHAPTER 27



“*B*riar.” Luke shot into the house after me. “I know you’re going to look for Ryder.”

I didn’t look back at him. “Am not.”

He grabbed my arm, stilling me.

“If I’ve learned anything about you, it’s that you do what you want and ask questions later.”

“Well, you’d be wrong. You just saw me ask Dominic if I could go there.”

He turned me around. “But you’re going there anyway.”

“I promise, I’m not going.” I took a step backwards heading for the bathroom. “Don’t follow me.”

“I don’t believe you.” He kept following.

When I reached the bathroom door, I pressed my back against it and did a little dance. “I have to pee.”

He remained frozen in place, his arms crossed at his chest.

I locked eyes with him. “Fine. You can come in with me.”

He leaned against the wall, a smile threatening to break. “Not this time. But I’ll wait for you out here.”

“Good.” I shut the door in his face, then turned on the water just a trickle in case he was listening for bathroom sounds. This might fool him.

I faced myself in the mirror, considering him. If I told him the truth, he might rat me out. But, I might be able to talk him into going. He could be a big help, especially if I got caught and had to fight my way out.

Except, if I went alone, I could take care of things my way and not have to worry about what Luke saw. It was decided. I turned the water off, waited a moment, then turned it back on, like I was washing my hands. A few deep breaths later, I climbed out the window.

It didn't take me long to find an available car. By the way the pack was drinking tonight, not many would be driving home. I drove slowly, trying not to bring any attention to the fact that I was sneaking out. The guards at the gate didn't stop me; I'd run enough errands for Silas by now that they were used to me coming and going.

I left the property and exhaled, glad that it was me who'd driven to the Dreilinger swamps last time, otherwise I probably would've gotten lost. The closer I came, the more I began to panic. The itch I'd experienced earlier had turned into full on plague. My bones ached, moisture left my mouth, and my throat felt swollen. Everything in me screamed to hurry.

When I was within a mile of the swamps, I pulled off the side of the road as far as I could and sprinted through the trees using my sense of smell to guide me. I considered shifting into a wolf, but then I would be naked should I need to shift back into a human. That's always awkward in any situation. Best I stay human for as long as possible.

The forest was shrouded in heavy darkness. The canopy above me, despite it being fall, was still so thick, the moon's light was unable to break the barrier. I didn't mind. I liked having to rely on my wolf senses to navigate. It made me feel powerful and part of something greater—the night.

Fallen leaves crunched beneath my foot falls. The smell of shifter wolves grew, which meant I was close. Before I advanced further, I figured I'd have to do something about my scent. Couldn't have security catching on to me this early in the game. Maybe I could find another pile of shit to mask my odor, but once a year was more than enough. Besides, there were other ways to sneak up on enemies.

I sniffed the air and expanded my hearing. All kinds of animals lived in these woods, more than around Fire Ridge. I could smell and hear them all. I just had to find the right one.

A flash of white through the darkness caught my attention. I cut to my left. The animal I tracked wouldn't be my first choice, but it was a step above smearing myself with horse manure. If I had more time, I might seek out a fox's den, or even a raccoon's. Rolling around in the dirt might work too, but for a quick fix, a skunk's spray would have to do.

I leapt over a bush and into a tree, my claws latching onto its rough surface, to give me a bird's eye view of the forest floor. I spotted the creature off to my right. I leapt from my perch and made what I thought was an accurate boogeyman cry to startle the skunk. He lifted his tail, and I turned my head just as the smelly blast hit me.

"Nailed it," I murmured, staying in the cloud of stink for only a second. Any longer and it might be too obvious. Plus, it made me sick to my stomach, and I couldn't have the aroma of vomit out-smelling my skunk perfume. I hurried away holding back several coughs, tears stinging my eyes. Maybe that wasn't such a good idea.

A steady light shined through a wall of trees. I was close. I crouched low in the underbrush and moved as stealthily as a mountain lion. The large barn was just up ahead, the Greybacks' home on the left. Behind it, I spotted the small shacks, moonlight reflecting off their tin roofs. I wondered if some of their pack lived inside them. A lot of shifters didn't care where they laid their head, as long as there was shelter.

I listened to the various sounds scattered over the property. Most of them were people talking and laughing, along with the occasional sloshing of heavy drinking. Guess all packs had something in common.

But there was one noise that made me cock my head to the right, toward the large barn. A girl was crying while someone else spoke in angry spouts.

Making sure I was alone, I darted across the lawn to an old truck and peeked around. A soft light glowed from one of the barn windows, but it was too high for me to peek through. Two shifters guarded the large barn door. I left my hiding spot and sprinted around to the back to conceal myself behind a thick oak tree.

So far so good. The smell of skunk was working. They probably had at least

a dozen guards patrolling, but as long as I was quiet, I'd go unnoticed.

Poking my head out, I risked a glance at the barn. There was an opening on the second floor, with stacks of hay just as high. Other than making a grand entrance, this was the only way in. I ran and leapt high onto one of the stacks. I landed soundlessly and scrambled my way up into the entrance. I was on a dusty loft overlooking the barn, cobwebs at every turn. I cringed and silently wiped at my arms just in case. I hated spiders.

Moving further upon old wooden planks into the darkness, I quickly melted into the shadows and sniffed the air. There was an odor that didn't smell right. It was hard to separate it from the normal barn smells of animal waste and dusty hay, but whatever it was, it set my already agitated nerves on edge.

"You shouldn't have come here," a deep voice said behind me.

My heart fell into my stomach, and I froze. So much for not getting caught.

I glanced behind me, but to my relief there was no one there. The male voice was coming from below me, the deep sound carrying through the rafters.

A girl sobbed uncontrollably. "We were friends. That used to mean something."

"It used to," the same male voice said.

"How could you come back here, with them?" The poor girl's voice held an edge of uncontrollable rage.

"I didn't have a choice."

My head jerked up. Ryder. He had breathed the words as if there was barely any air left in his lungs. I was right. They had taken him.

I crept near the edge of the balcony and peered down but was met with darkness. I moved to a narrow walkway, risking its proximity to the voices for a better view.

"The moment you left us, you became a stranger to me," the man's voice continued. It was laced in cruelty and spite. "I regret the day you were ever born."

I slowly peeked over the edge and sucked in a hitched breath. The faint light of a small lantern revealed Ryder hanging from the rafters, both his hands tied high above his head. His toes just barely grazed the floor, enough to tease him.

His shirt had been stripped and his back whipped. The word “traitor” had been carved into his chest. Beneath him, a pool of blood slowly grew.

I gripped a wooden board until I thought it would snap. Damn Silas. And damn Dominic for not listening to me.

The girl who had lost her eyes sat near Ryder's legs. She had white bandages covering both of them but she kept touching at them as if her eyes might magically reappear.

"I'm sorry," Ryder said, his voice raspy and weak. He winced through each word, his face pinched in pain. By the large purple bruise on each side of his chest, I wouldn't be surprised if he had broken ribs also.

The girl lifted her head toward him, frowning. "You're sorry?" Her voice rose. "Sorry?"

Through an agony-filled exhale, Ryder said, "There was nothing I could do."

He squinted his eyes, grunting in pain, as the girl pulled on his legs, hauling herself slowly to her feet. Her hands felt for his stomach. "You could have said no."

Her fingers balled into her palm, and she pulled back her fist before punching into his stomach. Air exploded from his lungs. "You are a coward!" she yelled. "A coward!"

Jackson stepped into the light for the first time, his hands balled tight like he wanted to take his turn at the Ryder-punching bag. "Look her in the eyes when she speaks to you."

Ryder attempted to lift his head, but it flopped back to his chest. Jackson stormed over to him and grabbed a fistful of Ryder's hair and jerked his head up. "I said look. This is because of you. You did this!"

He threw Ryder's head forward, disgust overwhelming his face. "You belong over there, you filthy Silver Claw. I should've given you to them when you were a pup. Useless from day one."

The girl punched him again. "When will I get to kill him?"

Her brutality shocked me. This is what Ryder meant when he said his pack wasn't any better.

"Not yet. He needs to suffer for a few more days."

“No!” In a sudden fit of rage, the girl punched and clawed at his face over and over. Because she couldn't see, she missed half of the blows, but the ones that connected were enough.

It was some time before she grew tired. It took everything I had to hold myself back from jumping down and stopping her. By the time she was finished, Ryder was unconscious.

Jackson placed his large hand on her shoulder. "Let's go for the night. The smell in here is terrible. You can come back in the morning when he's awake."

She sniffed, wiping her nose with the back of her hand, and let Jackson guide her out of the barn, taking the lantern with them. As soon as they closed the door, I quietly made my way to the back of the barn where I had spotted a ladder. It creaked when I placed my weight on it so I decided to skip it altogether and jumped to the ground.

The odd smell was stronger here. It reminded me of the time my whole teenage group home had come down with the flu. Everyone but me, of course. The humans had gotten it bad, making the small house smell like the plague with their waste and vomit. But why would it smell like that here?

I crept through the darkness, passing several stalls on my way to the other side. The smell grew stronger, until I had to press my palm over my nose and mouth. Deciding to investigate, I smelled the air until I was next to the stall door where the smell was the strongest. Listening closely, there was breathing, ragged and soft. I tried the handle, but the door was locked.

I slid the bolt across the top of the door and opened it just enough to peek inside. What the holy hell? I opened the door wider.

Inside, laying in their own waste were three naked humans, two females and one male. Open sores littered their bodies, oozing puss and blood. The smell was horrific. I swallowed the growing bile in my throat.

This complicated things. Saving Ryder, who looked near death, was going to be challenging enough, but adding three injured humans? Near impossible, especially with two shifters guarding the barn outside. It didn't help that my car was parked a mile away.

Maybe I couldn't save them all. The thought squeezed at my chest, but I

ignored the sensation.

Ryder first.

I stepped out of the stall and stood hidden in the darkness feeling its cool pressure build around me. My wolf shivered, then growled.

She didn't like to fail.

Neither did I.

CHAPTER 28



Withdrawing a blade from my boot, I approached Ryder from behind. With a quick leap into the air, I slashed at the rope, cutting it clean through. His body fell, but I caught him before it could hit the ground and gently laid him down. Moonlight just barely filtering in through the barn's wooden slats, illuminated his bruised face.

He moaned and opened his eyes. He blinked, as if he couldn't believe what he was seeing. "Briar?"

"I'm going to get you out of here. Just stay quiet for a couple of minutes."

He nodded, and I lowered his head carefully to the ground and straightened. As far as I knew, there were only two guards standing out front. If there were more, then my plan might not work.

I quietly approached the barn door and peeked through the wooden boards. One of the guards held a cigarette between his fingers as he puffed clouds of smoke into the cool air. The other guard was on the ground, leaning against the barn door. The light of his phone brightened his face. Not the most attentive guards. Hopefully not the brightest either.

Scratching the side of the barn, I made a strange mewling sound. The guard with the cigarette lowered it and tilted his head, listening. I cooed again, trying to sound like a wounded animal.

"You hear that?"

The shifter on the ground raised his head. "Should we get Jackson?"

The cigarette guard glanced at the main house. "Nah. He just left here. If we

go get him, he'll be pissed if it's nothing. Go check it out. It's probably just one of the humans."

"Aw, man. I hate dealing with them. They're all used up. You go."

These guys were lazy and idiots. Two things I could work with.

Cigarette man sighed. "Fine. But if one of them jumps on me and gives me fleas, I'm sleeping in your bed tonight."

Phone guy laughed. "Man, you've already got fleas. That's what Sally told me anyway."

The wide door opened and cigarette man stepped into the shadows of the barn. I yanked him into the darkness with me, snapping his neck before he could utter a word. I dropped his body to the ground, only making enough noise to sound suspicious. He should be out for hours until his body healed.

"Mark?" Phone man took a tentative step toward the open door. He was within arm's reach.

I risked the exposure to snatch him too. He was bigger than I expected, but after a slight scuffle, I managed to bring him down before he could sound an alarm.

I searched the area. Cypress and gum trees lined the property, and there was a swampy area further back. That would explain the mosquitos still around, despite the cool air.

What I needed was a vehicle, one I could jump-start. Several cars polluted the compound, but I doubted a lot of them would start by their dumpy, outward appearance. I settled on an old Ford pickup and hoped their slogan: Built Ford Tough proved true.

Keeping it in mind, I slipped back into the barn and carried Ryder to the door.

"You're going to get yourself killed," Ryder whispered, with barely enough energy to hold his arms around my neck.

I gently laid him down in the opening of the barn. "Tonight is not my night, son."

I dashed back to where they were keeping the humans and broke their chains free. Two of them moaned but didn't speak. Either they were too malnourished

or possibly drugged up. I was careful when I lifted their bodies one by one; even the man felt as if he were a child, small and fragile. I set them next to Ryder.

One of them, a woman with stringy brown hair, reached up and gently touched my cheek. "My angel."

"I'm no one's angel, lady." I stood and listened. Everything remained quiet.

Returning to the barn one last time, I searched the barn for lighter fluid and matches. It took a little longer than I wanted but eventually I found them. I crept outside and kept to the shadows while I formulated a plan.

The tricky part would be getting several outbuildings to burn at the same time. I would need to be fast and create as much chaos as possible. I chose a shed closest to the house and three other of the smaller shacks at the rear of the property.

I started with the furthest building on the property, using only a little bit of the gas. I needed to ration it out among the cabins, and besides, I only wanted enough to capture their attention. Just as I was dumping the flammable liquid on the third one, a door opened to one of the small cabins. I ducked in time before being spotted, then peeked around.

A tall and extremely large shifter man stretched his arms to the sky, wearing only his boxer shorts. He grumbled something about a skunk and walked back inside, closing the door behind him. I breathed a sigh of relief and dropped my shoulders. I didn't want to have to fight that one. The commotion would wake the others.

Using the last of the gas, I created a torch out of sticks and dried leaves. Hurrying so the fire didn't reach my fingers, I pressed it to the ground. Flames ignited. I sprinted as fast as I could to the next one and lit it on fire as well.

By the time I was to the shed near the house, people had already begun to shout about the fire. And just like I wanted, chaos ensued. Several people ran from the main house when they saw what was happening. Someone drug a watering hose and began to spray down the cabins. Other people filled buckets of water from a spout behind the house.

Just like I wanted, everyone's attention was focused on the flames.

I sprinted across the gravel driveway until I reached the old pickup truck. It

would only be a matter of minutes or less before Jackson realized this was a trap to get Ryder. I slipped inside and fumbled with the wires, trying to remember how to start it from the criminal past of my youth. I finally found the ones I needed and yanked them free. Pressing them together, the engine came to life. There was so much shouting I doubted anyone heard the engine, despite it being loud.

I sped to the barn doors and, one by one, I placed the humans into the back of the truck, reminding them to keep their heads down and to stay quiet. I added a couple of blankets from the barn hoping they had the sense enough to use them. They were fading in and out of consciousness.

Ryder's turn. I returned for him, finally feeling like I might actually pull this off, but when I entered the barn, Ryder was sitting up and staring into the darkness.

"Let's go," I bent down to pick him up, but he shook his head.

"It's too late."

"No it's not. The truck's just outside."

His gaze lifted above my shoulder to something beyond. I clenched my jaw shut and lowered my head. We weren't alone.

"I'm surprised anyone came for him." Jackson stepped out from the shadows.

CHAPTER 29



I stretched tall to face him, all six feet seven. My head only came to the top of his shoulders. I swallowed the cannonball in my throat.

"Ryder is a Silver Claw," I said. "I'm taking him home."

He glanced around as if he could see through the barn's walls. "I only sense one of you. So either Dominic wants you as dead as my bastard son here, or, you're doing this all on your own. Brave, but stupid."

"Well, no one's ever called me smart before."

"I can see why."

"Yeah, well, I'm getting Ryder out of here, and you're not going to stop me." I forced myself not to look toward the stalls in the back, in case he hadn't seen me take the humans. I wouldn't be able to explain that one.

"You can't beat me, little she-wolf. I'm an Alpha, but because of your bravery, I'd like to offer you a deal." He paused for dramatic effect. "Join our pack, and I'll let you live."

I glanced back at Ryder. Blood dripped from a wound on his head. "And what about him?"

"There is no him. He is already dead."

"Then no deal. Pack members stick together."

He cracked his knuckles and cocked his head side to side. "I'm going to enjoy this."

"Don't do it," Ryder coughed. "Just go."

"Shut up," I snapped, hoping Ryder was out of it enough that he wouldn't

remember what was about to happen.

Time for my wolf to take over, mostly. She had been itching for it for days.

"Let's get this over with." My fangs grew long, and I snapped my hands forward, extracting claws as sharp as razor blades. I grinned. This was the fun part.

I didn't entirely shift, because I needed this to end quickly. My wolf would tear him to shreds, resulting in a lot of noise that would attract attention. As a human, I was able to control precise movements compared to my wolf's brutality. She didn't care how loud her victims screeched.

Jackson lunged at me, slashing across my face, but I ducked just in time. I kicked him in the side, sending him flying into the wall across from him. The sound was louder than I wanted. He spun around, growling and spitting from his mouth. He attacked me again, but I was much faster. He was all brute strength. I was speed, agility, and strength.

I kicked at his thigh, almost snapping his femur, but he absorbed the blow and stumbled back. We punched at each other, both of us getting in good hits.

"You are extremely powerful for a shifter." He narrowed his eyes as we circled each other. "There's something about the way you fight. Does Dominic know how strong you are?" He laughed. "Probably not. Otherwise he'd have killed you by now."

I growled, frustrated I couldn't end this quicker than I'd wanted. Time to put this asshole down. I ran at him again, grabbing a discarded pitchfork. Just as we met each other, he swung high, and I ducked beneath his massive fist while also jamming the pitchfork up through his chin and out his prominent cheekbones.

His eyes widened in surprise, and he stumbled back. The blow wouldn't kill him, but it had sealed his mouth shut. He yanked at the wooden handle of the fork, but it didn't budge.

With him preoccupied, I hurried to Ryder and helped him to his feet. It only took us a few seconds, and he was in the passenger seat. I jumped behind the wheel and slammed my foot onto the gas pedal just as several shifters came running after me.

Fog, trapped within the darkness, parted for us as we drove ninety miles an

hour down an old country road. I had to get out of here before they caught up with me. I turned a few random lefts and rights in case I was being followed, but after a few miles, I realized I was alone. The Greybacks probably assumed I was heading back to Fire Ridge and thought to cut me off, but that was not my destination.

When I reached my street, I drove behind the house and parked on the back lawn in case anyone tried to come by. It would take a while for them to figure out where I lived, if they even decided to retaliate. Taking Ryder was one thing, but I didn't think they'd dare attack another Silver Claw.

I turned off the ignition and checked on the humans. They were still alive but sleeping fitfully, huddled together under the barn blankets. Ryder stirred from the front; he'd fallen asleep on the way home. Then, seeing we'd stopped and I wasn't in the cab, he jerked up and looked around.

I walked around to his door and pointed to the bed of the truck. "Keep an eye on them."

"Where are you going?"

"I'll be right back." I walked inside the house and knocked on Lynx's bedroom door. "Lynx? Sorry to wake you, but I need help."

She opened her bedroom door and tied a string around her robe. She yawned and smoothed her hair down. "What's going on?"

"Is Samira here, too?"

"I'm here."

I turned around. Samira wore a long, black jacket with her twin blades crossed on her back. She looked like she was going to war.

I frowned. "Where are you going?"

"Luke called and told me to check on you. If you weren't at home, I was going to Jackson's place. I'm glad to see you're here. I hate fighting those wolves."

"You were going to help me?"

"You seem surprised."

"Understatement." She was the last person I thought would come to help me.

"What's this about?" Worry filled her eyes.

I tore my gaze away from Samira. I thought I would have to beg for help, especially from her, but maybe not. “The Greybacks took a friend of mine, another pack member. Ryder. Dominic refused to send anyone after him, so I went myself.”

“Where is he?” Lynx asked. She moved back into her room to peer out the window.

“He’s in the car watching over three barely-alive humans.”

“Humans?” Samira’s eyes narrowed. She walked toward the back door.

I followed behind her. “I found them naked and chained up. I think they’ve been drugged. I don’t know what to do with them.”

“I’ll grab some clothes,” Lynx called to us and hurried back into her room.

I followed Samira outside.

“That was dangerous to go there by yourself.” She peeked in the front window at Ryder. Ryder glanced back at her nervously. “You took Jackson’s son?”

“They took him first. Besides, he’s one of the good ones.”

She shook her head as she stepped on top of the rear tire looking into the bed of the truck. “You shouldn’t get involved in family business.”

“And what about the humans?” I countered. “Should I have left them?”

She dropped to the ground next to me. “No. They are innocent and should be saved.”

“I’m so not following your logic, but whatever. What do I do with them now?”

“Ryder should return to Fire Ridge, but I’ll take the humans. Depending upon what drugs or abuse they’ve been subjected to, they may require special rehabilitation. There’s a place in Wildemoor created just for situations like this—humans who have been harmed by supernaturals. They can heal there and be taught that not all supernaturals are bad.”

“And what if that doesn’t work? It’s not like we can have a bunch of pissed off humans roaming the lands hell-bent on revenge. They could expose us all.”

She hesitated. “There are other ways. Compulsion if necessary.”

My eyebrows lifted. “Can vampires do that? Can you do it?”

“It is a rare gift, mostly older vampires or vampires with unpolluted bloodlines. But just because they can, doesn’t mean they do. It’s a violation frowned upon by certain influential groups. In some cases, it could even mean death.”

I noticed she didn’t answer my question as to whether or not she could compel. She probably could. I’d have to be mindful around her.

“What groups are you talking about?” I asked. The only organized group of supernaturals I knew about were the Principes Noctis. They didn’t have the best reputation and believed supernaturals should rule over humans. Twenty years ago, they were mostly ignored among our kind, but I’d heard rumors lately they were growing.

She remained silent, as if she didn’t hear me, but I knew she still didn’t trust me enough to tell me the truth. It was a rare person who can use silence like words.

"How long will they have to be at this facility?" Sending the humans somewhere I had never heard of made me nervous. They had been through enough.

"Only as long as they want to be," she answered.

I glanced back at the rear of the truck where Lynx was clothing the humans and speaking soft words of encouragement. One of the humans whispered for water, and Lynx ran back into the house to retrieve it. She was the best of us three.

Samira motioned her head toward the truck. "Is someone going to be looking for this beast?"

"Probably."

She watched Lynx give water to the humans, her expression the same as mine had been moments ago. We would never be as good as Lynx. Her gaze returned to mine. "The humans aren’t well enough to travel to Wildemoor. I will deliver the truck to a friend I can trust and take care of the humans there. When they’re well enough to travel, we’ll leave."

I was touched she was so willing to go to so much effort for complete strangers. There was so much more to this vampire than I realized. But I wasn’t

going to tell her that, so I teased her instead. "You have a friend?"

"Friends are crucial in this business." She either didn't realize I was kidding or decided not to take the bait.

Behind me, Lynx asked Samira if she could go with her. Samira paused, but ultimately said no. Of all of us, I would think Lynx would be the most trustworthy. It surprised me Samira had declined her request with how well she had already handled the humans.

I circled around the front of the truck and helped Ryder to the ground. He wrapped his arm around me, leaning into me as we walked into the house. Already he felt stronger, the sign of good genetics.

I eased him onto a kitchen chair and eyed a cut above his brow. "You could use stitches."

"Thank you for coming after me," he said. He stared down at the top of the weathered kitchen table, his eyes full of deep pain only a betrayed heart could produce. Even though I had been through a lot, I'd never had a family member willingly torture me.

"There was never a question of not going after you."

"No one else in the pack would've come."

I worked my jaw, wondering if I should tell him the truth – that Dominic had refused to look into his disappearance. But what good would knowing the truth do for him now? His father's actions had already devastated him. Knowing his pack Alpha cared so little for him too would only further depress him.

"Dominic wanted me to go after you." My teeth hurt from the lie. "He trusted me to be sneaky enough to get the job done, and he was right. Had he sent the whole pack, it would've been all out war between us and no one wants that."

He attempted a smile but winced at the motion. "True." His eyes lifted to mine. "So now what?"

"Get some rest. I'll take you back to Fire Ridge tomorrow morning. Dominic may want some kind of retribution after he gets a look at you. We'll see."

"I knew my father was an evil bastard, but I never thought he would..." His voice stopped, the words too painful to speak. "And what they did to those humans. Some things never change."

I rested my hand over his. “Don’t worry. Your father will pay.”

He nodded his head, but there wasn’t much conviction behind the motion. It might be too difficult for him to imagine anything terrible happening to his father, so I did it for him.

I made myself a promise. Jackson would pay. Just like Dominic and the rest of them.

One more name added to my kill list.

CHAPTER 30



Lynx dropped us off at Fire Ridge, fussing over Ryder before she left. Why she worked at a clothing store and not as a nurse was beyond me.

Remnants of the party the night before lay scattered across the lawn. Sunlight glinted off the surface of broken glass, and I had to be careful not to step on the shards of beer bottles hidden in the grass.

No one would ever know it had also been a funeral. These shifters moved on quickly.

“What happened?” Ryder asked, eyeing the destruction.

I stopped, realizing I hadn’t told him about Toby yet. I chose my words carefully, not wanting to upset him further. I didn’t know how close he’d been to Toby, but I knew they were at least friendly with one another.

He took the news as expected. Swallowing the pain instead of dealing with it. One of the ways our world was so different from humans. Maybe that explained why so many of us were filled with rage. We could all benefit from a full time psychiatrist.

Before we walked through the front doors, Ryder asked, “Tell me the full story. How did the meeting with the Nocs go?”

“It was... interesting. There was some negotiating, some fighting, people died, obviously, but in the end, everyone got what they wanted.”

He shook his head. “Blood runs freely and without restraint for those who seek power.”

I glanced at him, surprised. That was something my father used to say. It

made me like Ryder even more.

"Come with me," I said, and moved past him. "Dominic will want to see you."

He nodded his head slowly. He looked a lot better this morning. The cuts on his body, the shallow ones, had healed, but while he had been changing this morning, I noticed he still had a huge purple bruise and the word "traitor" still visible across his chest. They were angry red marks over his heart, and they wouldn't heal easily. Wounds like that go beyond the flesh.

I inhaled a deep breath and opened Dominic's office door. Terrence came barreling out from the room, as if he were upset. I had to jump out of his way to avoid being run over.

Dominic scowled at my intrusion. Silas, sitting on the opposite side of the desk, mirrored the expression, but when both their eyes found Ryder, their expressions darkened.

"I retrieved Ryder from the Greybacks," I said quickly, giving them a pointed look. "Just like you asked me to."

Dominic glanced from me to Ryder, as if he were trying to figure out my angle. Ryder's eyebrows lifted like a hopeful puppy seeking praise. He needed to feel wanted, especially after what his own father had done to him.

Dominic caught on, and his expression lifted in mock joy. He slapped his hands together. "It's so wonderful to see you back!"

"We've been worried," Silas said. The words were right, but they held no weight. He may as well have been talking about the weather.

Dominic stood and walked around his desk to Ryder, saying, "I knew Briar was the perfect choice to be your savior." He leaned in and, resting his hand on Ryder's shoulder. "We'll get those bastards for what they did to you. I swear it."

"I would prefer it if we could just move on," Ryder said, his voice soft. "It would only harm both packs if we retaliate. I heard what happened to Toby. I don't want any more bloodshed."

Dominic gripped him by the back of the neck and stared into his eyes. "If that is what you want, then we'll honor your request. But if Jackson decides to attack you, or anyone else in our pack, all deals are off, and we will make them

suffer."

Ryder nodded his head in agreement.

Dominic turned to me, his gaze turning dark. "Ryder, give us a minute, will you?"

Ryder looked at me questioningly, but after I nodded at him, he left the room and closed the door behind him. I squared my feet beneath me.

Dominic paced the room, his hands behind his back, while Silas clicked his tongue, as if preparing to scold someone for being tardy to class. Me, the naughty child. It made me furious, especially when I did what they should've done themselves.

I couldn't hold back. "What? I saved a pack member. You should be thanking me."

Dominic turned his back toward me, but he unleashed the power that made him Alpha. It was a force, like the wind in a hurricane, and it pushed me back. The unseen pressure sucked the air from the room. The walls quickly closed in on me.

I inhaled, forcing myself to breathe through the sudden tightness squeezing my chest. My wolf bristled beneath my skin, sensing my sudden anxiety. His power increased, and the invisible pressure wrapped around my spine just before jerking it hard. I gasped in pain.

"I told you to wait to get Ryder," he snapped and turned, his eyes glowing a deep red. "But you didn't obey."

Still sitting in his chair, Silas picked at a cuticle on his forefinger. "You can't have pack members who don't follow the rules."

"What about the pack rule of protecting one another?" I rasped out, barely able to breathe through the force pushing against me.

Dominic hissed. "There was no proof he had been taken."

I pushed against his power, only enough to get my words out. "They would've killed Ryder if I hadn't gone there. You should've seen what they were doing to him."

Dominic's eyes slowly moved to mine, cold and cruel. "The point is, we can't have pack members disobeying me. It sets a bad tone for the rest of them.

Ryder's life or not, my orders must be followed."

"But—"

The pressure died down. "You will be whipped for your insubordination. I'm sure Silas will be happy to have the honors."

Silas finally looked up from his nails, his lips twisting into a grin. "I will do it for the good of the pack, of course. Although it will pain me."

Like usual, he knew just enough to appear normal, but he couldn't hide the devil within. He was too eager.

"This is bullshit. I thought protecting the pack was important. I did a good thing."

"Without permission. Loyalty first," Dominic said, his eyes studying me. I could sense the intelligence within the dark glow. "Sometimes I wonder if you're secretly conspiring to be Alpha. Your motivation for greatness is too strong."

I laughed out loud. "Greatness? You think that's what I'm doing here? Maybe I just want to keep the pack safe."

His eyes burned a deeper red. "Are you implying I'm not capable of that?"

I looked down, showing complete respect and obedience. "No, sir. I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that."

It killed me to bow to him like this. I shouldn't have said that though; it was almost a challenge.

He turned his back to me, dismissing me. "Do I need to call my security team to take you downstairs, or can you walk there yourself?"

"I know where it is." I opened the door and began to leave.

He sat down at his desk again and returned to the paperwork in front of him. Conversation over.

Silas called after me, his voice practically singing the words. "I'll be along within the hour. I'll give you some time to think about what you've done."

I clenched my hands together. As soon as I was out of their earshot, mostly anyway, I punched a hole in the wall.

"Everything okay?" Ryder was suddenly behind me.

I ground my jaw together and made my expression go slack. "It's fine. Silas just rubs my ass wrong."

"Welcome to the pack. He does that to everyone. They say his mother was a hell-hound and his father the devil."

"That makes sense." Behind him, my uncle, who was standing in the mouth of the hallway, motioned his head for me to come over. I glanced back at Dominic's office. They might be a while.

I placed my hand on Ryder's shoulder. "Go upstairs and rest. I'll catch up with you later tonight."

I didn't want him to see me get whipped; he would know the truth then.

He nodded and walked toward the front door where his car was still parked. I watched him for a minute, wishing he could live a different life altogether. There were so many other packs, better packs. Packs where his goodness could thrive.

As I stared at him, I considered introducing him to such a pack. Maybe after all of this was over.

When I reached my uncle, he pulled me to the side and into the kitchen. The mansion was mostly empty, but there were a few people still passed out on couches in the living room.

"There were some Greybacks sniffing around the woods here last night," my uncle said. "I assume that had something to do with you bringing Ryder back?"

"You heard they took him, right?"

"I did, but only after you left. You shouldn't have gone there alone. It was extremely dangerous."

I held my ground. No matter what anyone said, I did the right thing. "Ryder's important to the pack, and he's important to me."

His brow wrinkled. "Are you two together?"

"Hardly. I just think he's worth saving."

My uncle stared down at the floor, thinking. "I haven't known him long, only a couple of years. He's always been kind to me. And he was one of the few shifters who didn't take a crack at me when I was tied up." He looked up at me. "But can we trust him?"

"Absolutely. Especially after I rescued him. He will be loyal."

I glanced back at Dominic's office again. I shouldn't waste any more time.

My uncle followed my line of sight. "You weren't supposed to rescue him,

were you?"

"What's done is done. Besides, it will be good for the rest of the pack to see me get punished for saving Ryder. A lot of them won't like it."

"Good point." He brushed his fingers across my jaw in a playful motion. "Your father always said you were a little schemer. What's your punishment?"

"Stupid whipping. It wouldn't be a big deal, but he put Silas in charge of it. I don't want that guy anywhere near me."

My uncle frowned, worry creasing the corners of his eyes. "Maybe Dominic will let me take your punishment."

My heart warmed, a part that had been cold for a very long time. That's what family was all about—having each other's backs. I'd forgotten how nice it felt. "That's nice of you, but I got this. A few lashes are nothing."

Concern remained rooted in his gaze. "I hope that's all it is." He glanced back at the basement door, the same one I should've already walked through. "Have you seen the drugged human recently, the one locked up in the basement? He's insane. I can't imagine what will happen to the city if Scorpion's Breath is introduced."

"Way ahead of you. I've already got a plan, but it's going to take a little time."

"Want to fill me in?"

I shook my head. "I'm still working out the details. How much longer are you on greenie duty?"

"Another week and I'll be given full rights back into the pack."

"Good. I need more eyes on the inside. I need to go." I turned to leave but stopped. "Hey, have you seen Luke?"

"He's the one who told me you went after Ryder. He drove to the Greybacks' place to try and find you. A few hours ago, he texted me and told me the place was on fire and suspected you had something to do with it."

"Fire's pretty," I mumbled, but I was only thinking about Luke. I can't believe he came after me. "Where is he now?"

"Not sure. I texted him when I saw you come in, but he hasn't responded yet."

“Thanks for doing that. I’ll see you soon, a little bloodier, but a hell of a lot tougher.”

He gave me the knuckles. “You’re a Moretti through and through.”

I said goodbye to him and headed downstairs to await my punishment. All the while I thought about Luke and how he had come after me. Why would he do that? I know he heard Dominic tell me not to go. Luke was a rule follower, or at least I always thought he was. If Dominic knew he had followed me, he would probably be whipped too.

Whose side was he really on?

The basement with its long halls and grimy walls was cold and smelled of rusty pipes. The floor was concrete and the lighting was spotty. It was the perfect place for the setting of a horror film. Today, I was the main character in said B-rated film.

I walked past the room where they had forced me to torture Lynx, my stomach tightening. I never wanted to think about what I had done in there ever again. If only that were possible.

Instead, I walked toward the room everyone called the OTC room: Obedience Training Center. A couple of weeks ago, I, along with several other pack members, had to watch as a female shifter was whipped for disobeying Dominic's rules on having a relationship with a human. She had been dating a man for almost a year until she was caught. Dominic had personally whipped her twelve times, one lashing for every month she was with him.

He had not been gentle. Blood had run down her bare bottom and thighs into a drain on the concrete floor. I wondered if they’d make me get naked too. Not that I cared. Pack members saw each other naked all the time when we shifted.

Getting whipped didn’t bother me either. In fact, I was looking forward to it. I wanted the other pack members to see how I was punished for saving one of their own. It would cause strife among them and hopefully fracture some of their allegiance toward Dominic.

A sound unlike anything I had ever heard stopped me cold. It was that of a wounded animal, full of pain and despair. It made the hairs on my arms rise.

I followed the chilling noise to a locked door and peered through an

elongated window. It was the human we'd gotten from the vamps. He was locked up inside, squatting in the corner of the room. His hair was drenched in sweat, and his coloring was more gray than white. He wore only white underwear that were clearly soiled in the back, despite being given a bucket in the corner.

Sniffing the wall, he scratched at the concrete with his fingers. He must not have any fingernails left, because the wall was stained red.

I pounded on the door. "Stop that!"

His head snapped in my direction, and his bloodshot eyes widened in recognition. He lobbed over to me, moving much the same way a monkey scrambles across the jungle floor.

For a moment, he disappeared from my view. I stood on my tippy toes to look down just as he slowly rose into my view, his face void of any kind of emotion. I stumbled back, shocked and surprised at the change that had come over him so suddenly.

He blinked, and when his eyes opened again, I recognized sadness beyond their glossy depths. Was he aware of what was happening to him?

"What's your name?"

He made no motion of understanding me, beyond breathing at a faster pace.

"I'm Briar." I touched my chest then pointed at him. "Your name?"

He continued to stare, his breath fogging the glass in front of him. I reached up, as if to touch him through the door, hoping to gain connection. If I thought for a second his consciousness was still in there, I would try to sneak him out. Send him to that place in Wildemoor, perhaps.

He leaned away from the window, and I wondered if I had frightened him. Before I could take my next breath, he smashed his head into the glass. The window didn't shatter, but his forehead split open. He head-butted it again, blood running down the bridge of his steep nose.

I stepped away, horrified. "Stop! Don't do that."

He cocked his head back again and slammed it forward. The glass remained firm, but I didn't think his head could handle much more. I hurried out of his view, feeling that my presence was making it worse.

Trembling, I headed straight to the OTC and closed the door behind me.

Shit. Samira was right. This drug couldn't get into the general population. The effects could devastate Rouen, a place I was beginning to like. Maybe even call home.

I had lost too many of those in my lifetime between my own family's and several foster homes. No way in hell was about to lose another.

CHAPTER 31



I leaned against the wall and stared up at the white ceiling. I hoped I didn't have to wait too long. There were other things I needed to do today, like make sure Samira took care of the humans. Seeing that crazed guy made me realize the urgent situation we were in. Somehow, I had to find a way to get rid of that briefcase full of drugs. I had no idea how much Mateo had put in it, but even one dose was one too many.

First I had to find it.

I was thinking about the many different places it could be, when Silas opened the door and walked in. I'd probably been waiting almost an hour. I glanced over his shoulder, expecting the rest of the pack behind him, but he closed the door.

"Where's everyone else?"

Punishments were always a public affair. It was meant to shame the offending pack member and was very effective. Members rarely disobeyed twice. But it was also meant as a warning to the rest of the pack. Don't disobey the Alpha.

In a weird way, it also bonded the pack. Afterwards, they would share in the misery of the offender. Taking them out for drinks after a long run.

Silas' lips pressed into a firm line. "This will be a private punishment. Even camera access is limited to just your Alpha."

I shifted my body weight, my stomach tightening. Something wasn't right. "Since when does the pack do private beatings? I thought the point of

punishments was to make sure others witnessed them and learned from them too. How will anyone learn from my mistake?"

His mouth parted slightly into a terrible grin. "Actually, no one will know Dominic never gave you the order to rescue Ryder. They will believe it was Dominic's idea, and he sent you to go on a secret mission of sorts. This is the story you will tell from here on out."

Except Luke. Luke would know. And my uncle.

"Fine. Just tell me why."

He walked across the room to where a leather whip hung on the wall. The tip was stained red.

"Dominic suspects you planned this. You deliberately saved Ryder, going against his wishes, just so you could be punished in front of everyone and earn the pack's favor."

It worried me that Dominic had thought of this. He was smarter than I gave him credit for.

Silas removed the whip and slapped it to his thigh. I didn't flinch.

"You're wrong," I said. "The truth is, I saved Ryder because I genuinely like him. It was selfish on my part. But I was also raised to believe that pack members should protect each other."

He slapped the whip against his thigh again. The sound echoed in the small room. "Dominic is fairly certain you want to become Alpha. If you weren't as complicated as you are, he would've just put you down. But the problem is, he also recognizes your talents. So what's an Alpha to do?" He came closer. "For now, he's decided to let you live and remain with the pack. But, you will learn your place. That's where I come in."

His eyes were glassy, and his hands trembled in anticipation. He drew near and spoke so quiet, that I knew his next words were meant for my ears only. "You want to know what I think?"

I didn't answer him, and he switched the whip to his right hand.

"I don't think you want to be Alpha. I don't think you care about that at all." He leaned so close, his lips grazed my ear. "I think you are just like me. You crave violence. Blood. That's why you went after him. To see it. Touch it. Smell

it.” He ran his cold, clammy finger down my neck. “Inflicting violence can be such a turn on, but have you ever willingly accepted violence against yourself? It’s a whole other experience, quite euphoric if you want it to be. Let me show you, teach you. Give in to it, let the pain move over you and I promise, you’ll live like you’ve never lived before. Then it will be just you and me, doll, experiencing it together. Because, believe me, I will enjoy this.”

He paused, sniffing me, waiting for some sign that I was getting off on this, just like him.

I stared into his eyes. “I’m not your fucking doll.”

He sprung back, his eyes turning from hot to cold. “Remove your clothes and stand facing the wall.”

Shit. This was really happening. And with no one here to keep him in check, he could easily go too far. I frantically looked around, finding the camera in the corner. To it, to Dominic, I said, “Don’t do this. It isn’t right.”

The whip unfolded from his hand and pooled at his feet. He jerked his arm forward, sending the tail toward me. It nicked my cheek, and I flinched.

“Trust me. Dominic is not going to interfere. Now do as I say.” When I didn’t move, he continued. “I am deadly serious. If you don’t, there will be severe consequences and not only to you. Ryder will receive twice your lashes.”

My muscles rippled beneath my flesh. I should kill him now. Rip his head from his body. His limbs next. Stack him like a goddamn Jenga puzzle. Part of me wanted to see that kind of violence. It’s nothing I hadn’t seen before. My teeth ached inside my mouth.

The only thing that stopped me was believing Dominic was watching. I’m sure he wouldn’t miss it. If I killed Silas, every pack member in the mansion would be upon me within seconds. I’m not sure I could survive that. And then where would that leave my grand plan? I not only had to destroy Silas but Dominic too.

Killing Silas alone wasn’t worth it. Torturing Lynx had to have a point.

Breathing hard through my nose, I turned around and pulled off my shirt. It fell behind me as I undid my pants and slid them off too. I turned around, facing Silas in my bra and underwear.

He leered, eyeing my body. "Everything comes off." He lifted the whip to his other hand and began to stroke it slowly, deliberately, as he watched me. Up and down. Up and down.

Forcing myself to breathe calmly, I faced away from him while I unhooked my bra and removed my underwear. A chill worked its way over my flesh, but I refused to let him see me shiver.

I didn't mind getting my punishment in a room full of men and women, but this was different. This was wrong. I hadn't felt this violated in years.

I placed my hands against the wall and growled, "Get it over with."

There was a moment of silence, and then the whip snapped. I jumped, but it didn't make contact with my skin.

"I will punish you when I'm good and ready. You just stand there and take it." The whip cracked behind me again, whistling through the air. But again, it didn't touch me. I braced myself, waiting. He continued to blindly whip the weapon across the room in no particular direction, just to scare me. And every time it cracked, my body would betray me and flinch.

Waiting to be struck repeatedly was a different kind of punishment, one I hadn't experienced before. Each time my body would react as if my skin had been filleted open, no matter how I tried to fight it. It was embarrassing, his goal all along, no doubt.

My wolf snarled and fought to gain control. She didn't want to take this sitting down. But I shoved her back. She would get her revenge soon enough, but not yet. For now, she had to remain hidden.

"It was difficult deciding how to punish you," he said. The whip sailed through the air again. This one finally grazed my back, no more than a hot kiss across my flesh.

"First, you took the pack's vehicle without permission." Oops. Forgot about that. "This in and of itself is a violation. You also didn't obey your Alpha. Another insult."

The next blow came a little bit harder, striking the back of both my thighs. I bit the inside of my cheek.

"I decided to give you a lashing for every hour you had the pack's vehicle,

which is still missing by the way. I expect to have it back before the end of the day in one piece."

Ugh, I was so stupid.

"So, let's see..." He swirled the thick cord through the air. This one didn't touch me. "As of right now, it's been fourteen hours since you stole our vehicle. Since I don't like even numbers, I'm going to round up. Fifteen lashes will suffice. And I promise you, they will hurt."

The lashing came so fast, I actually yelped when it cut through my back. I hadn't expected to cry out like that, but the pain struck me to my core. I held my breath and waited for the next lashing. This time I was prepared. I didn't make a sound even when the whip sliced open my flesh a second time. I wouldn't give him or Dominic the satisfaction.

By the seventh flogging, my body began to shake, betraying my wishes again. The pain was too intense, the cuts too deep. Even my wolf had retreated to the shadows in my mind where forgotten memories lay buried.

"Embrace the pain," Silas' raspy voice called out across the room. The whip whistled through the air and struck me. "Embrace the pain!" His voice was louder, commanding. He'd forgotten that Dominic was watching; he was in his own world. "It will hurt less, I promise."

Warm, thick liquid ran down my bare ass and legs. I focused on it, watching as it puddled around my feet, trying to grit through the raw and mind-numbing pain.

After my family's death, I had never let anyone hurt me again. I had worked hard to become strong, impenetrable, never doubting my strength. But Silas' sneer brought me back to my youth, and I was a victim once again, a child at his mercy.

I growled, growing angry. I wasn't going to let this happen. I wouldn't let him abuse me like this.

In that moment, my mind shifted, giving me a different perspective of my predicament. I wasn't his victim. I was choosing to let him whip me. I would withstand it, and I would be stronger for it. It was me showing him mercy, for I could kill him in a heartbeat. It was a mercy he didn't deserve, and one he had no

clue he was being given.

When the familiar crack of the whip screamed through the air, I spun around and caught the tip in my hand. Startled, Silas stumbled back a step.

I snarled and grinned the wickedest grin I could summon. "Do it again."

If he was going to whip me, it would be because he knew I wanted it, and not the other way around. I would not let him have any more control. I turned around and slammed my palms against the wall, bracing for the remaining blows.

"Oh, you are one of a kind." His voice was higher now, excited beyond anything I'd ever heard from him. I was certain he had a boner the size of Texas in those tweed pants of his.

The braided whip struck me again. Holding my breath, I counted each lashing. My legs shook, and every inch of my body felt as if it had been licked by lightning and hammered with thunder. But I was in charge now. I was commanding him to do it. I am in control. I said this in my mind over and over.

One more left.

I glanced over my shoulder when it didn't come, growling. "What's keeping you?"

"Brace yourself, she-wolf." He licked his lips, and his voice was deep and gravelly. "This one's going to hurt the most." He tilted his head to the side, giving me a view of the insanity in his eyes. "But I think it's the one you'll also like the most. Believe me, it'll bring you your greatest pleasure."

Turning back to the wall, I closed my eyes tight. When it struck, my whole body shook. I dropped to my knees, sucking in a breath between my teeth. The braided cord had to have gone partially through to my spine. My legs had gone numb.

"I wondered what it would take to bring you to your knees." He walked closer to me and touched my shoulder softly from behind. "Wasn't that delicious?"

Bending down, he ran his fingers down my arm, fingering my sweat and blood. "I know it hurts now, but you'll grow to love it. I promise."

Giving me no warning, he pressed his tongue to my back. Only a flash, but

enough to know he was tasting my blood. "Mmm. Maybe we could do this every night."

Repressing the vomit begging to come up my throat, I pressed my hand against the wall and pushed backwards. He caught me in his arms and held onto me tightly. I grabbed his shirt and tugged him down, closer to my mouth so he could hear me whisper. His eyes narrowed on my lips, and he smiled, leaning down.

"Screw." I gripped him tighter, trying to steady the dizziness in my head. "You."

His expression darkened. He shot up, making me fall to the floor with a thump.

"I think one more lashing is in order. Just so you remember the importance of obeying."

Closing my eyes, I braced myself for the pain that would surely make me pass out this time. One more. Just one more.

I heard him raise the whip, but the lashing never came.

Someone stopped him.

CHAPTER 32



I opened my eyes to the new presence in the room.

Luke grabbed Silas' wrist and jerked it down. "She's had her punishment."

Where did he come from? I didn't even hear him come in.

"Get back!" Silas attempted to shove him away, but Luke was immovable.

I couldn't believe my eyes. Luke was standing up to Silas for me.

Silas' nostril's flared, and his face reddened. "Leave, or you'll be next."

Luke folded his arms, challenging him. "Dominic said it was enough."

At Dominic's name, Silas lowered his hand, and his whole disposition changed. He smiled, patting Luke's shoulder. "Relax, Luke. I was just having a little fun. The she-wolf was enjoying herself." He turned to me, and his eyes grew cold. "Weren't you?"

I wish I'd had the strength to tell him to screw off again, but as it was, my body was shaking too badly to do anything. Remember, Briar, you chose this. Only this thought brought me comfort.

"I think she's learned her lesson," Silas said. He watched me, slowly coiling the whip. He placed it back on the nail and left, snapping the door shut behind him.

As soon as the door closed, I collapsed to the floor further, breathing shallow breaths. Expanding my lungs any farther sent hot flashes of searing pain throughout my body.

Luke kneeled behind me, and his fingers softly skimmed the skin across my

lower back. The warmth of his touch slightly dulled the pain.

"Stay still. I'll be right back." His voice was gentle, but the quiet rage beneath it brewed like the fiery eye of a hurricane.

By the time Luke returned, I had rolled onto my belly, letting the coldness of the concrete floor numb my skin.

"This might sting." Luke pressed a cloth to my back.

I hissed and brought a fist to my mouth, biting it. He wiped at my back delicately, trying to clean the wounds. "I can't believe he did this. It goes against every pack rule."

"Camera," I whispered, warning him not to say too much.

"I turned them off. Dominic left to get something to eat right after Silas came down here."

That ass. My eyes watered as Luke blotted at my cuts.

"Which only makes it worse," he continued. "The Alpha should've been watching over this to make sure Silas didn't go too far."

"Rules don't matter here." I wanted to say more, to tell him how I really felt about everything, but I still wasn't sure I could trust him. "I thought you said Dominic told you to tell Silas to stop."

"I lied."

"Silas will kill you if he finds out."

"He won't. He'll be too embarrassed and won't mention it in front of Dominic, just in case it pisses off Dominic." He pressed something cool to my back and lightly rubbed it in. An ointment of some kind meant to speed the healing process.

"Why are you helping me?"

I heard him swallow. "Because you need it."

"Would you help anyone in my position?" I said the words slowly.

"Of course."

I winced when he glossed over a particularly raw area. "Where do you stand?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you stand with me or with Dominic?" I needed to know where his

loyalties lie. He always seemed to be playing both sides.

It took a moment before he answered. "I'm with the pack, as you should be too."

I swallowed, bracing myself. I was right to be careful around him. Well, fuck him too.

"Then with Dominic." I swatted his hand away and scooted so that my back was close to the wall, cutting off his access to it. "Just leave me alone. I can heal on my own."

Ignoring him, I curled into a ball, covering my lady parts. I didn't want to be naked and vulnerable in front of him, this shifter who watched so many of Dominic's atrocities and did nothing.

He moved closer, but I growled, warning him to back off. Silence crowded the room, constricting my chest.

Finally, he spoke. "I saw it, you know."

I focused my gaze on a small puddle of blood shaped like a seahorse, willing my face not to turn red. "So you like to watch people suffer. Why does that not surprise me?"

"No, Briar." He took a step closer, and his voice lowered. "I mean, I saw you."

I turned my head to look at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

He squatted down so that his face was almost level with mine. "As soon as Dominic left his office, I snuck in. I saw everything. He whipped you harder than anyone I've ever seen. Sweat was dripping down his face." His voice lowered to a gruff whisper. "But I saw the way you reacted."

His finger reached out, and he tenderly traced it up my arm. Unlike it had with Silas, the motion didn't cause swimming revolutions in my stomach. Instead, his touch burned into my flesh.

He continued. "You accepted every lash he gave, even asking for it at one point. It took my breath away."

My throat dried, and I cleared my throat. "Why?"

His eyes found mine. "Because Briar, I knew you were lying. I saw it in your eyes, your fear of being victimized. You replaced that fear with fire. It stole my

breath because I've never met anyone as strong as you."

"You see a lot, Luke. And yet, you still stand with Dominic."

"I told you, I stand for the pack."

I closed my eyes. "Thanks for the ointment."

I couldn't deal with this. First, I didn't have the energy to respond to what he was trying to tell me, and second, I had one goal. Nothing was going to distract me from it.

The room grew quiet. After a long moment, he straightened. This time I heard him leave. I shivered at the gust of cold air that entered the room with his disappearance.

When Luke had burst into the room earlier and stopped Silas, I had a fleeting hope Luke was on my side. But his words said something else altogether. Which do I believe, his actions or words? And why did they conflict at all? Unless...a sudden realization dawned on me. Maybe Dominic had something over him, much like the way he had something on most people he did business with. And as long as Dominic had that, Luke would never stop riding both sides of the line. If that were true, then I didn't blame Luke. It was just cruel to feel his kindness in one moment, then his indifference the next.

I waited several minutes before I moved. Every part of my body hurt. When no one came to check on me, I risked shifting into my wolf, trusting Luke still had the cameras off. It had been a long time since I truly needed her strength. Very few shifters would've been able to shift after this, but I was no ordinary shifter.

It didn't take her long to take over my human form; she was eager to mend my broken body. My wounds healed almost instantly, and I trotted around the room, enjoying the feel of cold concrete against the soft padding on my feet.

I longed to run in the forest, shrouded in darkness. My body may have healed, but my mind wasn't quite right. For just a minute longer, I let my wolf enjoy her form before I forced the change back into being human.

I dressed quickly, shivering as I remembered the pain I'd gone through. Slowly, I made my way back upstairs. More pack members had arrived and they crowded the living room. I glanced in the other direction toward Dominic's

office. There was an outside door in that direction, but I would have to pass his office to get there.

The sound of a rowdy pack echoed back to me. If Silas was there, I'd have to pretend to still be hurt and, if one of them noticed, I'd have to tell them something. I'd actually love to tell them what happened, but I remembered Silas' warning. The thought of Ryder going through what I just went through made me ill.

I opted for the back door. I moved quickly past Dominic's office, but the door flew open, as if he had sensed me. He didn't startle at my presence.

"I trust you won't disobey me again?"

I lowered my eyes in a submissive gesture and nodded. I even let my lips tremble as if I were still in pain. I hoped he wouldn't ask to see my back.

"You are strong and brave, but always remember your place. In my shadow. The darkness is the only place I'll allow you to exist. Don't ever forget that."

I nodded again and hurried away from him. He didn't call me back, but I felt his eyes on me.

As soon as I reached the back door and had crossed the expansive lawn, I shifted back into my wolf form and darted into the forest.

Sometimes I believed the only peaceful place in this world was in the forest. Oh, the animal world could be cruel, but it was never done through a thirst for violence, but only for survival. I liked that kind of world.

I ran for hours, letting my wolf soothe the dark emotions twisting inside me. She burned through my humiliation at being naked and alone in a room with Silas. She ate up my anger that yearned for Dominic's blood, and she mourned Luke's dismissal.

By the time she was finished, I was ready to face the world again. I had my uncle, and, for now, that was enough. Together we were going to get justice for my family.

CHAPTER 33



After my beating, I avoided Silas as much as possible, which was extremely hard because I was still on his security team. Not only that, but Silas seemed to seek me out as if I was his new pet project. The second he entered a room, he observed me scrupulously, and I had the feeling that he was interacting more with the pack just to be near me.

His presence made me sick, and I had to clench my jaw every time he spoke to me. But I also took advantage of his attention to try to figure out where he put the briefcase full of Scorpion's Breath. I'd often catch him sneaking downstairs to experiment with the human, but I never saw him with the briefcase. He must be carrying the vials only, and keeping the case out of sight.

A few days after my punishment, Gerald found me and asked to take a walk with him. I frowned, but agreed, wondering what he was up to. Gerald had always been nice enough to me since I joined the pack, but we'd never spent any time together alone.

When we reached the privacy of the forest, I asked, "What's this about?"

He glanced behind me as if to make sure we were alone. "I heard what happened to you after you saved Ryder from the Greybacks. Is it true? Did Silas punish you in private?"

"Who told you?" As far as I knew, only Luke and my uncle were aware of what had happened.

"It doesn't matter. Is it true?"

I nodded my head and lowered it in shame, really playing it up. Maybe my

beating could serve a purpose. My uncle must've told him, knowing how important it was to our plan. A risky move if he was caught.

Gerald's nostrils flared as air puffed through them. "That's messed up shit. I didn't join a pack just so some Alpha could choose which rules to follow. I mean, sure, you might've gone after Ryder without permission, but one of our most important reasons to belong to a pack is knowing everyone has your back, no matter what. We never leave a man behind. Even Dominic preaches this. You did what any of us would've done, had we known. But you got punished for it. Did Dominic give a reason why you couldn't go after Ryder?"

I avoided eye contact and twisted my hands together like I was afraid to tell him. My voice soft, I said, "He said he thought Ryder might've returned to the Greybacks willingly."

Gerald barked out a laugh. "Why would he ever do that? Everyone knows how much Ryder hates that pack, and how much they hate him. Especially after Silas forced him to undress that girl."

I took this opportunity to stitch his doubts together. "So why then? Why would Dominic not send someone to save him?"

Gerald lowered his gaze to the ground, his eyes searching the ground as if he could find the answer there among the golden leaves and fresh earth.

I continued to guide his thought process. "Could Ryder know something about Dominic he shouldn't?"

Gerald began to pace, his heavy boots crunching over fallen leaves. "Possibly."

"Or maybe it has something to do with Scorpion's Breath. Maybe he intends on bringing in the Greybacks to expand his reach, and he couldn't do that with Ryder, Jackson's own son, living with us. Giving Ryder back to the Greybacks could've been part of some deal they made."

He stopped moving, his back to me. "Dominic wouldn't dream of merging with the Greybacks. We've been enemies for decades and for good reason. The things they do to humans? It's jacked up."

"Power can do funny things to people. You saw how Dominic barely flinched at Toby's death."

I let my words sink in and form a monster inside his brain. The muscles in his back rippled, and he turned around. "What do you think of this new drug?"

"I think it will destroy us all. It's meant for humans, but you heard what Mateo said. It's stronger on supernaturals. How long do you think it will take until Dominic and Silas begin selling it to supernaturals? It's just one more revenue source."

He pressed his hands to his head as if this new thought gave him a headache. He wasn't used to questioning an Alpha's orders. From the time he was born, he was taught specific pack rules. Where I was leading him was a place he would never have considered twenty-four hours ago. But now he knew. Alpha's weren't perfect, especially when they stopped working for the betterment of the pack.

His eyebrows lifted, and his eyes widened in concern. "So what do we do? Should we say something?"

"For now, I don't think we should do anything. I don't want to cause problems. Our pack needs to be strong."

He slapped his hand at a thick tree limb above him, snapping it in two. "This is bullshit. Everyone should at least know what Silas did to you."

My wolf purred at his reaction. Anger like this can spread through a pack, dividing it, but in order for it to work, the flames had to be subtle. Barely felt and barely heard. If Gerald said anything now, before anyone else had doubts, it would only backfire. Dominic's power was still too strong.

I rested my hand on his shoulder. "Please, Gerald. We must stay strong as a pack because I'm worried about the Greybacks. They could retaliate for what I did."

The lines in his face deepened. "They wouldn't dare."

"But if they do, as long as we have each other's backs, we'll be okay."

"Like Dominic and Silas have ours?"

"Screw them." Those words, if spoken to anyone else in the pack, could've gotten me another horrible beating. But I needed to add fuel to his fire, deepen the rift between one of Dominic's most loyal pack members.

I held out my hand, a silent promise. "I have your back. Always."

He hesitated briefly before grasping it. "And I, yours."

I smiled, a genuine one. I didn't think I could produce one after what I had just been through with Silas. But my smile was triumphant.

My little army grows.

* * *

AFTER MY MEETING WITH GERALD, rumors had begun to spread about the humans and Scorpion's Breath. Many in the pack had become deathly afraid of it, and some began to voice their concerns about us selling something so dangerous. Of course, I was the breath blowing on these tiny embers of discord.

But I was careful though not to be seen or heard too frequently. I was already on thin ice with Dominic. Every time we crossed paths, he would give me a look as if he was trying to figure out the answers to a test that only he had been given. It didn't help that he was also asking questions about my past. Where was I born? What packs had I belonged to?

I wasn't afraid of his questions. I had long ago created a fake life for me, mostly. I explained that I had only joined a pack once when I was eighteen, but it was short-lived. If anyone wanted to confirm my story, they could easily look up the Blue Ridge wolves out of Michigan for confirmation. I had been a pack member, briefly, and there were shifters there who knew me. But they wouldn't be able to tell him much else.

In addition to Dominic acting differently, something had also changed between Luke and me. He would watch me when I entered the room, and always seemed to be near me when anything got dangerous. But he rarely spoke to me, not like before, or met my eye.

Once we were sitting next to each other in the car, I could've sworn I felt him lightly run his pinky finger down the outside of my thigh. I pretended to ignore it and, when we got back to Fire Ridge, he got out of the car without a word.

It had been eight days since my secret meeting with Silas. I returned home from Fire Ridge to get ready for work at the club. My hands shook as I got dressed, dread filling my entirety. I hated going to work now. To be among all

those people. Their prying eyes. Their demanding voices. Where I used to feed off the attention, I now hated it. Hated pretending I was fine, that I hadn't been beaten while naked and alone in a room with a total psychopath.

But I had to keep up appearances.

I showered and dressed. Instead of going for the sexy bartender look, tonight I wore something low key. I wanted to blend in as much as possible. I had to work the late shift tonight. It was only eight-thirty in the evening, but I was already feeling the effects of sleep tugging at my eyelids. Probably some form of anxiety about not wanting to go in. At the kitchen table, I poured myself a second cup of coffee and drank it down quickly. Then a third.

"You're going to give yourself a heart attack."

I turned around. Lynx stood in the doorway wearing a spaghetti strap, black dress. It snuggled tightly against her hourglass figure. She looked amazing.

"Are you going out tonight?" I asked.

"I thought I'd go to the club with you." She sidled up next to me and poured herself a cup too. "I know you don't want to tell me what happened to you, but I know something did. I can see it in your eyes. Plus, you're acting all withdrawn. And what's with your outfit? You look like you're wearing a raggedy blanket straight out of a dog kennel."

I glanced down at the long black skirt and oversized tan sweater. "That bad?"

She wrinkled her nose. "It might be okay for church. In northern Alaska. You're a bartender, remember?"

"I'm serving people who worship the almighty drink while confessing their sins. Maybe this outfit is perfect."

She raised one eyebrow.

I groaned. "Fine. I'll change."

I downed one more of the steamy, black liquid then moved to go upstairs.

Lynx stopped me. "I want you to know that whatever you're going through, you don't have to go through it alone. I'm here for you."

I placed my hand on the doorjamb, wishing I could tell her everything. But that could hurt us both.

"Thank you, but I'll be okay. Time will fix this." And a lot of blood spilled

from my enemies' throats.

"Samira came back yesterday," she blurted. "Have you had a chance to speak to her yet?"

This made me pause. "Did she say why she was gone so long?"

Samira had thought she'd only be gone a day or two to deliver the humans to Wildemoor, but she had taken much longer. It made me wonder what she was up to. At first, I thought maybe she was in trouble, but she had texted Lynx and told her otherwise. She never sent me a message, which bothered me a little. I thought since we'd fought those vampires together that maybe we had bonded a little, but I guess not. Whatever.

"She just said it took her longer than usual." She ran her fingers through her hair. "The humans are doing well though. At least that's what she said. She can be private, just like you." She didn't smile, but her expression was kind.

I swallowed around the fullness in my throat. "I better go change out of this blanket before I'm late. I guess I'll see you soon?"

She nodded her head and sipped her coffee. "You need a ride?"

"Shoot, I already ordered Uber. I wish I would've known you were going."

"You can still cancel."

I waved my hand. "Nah."

"Roma again?"

"She's the best damn driver I know. Half the time I don't even have to call her. She just shows up when I need her most." She was also the one who drove me back home that night Silas whipped me to retrieve Dominic's car, but I didn't tell Lynx that.

"Sounds nice, in a stalkerish sort of way."

"They're the best kind." I winked and left the room, feeling a little bit better that Lynx was going to be there too.

The club was crowded, more so than usual because it was the weekend. The swarms of people gave me a headache so I kept my head down, speaking only when spoken to. I had several requests from customers to put on a show like I usually did, but I just couldn't bring myself to do it. The only way I got through the night was by sneaking occasional sips of whiskey behind the bar. It settled

my nerves and kept my heart rate calm.

I liked having Lynx there. She didn't hover too much and would come say hi whenever there was a break in customers. It was strange having someone look over me, and yet nice at the same time. I didn't deserve Lynx's friendship.

Luke was there, too. I discovered this halfway into my shift. He slithered in and out of the crowd. Not really a part of the moving system but not separate either. I wondered if he was working on something for Dominic, but he didn't seem to have a specific purpose, other than drinking and brooding in his usual way.

Our eyes met a couple of times, but they never lingered. Neither of us knew what to say to each other.

I was in the middle of pouring a blue Hawaiian cocktail to a college-aged man, when I heard a familiar whistle from the side of the bar. I glanced over. Ryder was tapping on the counter excitedly.

I finished serving the drink and walked over to him. "What's up?"

He leaned forward, his voice low. "I think I found it."

"Found what?"

"The briefcase. And we're going to get it tonight."

CHAPTER 34



“*W*here?”

I looked around to make sure no one was watching or listening in. We had searched everywhere for that stupid briefcase, even searching Silas’ car. We were pretty much out of hiding places to search.

He leaned forward conspiratorially. "There is a secret room in his master suite. It’s the only place we haven’t searched.”

My eyes widened. “How did you find this out?”

“You know Lola?”

"The maid?"

He nodded. “She said she was cleaning his room one day when he suddenly walked out from behind a bookcase. No doorknob. He swore at her and threatened to hurt her if she told anyone.”

I had spoken to Lola a few times. She was a nice woman in her early thirties. She was a single mother of two young children. Silas paid her well.

It was joked about among the pack that Silas had a maid. He was the only one who did, although I heard she occasionally worked for Dominic as well. The rest of us considered ourselves big kids who could take care of ourselves, though I was pretty sure a lot of the pack members could use the maid.

"Why would she tell you this?" I asked.

Someone called me from the other side of the bar wanting a drink. I held up my finger to signal them to hold a sec.

"Anyone that takes the time to get to know her, would know that she hates

the man." His eyes lowered to the counter, and his face reddened slightly. "We've also grown close the last few weeks."

My eyebrows lifted. Lola was a human who knew about shifters and other kinds of supernaturals. She was one of the few who accepted us. I don't see how, though, after working for Silas. "How close?"

"I like her."

I grinned and nudged his arm. "I didn't know you had a thing for cougars."

Ryder smiled, giving me what I wanted.

"I haven't asked her out yet, but I've been thinking about it."

My teasing mood disappeared. "Well, if you do, don't let the pack find out."

Dating a human was forbidden, unless you had permission from Dominic. So far, I'd never heard of him giving it.

"True." He rubbed at the back of his neck. "I'll think about it. Maybe it's not worth it."

"If you want to, then do it. Just don't let anyone know." I tapped my knuckles against the bar. "So you really think it's in this secret room?"

He scrunched his face in hesitation. "I guess he might not have it back there, but we've searched everywhere else. If he's going to hide something, I would think he would do it in a secret room, right?"

The customer behind me yelled again. I called behind my shoulder. "I'm coming."

I hurried off to pour a few drinks, my mind spinning. Tonight could be the night. Ryder and I had talked about what to do if we found the briefcase.

After making the rounds, I returned to Ryder. "Do you think you could be ready? If we find it?"

"With the plan?"

I nodded.

"I guess."

"Good. Stay close to Fire Ridge. I'll call you soon."

I left him alone with his beer and smiled a little. It was good to know he was having feelings for someone. The right relationship could make the darkest night not seem so dismal. It's what my mother used to say. I wasn't sure I believed her,

but by the silly grin he had given me when mentioning Lola's name, his nights were not so dark, despite everything he had been through.

My shift dragged on, the music and lights worsening my headache. All I could think about was getting back to the mansion to search the hidden room. Did Dominic know about it? Or was this something Silas kept to himself?

When my shift ended, Lynx found me. "Can I give you a ride home or is your bestie Uber driver taking you?"

"I'd love a ride, thanks."

At home, I changed quickly and asked Lynx if I could borrow her car. I assured her this was a rare request. I was glad when she agreed as a vehicle may come in handy tonight.

When I arrived at Fire Ridge, it was quieter than usual. Weekends usually were. This was usually the time pack members were required to visit local businesses to collect dues and it often took up most of everyone's weekend. My shift was tomorrow since I had to work nights at the club.

There were a few members inside watching TV and a few more outside sitting around the fire, laughing and drinking. Gerald was there with them, and his face grew serious when he saw me through the window. He motioned me outside.

When I opened the back door, I heard him say, "Hey guys. I don't think you've had the chance to get to know our newest member very well yet." He waved at me. "Come here, Briar."

At my approach, a large redheaded man with webbed lines etched across his face eyed me. "I'd like to get to know her better."

I snorted. "I would break you, old man." He must've been thirty years older than me.

"I'd like to feel you try!" He slapped his thigh and howled into the night.

The others laughed with him.

Gerald shoved him. "Don't pay Jerry any attention. His prick hasn't stood tall since he left his mama's house three decades ago."

Jerry punched at his face, but Gerald ducked, grinning wide. He patted the seat next to him. "Join us?"

I dropped onto the thick, round log just as Jerry tossed me a beer.

I didn't know much about Jerry other than he had joined the pack ten years ago after his had slowly dwindled in numbers. He'd come from up north. One of the Dakotas. He was a round-faced fellow that smiled more than he frowned. His face was lined with wrinkles, and each one seemed to tell a story. His laughter was infectious, and I was immediately drawn in by his magnetism.

Sitting across from him was Samantha. She had long dark hair like me and had a mouth on her that would make sailors blush. Half of what she said didn't make sense, but the way the words would slip past her lips, all vulgar and sultry-like, you'd think she'd said something that should be banned in every country. I liked her instantly.

The other two in our circle, Tammy and Lauren, were quieter, but where Lauren rarely showed signs of emotion, not even to laugh, Tammy spilled her heart all over the place. She couldn't open her mouth without expressing happiness, sadness, anger. She was a volcano of emotions, and you never knew what was going to spew out of her.

"Speaking of mamas..." Gerald looked out over the group, his eye twinkling. "Did I ever tell you about the time I caught mine trying to bury my stepdad? She was dragging his drunk ass into the backyard, while he was holding a beer in one hand, and a porno mag in the other. The bastard was caught choking his chicken, just after turning my mom down for a roll in the hay."

He pitched his head back and howled in laughter. I couldn't help but join in with him and the others.

It was good to release some of the nervous energy that had been building up inside of me. What I was about to do was by far the most dangerous thing I'd ever done. I just hoped the consequences wouldn't spread to the innocent members of the pack.

"And then when she had him half-buried, she..." Gerald could barely tell the story he was laughing so hard.

"You are such a liar," Lauren stated when Gerald finished his story. She said it blank-faced. People probably thought she never got worked up, but I'd seen her fight. She thrived on anger and rage and used it to fight dirty. She'd throw

out a leg to trip her opponents or do a quick jab to the throat for no reason.

Gerald raised his fingers in a Cub Scout salute. "On my honor! She buried him to his neck before I finally stopped her."

"I want to know your mother," Jerry said, taking a long swig from the bottle in his hand.

Samantha rolled her eyes. "Of course you do. There's just something about mamas that gets your balls all tight."

"Just yours, sweetie pie," he countered. "Your mama didn't stop yelling my name when I rode her six ways to Sunday last night."

"Ohhhhhh!" Gerald cried, laughing hard. Even Lauren cracked a smile.

I joined in, laughter knotting my stomach. I wiped a tear from my eye listening to Gerald and Samantha as they continued to banter back and forth, but the pleasant pain quickly subsided when I caught movement near the edge of the forest. I squinted my eyes to try and see through the darkness.

I recognized the dark forms.

Samira and Luke? What the hell were they doing? She rarely came to Fire Ridge and when she did, it was for business only. She walked with him a little further, then they stopped just before disappearing into the forest. I strained my hearing, but I couldn't hear them over the loud sounds around me. I blinked, straining my eyes again, but by the time they came into focus, Samira was gone and Luke stalked toward us, his thick brows drawn together. His eyes were darker than usual. Always brooding.

One of these days, I will get him drunk just to see if he could let loose. But I bet he wouldn't let it get that far. He was the kind of man who liked to be in control.

As soon as Samantha saw him, her gaze warmed and her voice purred. "Hey, Luke! Join us."

He grunted and eyed the group, his gaze stopping when he saw me.

"Please," she continued, batting her eyes. "We could use some of your practicalness to see through Gerald's bullshit. He's telling stories dumber than a shit-eater in the Arctic."

"That doesn't even make sense," Tammy snorted. She threw back her head,

chugging the beer in her hand.

"Shit-eater in the Arctic." Jerry howled again, something he did a lot, I discovered. The others joined in, howling with him only as pack members could do.

Luke stared beyond us, his hands stuffed into his pockets. "You guys are drunk."

Before he could ruin the mood, or my plans, I jumped to my feet. "Let's go for a run."

I made a show of undressing, unbuttoning the front of my blouse exposing my black bra. This brought Luke's gaze back to me. Only for a brief moment, but enough to give me satisfaction.

"Hell, yes," Samantha said. She jumped up and began to throw off her clothes, forgetting about Luke.

The others eagerly agreed. It was rare for shifters to turn down a good night run.

They shed their clothing like a second skin. They didn't even notice I hadn't even taken off my clothes yet, or that I wasn't following them. I called after them just in case. "I'll be there in a second!"

The fire warmed my skin as I stood there, my shirt still open. My gaze dropped to Luke who had sat down to face the orange and yellow flames. Its shadows danced across his furrowed brow.

I sat down next to him. "I saw you talking to Samira. What was that all about?"

He didn't look at me as he spoke. "She's helping me with something."

"Why go to her? Why not Dominic?"

His expression darkened, matching the shadows of the fire. "Dominic won't help me."

"Is it something I can help with?" I squirmed on the thick log beneath me. Offering my help made me feel vulnerable, a position I rarely put myself in. But I wanted to help. I wanted to help him more than anything for reasons I had yet to uncover.

He shook his head, not even considering my offer. "I've got it taken care of."

I bristled at the rejection and sighed. I don't know why I bothered. "You should go join the others for a run. Your ass could use it."

"I can't. I'm supposed to be on my way to meet Silas and Dominic."

I sat up a little straighter. "Oh, yeah? What are they doing?"

"They ran into trouble at some meeting. Apparently someone's not obeying like Dominic wants, so he's insisting I come and force the issue." He shook his head. "A man's mind can only take so much."

His eyes burned with an intense heat, and it had nothing to do with the fire's reflection illuminating his glossy orbs. Power and deep-seated anger pulsed off him, raising the hairs on my arms. If he wanted, he could probably be Alpha.

"Why do you do it?" I asked, suddenly needing to know. "Why serve someone you clearly hate?"

"Because the past gives me no other choice." He lifted his gaze from the crackling flames to meet mine. "I know you're working on something, something that will probably hurt or kill Dominic, but whatever it is," his expression was scary serious, "I will stop you. Dominic must live."

Whatever kindness I had felt for him moments ago, cooled. The hair stood on the back of my neck, and a low growl escaped my mouth. "I'd like to see you try."

He stood, the hard lines on his face softening. "I hope it doesn't come to that. You're the last person on this earth I want to fight."

What the hell? Why did he have to be so confusing? His words, his body language, all conflicted with each other.

"Whatever you have planned, be careful," he added. "There are secrets here, evil beyond evil. You're just scratching the surface." He walked away, back toward the edge of the property until darkness had entirely engulfed him.

I watched him go, realizing he was more like me than I wanted to admit. We were children of the night, born out of violence. He carried burdens similar to my own.

And now, we both served that same violent master. All because we can't let go of our past. In the end, it would probably kill us. My father used to always say that the Grim Reaper wore revenge on his hip instead of a gun.

I waited a few minutes, pushing my dark thoughts away while I enjoyed the fire's last warm breaths. When I was sure none of the pack members would return, I rose from my seat and texted Ryder.

It was time.

CHAPTER 35



The house was mostly empty with only a couple of shifters in the living room dozing off to a college football game. One of them opened his eyes at me in passing.

I faked a yawn. “I’m tired. I guess I’ll stay the night.”

He nodded and returned his glossy gaze to the television.

I slipped into the kitchen and made a show of pretending to get something to eat. There were several rooms in the mansion where members could crash at any time. Most of us, however, had our own places, except for Dominic, Silas, Ryder, and a few others that didn't feel safe enough to sleep beyond the property.

When I was finished, I headed upstairs to search the spare bedrooms. I called out a few times to see if anyone was there, but so far the rooms appeared empty. Moving silently as a resident mouse, I snuck into the east wing where Dominic and Silas lived, taking up the entire top floor.

It was a small maze to get there, past a large great room filled with pool tables and another smaller and, rarely used, living room. After making sure this side was empty, I crept to Silas’ door and tried the knob. Locked.

No problem. I reached into my back pocket and removed my lock picks. When I was thirteen, picking locks was one of the first skills I learned at the halfway house they put me in.

I worked at the mechanism for only seconds before it popped open, the sound softer than my heart beating against my ribcage. After making sure I was alone, I snuck inside and closed the door quietly behind me. I puffed out a

shaking breath and wiped my sweaty hands across my jeans.

The space was dark even with my night vision. I lit up the screen on my cell phone, and still, there seemed to be a darkness permeating every corner of the large room. Maybe that's just how demons lived, with light unable to tolerate a monster's presence. My throat tightened along with my stomach. I needed to hurry.

The entry way was covered in shiny tiles, more silver than white. I could practically see my reflection against its polished surface. Careful to not leave any footprints, I moved further into the suite. The walls were bare, not a single picture hanging. The furniture was also plain. Just a black sofa contrasting against a white wall. I walked through the kitchen. Spotless. No knickknacks or any personal objects to give away his personality. A few dishes had been placed in the dishwasher. I opened the refrigerator. At least a dozen packages of steak and four gallons of milk. That's it. Not even a condiment packet. The freezer was empty.

I explored the rest of the suite until I found what had to be his bedroom. It was also locked, but in seconds, I was inside. His bedroom was like the rest of his suite, white walls with wooden floors and only filled with the bare necessities. The biggest difference was, one wall was lined with bookcases full of books.

The only item in the entire suite he seemed to have splurged on was his bed. Large and overbearing with four wooden spindles nearly reaching the ceiling, it sat in the middle of his room covered by a black comforter and a few golden pillows. The sight of it made me shiver. I had a feeling he wouldn't mind showing it to me one day. The thought made me heave.

I quickly moved away, scouring the rest of the room, but nothing was out of place. Hell, I couldn't even find a speck of dust.

I approached the long bookcase, eyeing it up and down. Because Ryder wasn't sure how to access the secret entrance, I searched for anything out of place. I caught a few of the book's titles in passing. Hamlet, The Odyssey and even The Shining was thrown into the mix. Most of the other titles also had dark undertones. I didn't find one that spoke of light or whispered happy endings.

When I couldn't find an obvious entrance, I pulled the books back palming five at a time, hoping to trigger some kind of mechanism to open a door. I sped up my pace but was careful to make sure the books returned in their rightful place. Something told me Silas would notice if anything were out of order by even a fraction of an inch.

I stepped back and surveyed the bookshelves again. What was I missing? I expanded my vision. That's when I saw it. Not on the bookcases but on the floor. The wooden planks, dark in color, were all perfectly smooth, except for one small section directly under the bookcase in front of me. I couldn't be sure it was anything other than a crappy flooring job, though, unless I tried it. I walked forward and pressed my foot on top of it. A faint clicking sound had me stepping back.

The bookcase in front of me sunk in and slowly moved to the left on an electronic rail system until it was sucked into the wall behind it. A gust of air breathed through the dark opening, smelling of old waste and formaldehyde. I coughed and covered my nose as I took a tentative step inside, pocketing my cell phone. I reached up and pulled a string hanging from the ceiling, illuminating a small room, maybe ten feet by twenty.

It took just a few seconds to orient myself to what I was seeing. As soon as I understood, my stomach twisted, sending bile up my esophagus. I pressed my hand to my mouth harder.

Where the other rooms were void of anything personal, this one told me everything I needed to know about Silas. No wonder he kept it locked behind a wall, where eyes couldn't see the depth of his evil.

Silas wasn't just a monster.

He was a monster that dissected other monsters and kept their body parts as trophies.

Dozens of glass jars lay stacked on an old wooden table in an uneven pattern. There was no order to them and some jars balanced precariously on top of each other.

Inside their murky contents floated ears, eyes, and other internal organs. Each of them had been labeled in sloppy handwriting and haphazardly taped to

the glass. Ray, Olivia, Tom, Lawrence, and so many more names. Did Dominic know the level of craziness Silas had climbed to?

My stomach flipped again and a wave of nausea hit my stomach like a tornado. It pressed up my throat, until it geysered past my lips and to the floor. I spewed two more times, until there was nothing left in my stomach.

I wiped my mouth and searched frantically for the briefcase. It had to be here.

I spotted another door on the far wall and strode toward it. Something stopped me. A box on the floor and leaning next to it was a briefcase. My heart skipped a beat. It had the Nocturnas' emblem on the handle.

I snatched it and peeked inside, making sure the drugs were still there. There were almost three dozen small vials, but eight were empty. Most likely used on the human.

Snapping it shut, I tucked it under my arm and moved back into Silas' room, taking in a deep breath. This was it. There wasn't a more perfect opportunity. I dialed Ryder's number.

He answered right away. "Do you have it?"

"I found it. And other stuff you wouldn't believe. We need to do this tonight. Dominic and Silas are gone, as is most of the pack. I don't think we'll have another shot at this."

His breath caught but when he answered, his voice was firm. "Okay. I'm ready."

"Just wait about ten minutes. I have to steal some other things so it doesn't seem like I came just for the briefcase."

"You got it. Be careful." The line went dead.

I checked the time on my phone. I had to do this quick. I wished I could bring my uncle in on this, but he had been given an assignment he couldn't refuse. If he did it well, he would be allowed back into the pack with full privileges. It was a big step toward getting in with Dominic.

As quietly as possible, I slipped back into the hall and looked around until I found a laundry room. Grabbing a couple of baskets, I returned to Silas' room and worked quickly, filling them with everything from his secret room. I took all

the jars and the box, in case it contained any information I could use later against him, should it come to that.

After hiding the baskets in one of the extra bedrooms down the hall, I scribbled a quick note and dropped it onto the now empty table. I left the door to the secret room slightly ajar and returned to the baskets. This would be the tricky part—sneaking them out of here without being seen.

I opened the window in the spare bedroom, grateful there wasn't a screen. There was a patio right below me. I could lower the baskets to the ground, but if anyone decided to go outside, they would easily see them. Not worth the risk. I searched the room. It was pretty sparse, but I got lucky and found a large duffel bag. Perfect.

After grabbing a few towels from the bathroom, I wrapped the jars, then stuffed them into the bag, careful not to break them. I felt guilty hiding all this stuff. It made me feel as if I was somehow a part to his atrocity. I should be exposing his sins, not hiding them. But ultimately, this was the better plan.

I opened the door and carefully slid the heavy duffel bag over my shoulder and walked down the hall. At the bottom of the stairs, I readjusted it and passed through the kitchen quietly. I continued walking straight into the rear of the living room and toward the front door.

"What do you got there?"

I froze and slowly turned around.

Maisy, I think that's what her name was, stared over the back of the couch with a genuinely curious expression. "I thought you were staying the night."

"Oh I am. I'm just going to take my clothes to my car so I don't forget it when I wake up. Hangovers tend to affect my memory." I grinned, tapped my head. "That reminds me, do I need to make another beer run?"

She chuckled. "Nah, Jerry went out this afternoon. But if you're not going to bed for a while, feel free to join us. We're about to start a movie."

"I might." I tried to smile as I opened the front door. "I'll be right back."

I darted across the gravel driveway and placed the bag into the back of Lynx's trunk, keeping the towels pressed tightly to the jars. I would have to grab the box later; I couldn't have Maisy seeing me leave with it.

I checked the time. Ten minutes had long since passed.

Ryder had begun.

Returning to the kitchen, I grabbed a beer from the fridge and dropped onto the couch. "What movie did you guys pick?"

Maisy shrugged. "I haven't. Alex over here keeps falling asleep."

Alex opened one eye. "I'm awake."

Maisy flipped through channels, combing her long hair with her fingers. She looked younger than most of the pack. I bet she was barely eighteen, if that. I was surprised her parents let her come to the mansion this early. Usually families of wolf packs didn't let children participate in all pack activities until they were at least twenty-one. It gave them the chance to live their lives a little, college even, if they wanted, before they became full members.

I was about to suggest a movie, when the front door flew open. "Hey! We need everyone outside now!"

We jumped to our feet, me acting surprised at seeing Ryder at the front door, sweat beading his forehead.

Alex was the first to the door. "What's going on?"

"Greybacks in the woods. A bunch of them. I can smell them everywhere! The rest of the pack are already hunting them."

Maisy and Alex were undressing before he had finished his sentence.

I also tore off my shirt in a grand fashion. "I'll go out the back way, you guys take the front. Let's circle around and meet up with the rest of the pack."

They nodded and hurried out the front door. Ryder looked at me and winked once before following after them.

Time for phase two.

CHAPTER 36



As soon as the door closed, I pulled my shirt back on over my head and bolted upstairs. I moved fast, taking the box to the car first. I reached into the backseat and grabbed one of the blankets I had stolen from the Greybacks' barn, the clothes Ryder had worn that night, and a jar of Ryder's piss.

I returned to Silas' room, and, using speed faster than I'd ever let anyone see, destroyed his room, smashing everything I could. I threw books across the room and shredded his bedspread with my claws. The rage I unleashed on Silas' belongings did more good for me than a hundred counseling sessions ever would.

When I was finished, I poured Ryder's piss all over the room. Not my finest moment, but it had to look convincing. And pissing all over is something wolves just did. Plus, they would immediately recognize the smell of Greyback territorial whizz.

Down the hallway, I raked my claws over pictures and wallpaper, destroying everything I could throughout the house. My destruction was complete in under three minutes. I gave myself one more minute to rub the Greybacks' scent from the blanket and clothes on as many surfaces as I could. When it was finished, I sighed in relief and stripped to my birthday suit outside on the lawn.

The breath of a cool forest breeze ruffled my wolf's fur as I sprinted through the woods to catch up with the rest of the pack. It didn't take me long to smell the Greybacks' scent. Ryder had done a good job of spreading it everywhere into

the forest using the other blankets I had taken from the Greybacks' barn.

My pack's howls echoed into the night, but their cries were swallowed by a heavy fog creeping just over the top of the forest. I ran toward the closest wolves to my right.

The two wolves, I couldn't recognize who they were by just their fur, turned and headed east in a frantic run. I followed them, staying close, should my whereabouts ever be questioned. We darted all over, and I could tell they were confused as hell. The Greybacks seemed to be everywhere and yet, nowhere.

After about forty-five minutes of scouring the hillside, we returned home at the sound of a great howl. It was Gerald. Since Luke left, he was the highest ranked member in the pack and in charge until Dominic or Silas returned.

Jerry and Samantha beat us back and were already dressing. They were talking to Gerald when the two wolves I'd been running with shifted next to me. Maisy and Alex. They stood there naked, cursing and pacing. I joined them and picked up clothes where I had left them on the lawn.

"Where are they?" Samantha asked, sniffing the air. Even though she was in her human form, her movements were still very wolf-like.

I zipped up my pants and sniffed the air too, moving closer to the house. "Shit! I can smell them inside!"

Gerald bolted through the back door and growled when he caught the Greybacks' scent. Samantha and I flanked him. I snapped my hands forward, extending my claws. "They could still be here."

Samantha tilted her head as if straining her hearing. "Spread out."

I walked through the kitchen and down the hall that led to Dominic's office. The other two hurried upstairs. I leaned against the wall and rested my head back, inhaling the night air that was pouring in from the open back door. It felt good on my bare skin.

I heard Samantha shout, "Up here!"

When I met them upstairs, I put on a good show, pretending to be shocked and angered at all the damage. I also made sure to touch several items in the room, acting as if I was cleaning up; when in actuality I was covering my own scent from earlier.

Gerald was on the phone, probably talking to Luke or maybe even Silas. "These jackasses made a mess of things, especially Silas' room. It's been torn to bits."

"What's that?" I asked, pretending to just spot the slightly open door. The way it was built, no one could tell that a bookcase normally hid the opening. I threw open the door to his secret room. "This is strange. Did you know this existed?"

Samantha came to my side and wrinkled her nose at the smell. "Bloody bastards vomited all over."

"I wonder why. What could've been in here?" I looked at her, my expression serious, trying to spread more seeds of doubt.

She wrinkled her nose. "I have no idea. And why did they only destroy Silas' room?"

The seed sprouted.

I feigned surprise. "Really? This was the only one?"

She stepped across the pile of vomit to the other side of the room and tried the closed door. "It's locked."

"Maybe we should break it down."

She glanced back at me, frowning.

"You know, in case any Greybacks are hiding in there," I clarified.

"Well, if there are, then they're trapped. Leave em'. This is Silas' room after all. If he thought we touched anything, he'd probably kill us."

"True."

She didn't let her doubt grow. Not yet. But maybe one day she would.

Gerald hung up the phone and came to the doorway of the small room. "Odd space. What was in here?"

"No idea." Samantha knocked on the wood. "I guess every guy's allowed to have his secrets."

Gerald and I looked at each other knowingly.

"Depends on what those secrets are," he said.

"Hopefully they aren't too bad," I added. "The Greybacks could use them against us." I glanced down at the table where my note lay discarded. They

hadn't seen it yet. "What's this?"

I picked it up and read the messy hand writing aloud. "We have your bloody trophies, you sick bastard."

I dropped the note from my hands, as if it were poison. Samantha and Gerald stared down at it, their minds turning over. Processing.

"Trophies?" I said, my voice full of dramatic horror. "What the hell was Silas keeping in here?" A visible shiver erupted over my skin. "This is going to start a war."

I turned around and walked out of the room. I'd given them plenty to think about. Sprinkle a little water on those seeds.

Eventually, the rest of the pack returned to Fire Ridge. The damage caused an uproar that many of them hadn't felt in a long time. They were used to being the dominant species in Rouen.

While we waited for Dominic in the living room, the pack grew restless. There were several mentions of revenge, escalating the already tense situation. Several fights broke out.

But as soon as Dominic came home and walked inside, he blanketed everyone's aggressiveness with a layer of power that rivaled all in the room put together. Even I cowered at his commanding presence.

He would be hard to take down.

His gaze surveyed the damage, his eyes lingered up the stairs. His face remained impassive, but the air felt like it was being sucked from the room. It was enough to let everyone know how he felt.

He was pissed.

"Are you sure it was Greybacks who did this?" he asked, his voice cold and hard.

Gerald stepped forward. "Yes, sir. We caught their scent all over the forest. In the house, too. Upstairs there's more damage, specifically to Silas' room. And another," he hesitated, "room. It's behind a bookcase." Gerald cleared his throat, afraid to use the word 'secret'. "It's empty. Whatever was in there is gone."

For the first time, Dominic's expression changed. Just a crack, but enough to give me a glimpse into his thoughts. He was worried. Could it be he knew about

the room? Or maybe he didn't, and it was Silas' betrayal he was sensing.

Luke and Silas walked in just then. Luke cursed under his breath and, without a word, followed the trail of destruction around the room and up the stairs.

Silas, however, remained still, his body beginning to shake. Where Dominic kept his face smooth, Silas' wrath was visible to everyone—an angry storm smashing against a cliff's face.

"Clean this mess up now!" he shouted. He stomped after Luke upstairs. Gerald and a few others went with him.

The whole house shuddered when Silas yelled and screamed. He must've discovered all of his treasures gone. Or maybe it was the mess that bothered him. Whatever the reason, he went on a tirade, destroying anything left.

Dominic's eyes were fixated upstairs, the muscles on the side of his tight jaw flexing. Heavy steps stomped toward us from above, and Silas' head appeared over the balcony. "They took the briefcase." He hesitated, then added, "And everything else."

Dominic's expression further darkened. "Then we have a problem. Round everyone up. We go to the Greybacks at sunrise."

Everyone scattered in different directions to obey the Alpha. The aggression in the room changed to excitement. It didn't matter some of them might die, they loved to fight too much.

My uncle, who had returned just before Dominic, pulled me outside. I motioned Ryder to come with us. Ryder was aware that I had grown to trust Vincent, but I never told him it was because Vincent was my uncle, only that I had discovered Vincent's true feelings toward the Alpha and thought we could align ourselves with him. Having always respected Vincent, Ryder felt good about having one more on team "Take-Down-Silver-Claws".

We walked several feet from the house and out of view from anyone who might see us through a window. My uncle turned around suddenly. "Did you have anything to do with this?"

"Yes?" I stuttered, unsure if I was about to be reprimanded or complimented.

He drew closer to me until I could see his face. He was grinning and laughter

escaped his parted lips. He slapped me on the back. "I don't think that even your father could've come up with a better plan. Blaming the Greybacks for stealing the briefcase? Brilliant! But how did you pull it off?"

"With Ryder's help." I told him everything we had done, including sharing with the both of them what I had discovered in Silas' room.

Ryder shook his head, his face pale in the darkness. "I didn't think anyone could surpass my father's cruelty."

"Do you think Dominic knows?" I asked my uncle.

"That's a good question. I'll see what I can find out. No one pays an old man much attention." He glanced over his shoulder back to the mansion where shifters had begun to spill out the front door. "You two better get ready. There's going to be a nasty fight soon."

Ryder and I glanced at each other.

My uncle noticed the silent communication. "What else did you two do?"

"There's not going to be a fight," I said.

"And how do you know that?"

I lifted my chin. "Because the Greybacks are gone."

CHAPTER 37



As soon as bright oranges and pinks kissed the morning sky, Dominic ordered everyone to drive to Dreilinger Swamps to confront the Greybacks. It had taken almost all night to prepare and round up every member of the Silver Claws, old and young. We all piled into dozens of cars waiting outside. I had never seen the full pack in one place before, so it wasn't until now that I realized how big it was. There were probably about three hundred members, the largest pack I'd ever seen.

I was about to get into Lynx's car, when someone grabbed my arm. I spun around and came face-to-face with Silas. My wolf broke to the surface, growling low, and I gripped the side of the door until I thought the metal would dent. "What can I do for you?"

The fire in his eyes mirrored the sun's rays peeking over the horizon, betraying his excitement. "I know you can fight, better than most of these apes. And I also know you crave blood."

I opened my mouth to protest, but he held up his finger, stopping me.

"I don't think you realize it yourself, but I feel it inside you. The anger. The rage. Call it a gift." His gaze burned into mine, and I caught my reflection in his eye's glossy surface. "When we get there, I want you to show no mercy. Give in to your anger, unleash it, and kill those bitches. And if you do, I will make sure you're rewarded in return. Do you understand?"

I shifted my gaze over his shoulder to where Dominic was getting into the back of a black SUV. "Does Dominic know you're promising this?"

He touched me lightly on my arm, chilling my skin. "This is between you and me." With that, he backed away, but still stared after me, waiting for my answer. I nodded once, just to appease him. Satisfied, he turned and walked to Dominic's SUV.

I jumped into the car and shivered. "I really hate that guy."

Ryder, who had been waiting for me behind the steering wheel, brought the engine to life; the rumbling of metal vibrated my insides. "He'll get what's coming."

The Silver Claws drove fast, led by Dominic at the front. There were at least forty cars following each other all in a line. We could have been mistaken for a funeral procession, but honoring the dead was not our goal this morning. We were reapers riding on iron stallions, preparing to take blood.

Funeral processions would come later.

Like I expected and planned, the Greybacks' ranch had been abandoned. This development, however, shocked the rest of the pack. Where could a whole pack just disappear to?

Dominic exited the main house, his brows drawn together and fists balled tight. Like every other building, it, too, had been abandoned. Even a lot of the furniture was missing. To the crowd of Silver Claws who watched on expectantly, he ordered, "Destroy everything. Look for hidden rooms or secret bunkers. Search for anything that might tell us where they've gone." He turned to a group of shifters at his side. "You all search the woods and the swamps. A whole pack can't just disappear. Find them!"

He wanted answers, and he expected them ten minutes ago. Dominic turned to Luke and gave him his last order. "If they're not here, divide up the pack. We will find and kill them, and anyone else who is found harboring them. Is that understood?"

Luke nodded. "Yes, Sir."

Silas kicked a bucket next to the barn, cursing a string of profanities.

With new orders, I left them and ran to the barn, Ryder on my heels. This place I definitely wanted to burn down, and by the way Ryder was passing me, he felt the same. I searched the old building until I found a can of gas. With his

help, we dumped the toxic liquid everywhere, starting in the stalls where the humans had been kept. When it was properly doused, I led a thick line outside.

Ryder stood next to me, staring at the barn, sunlight highlighting the flecks of gold in his hair. I handed him my lighter. “You want the honors?”

He bent down, flicked the lighter, and hesitated briefly before finally touching the flame to the line of gas. It spread quickly, just like our rage had moments ago. We watched as the place where Ryder was tortured and human slaves were kept burned down.

When the destruction was complete, Dominic gave everyone specific areas of the city to search. I requested the area near where I lived, making it seem like I was just choosing something convenient. But no one knew the real truth. There was no point searching.

I knew exactly where to find the Greybacks.

Ryder drove us to my house and parked in the garage. He leaned back against the headrest. “I’m wasted.”

“But didn’t it feel good to destroy that place?”

A long sigh escaped his mouth. “A little, but it wasn’t all bad. I have good memories of that place too.” His lips turned down. “But the bad ones override them.”

I patted his shoulder. “Hang out here for a while. No point searching with the others.”

“Are you sure your roommates won’t mind?”

I waved away his concern. “Nah, it’ll be fine.”

Exiting the car, I grabbed Silas’ box, piled the briefcase on top of it, but left the rest to dispose of later. I didn’t have much time until my meeting with the Greybacks and wanted to use what I had left of it to gather my strength. Truth was, I was nervous to see them. I wasn’t sure Jackson would go along with my plan, especially since I’d shoved that pitchfork up through his jaw. That tended to break one’s trust.

Before I ducked inside, I searched for Samira’s car, but it was gone. Damn. She must’ve crashed somewhere else, her fancy hotel maybe. I really wanted to tell her about the briefcase. I knew she was worried about it.

We walked inside and found a note on the fridge from Lynx. She wasn't home either. She had gone to her mother's house. Weird. I would think that would be the last place she'd want to go.

After telling Ryder to scrounge up something to eat, I climbed the stairs, trying to think of a good place to hide the briefcase. A few minutes later, I found a tight spot in the attic, way in the back. I covered it with old clothes that smelled of dust and moth balls. No one would look for it here.

Back in the kitchen, Ryder handed me a muffin and a soda. Thanks to Lynx, there was always something to eat in the house. I swear I'd gained five pounds just from living here.

"Are you sure you don't want me to come with you?" Ryder asked. "I mean, I know I'm probably the last person who should be going, but I will if you need me to."

"I think I'll be okay. They want someone on the inside, just as much as I need their support. They won't hurt me."

I focused on the blueberry muffin in my hand, knowing I was probably telling a lie. Hell, I could be dead before nightfall.

"Will you at least text me when you get there and when you leave?"

"You got it." I paused and looked over him. The dark circles under his eyes were gone, and his shoulders weren't as tense. "Thanks again for your help tonight. I couldn't have pulled it off by myself."

"It felt good to actually do something."

I nodded, agreeing. It did feel good. I ate quickly, then checked my phone. My uncle had sent me news. So far, no one had discovered any Greybacks in the city or on the outskirts. And no one had heard a thing.

It's like they just disappeared.

Which they had.

I texted Lynx to see if I could borrow her car again, but when she didn't answer, I decided against it. I didn't want to become that roommate. I'd already had to torture her. I figured taking her car without approval might be taking it one step too far.

Instead, I called Roma. While I waited, I carefully removed the duffel bag

out of the trunk of Lynx's car, in case she came back and had to use it. I stared at it, not sure what to do with its contents. I considered getting rid of the jars now, but I didn't think I had time. Instead, I walked swiftly toward the trees and hid it behind the biggest tree I could find.

Roma was waiting for me when I got back. I slid into the back and handed her a slip of paper with an address on it. "I need to go here."

"Hello to you too." She smoothed out the paper to study it.

"Sorry. A little nervous, I guess."

"You, nervous?" She shook her head and glanced at the paper again. "The old village of Doner Prairie. There hasn't been anyone up there for decades. Why do you want to go there?"

"I promised someone I would meet them. I'll pay you cash, triple your normal rate."

She eyed me in the rearview mirror. "Can you afford that?"

"I can today." I leaned against the window, closing my eyes to its sun-soaked warmth.

"Alright." She forced the gear into drive and pulled away from the house. Like she usually did, she talked to me about nothing and everything, trying to entertain me with stories of her time backpacking in Europe, then she moved on to her brief stint with the Peace Corps. I tried to pay attention, but I was too distracted. My knee bounced up and down, and I worked my teeth over the flesh on the inside of my cheek. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea.

She met my eyes in the rearview mirror. "Are you okay?"

"Sometimes I think my ass is in my brain." I poked at my head. "I get these shit ideas."

She didn't say anything for a long moment as she fingered a thin braid at the side of her face. Finally, she asked, "Why did you ask me to take you? You could've borrowed one of the Silver Claws' cars."

"This isn't exactly the kind of meeting I want anyone to know about. Besides, I've begun to think of you as my good luck charm."

"I get that a lot." She settled into a rare silence with an amused expression. After a while, she rolled the window down, letting in a cool breeze.

The air was heavy with moisture, the humidity higher than usual. It made my shirt stick to the back of the seat, and my thighs stick together uncomfortably.

Doner Prairie wasn't at all what I expected. I had imagined another ranch with fields and trees and maybe more than a few living quarters, but this was a ghost town. Literally. The buildings were right out of the late eighteen hundreds, like a giant set built for a western film.

Roma glanced out her side window. "This was one of the first gold mining towns in Louisiana."

"I didn't know there was gold here."

"There was, but only a little. Townsfolk didn't know that though. As soon as word spread there was gold, people flocked here. It was a booming place once," she explained as if she had been there. "But after ten years and very little profits, the place shut down. Damn shame."

I rolled my window down and inhaled. A dirty earthy smell greeted me, but it was laced with something else. Wolves.

"Park here."

"In the middle of the street?"

"Do you see another car coming anytime soon?"

She pressed on the brake, bringing us to a stop. "I guess not."

"Wait here." I exited the car and strolled down the middle of the street, eyeing the old buildings on each side of me. Sunlight streamed from the noon sky, illuminating every dark corner and alley.

Even though I couldn't see anyone, I knew I was surrounded by wolves. I could feel their dark eyes watching me and smell their fear mingled with curiosity. Who was I to go against my own pack to warn another, especially an enemy? It was unheard of to betray one's own. It made me dangerous.

Like a ghost, Jackson appeared at the other end of the road, stepping out from behind what could've been an outhouse at one point. "You have sixty seconds to explain yourself before we kill you."

CHAPTER 38



My gaze flickered behind him, looking for any more shifters. I didn't see any, but I could definitely feel them, their power aggravating mine like two opposing magnets.

"What's there to explain?" I asked. "Dominic was coming to wage war against your small pack. I simply gave you a heads up."

"You come alone?" His deep voice sounded strange in the empty street.

"Other than the Uber." I pointed behind me, indicating Roma, "I'm alone."

He smoothed his blond hair back, exposing amber eyes, the color of rich honey. "I would say thank you, but no one's that kind. What do you want?"

"First, lay low for a while until I can neutralize Silas and Dominic, just like I promised. Second, stay the hell away from Ryder. He's not up for grabs."

"Why? Why d'you care so much?"

"That's none of your business. Just stay out of my way, and we'll have no other problems."

He took a step toward me. "You trying to take out Dominic so you can be Alpha?"

"No. And even if I was, I sure as shit wouldn't tell you."

"You forget we fought. You could be an Alpha if you wanted to."

"I'd rather chew on nails. I'm just here to take care of some old business, then I'm out of here. After that, if you want the Silver Claws Alpha position, it could be yours for the taking, but you might have to fight a few Silver Claws to get it."

“Easy.” Jackson slid a blade out from behind his back and began to slice at his fingernails with its sharp edge.

I held my tongue. He didn’t know Luke’s strength or even Gerald’s. Either one could seriously challenge his position as Alpha. But when that time came, I should be far away from Rouen.

"I'd like to believe you," Jackson drawled, "but gaining my trust is as hard as wrestling an oil-dipped shark in the middle of a hurricane." He looked up at me, his eyebrow raised. "If you want me to stay out of your way, I need to feel your loyalty. One way to start is by fighting a few of my men. It's what we do for new recruits."

"I'm not trying to become a Greyback."

"But you are asking us to trust you with our lives. Fighting, making one broken and bloody, has a way of bringing out the truth in people. If you're lying, your body will betray you, and your bones will turn as brittle as these here buildings. But," darkness danced in his eyes, "if you're telling the truth, one way or another, your heart will keep on beating."

"If I had time for this shit, I'd bullet point the ridiculousness of everything you just said. I saved your lives last night. You either trust me or you don't."

He chuckled and took another step closer, the knife lowering to his thigh. This time the step felt more like a threat, and my senses triggered full alert mode. I glanced around, searching for immediate danger.

"That's the problem," he said. "I don't trust you."

I growled, summoning my wolf to the surface and pushed the power outward. His eyes flinched as he felt her. He snarled and snapped his fingers. Six men and one woman emerged from the old wooden buildings on each side of me.

I lifted my hands into the air, taking a step back. "I don't want to fight. That's not why I came."

The woman leading the others slid her tongue over her front teeth. "But we want to fight you."

"Don't worry." One side of Jackson's mouth turned up. "We're not going to kill you. Just give you a little beating so you'll get a taste of what will happen if

you try to double-cross us."

The shifters moved closer. This was not how I envisioned this meeting going, but if they wanted to fight, I was happy to oblige.

"Fine." I removed my black jacket and tossed it to the side. It's one of the few nice things I owned. I glanced back at Roma sitting in the idling Audi. I hoped she had enough sense to stay out of this.

The large woman headed straight at me. Her ruddy complexion matched her red hair. Soon her face would have red on it too.

I held up my fists, preparing. "I'll try to go easy on you, bitch."

"Did you just call me a bitch?"

"Not you." I pointed to the man just behind her. "That guy. Ask him what he was doing to your mom last night. He was definitely being her bitch."

Both the man and woman shifter lunged for me at the same time. I easily dodged their movements and kicked backwards, catching the male's jaw with the underside of my boot. I barely managed to get my legs beneath me when another attacked.

The next twenty seconds were a blur. Fists flying, kicks jabbing, and heads butting. I moved faster than all of them, but they had the upper hand simply because of sheer numbers. I kept on the offensive, afraid if they pushed me back, I would lose my momentum. A shifter from behind managed to get in a few lucky kidney shots. I groaned and spun away, ducking as a massive fist flew over the top of my head. I grabbed the large female and choked her good and tight, while using her body as a shield against the others' blows. I dropped her when her body went limp in my arms.

Crouching low, my muscles pulsed with power. It would've been fun to fully shift right now, but sometimes a dog had to turn belly up. This was one of those times. But not yet. I wanted them to know I wouldn't go down easy.

I was about to tackle two men running right for me, when I was bound from behind by massive arms that nearly crushed my chest. Instant panic filled me with dread, something I couldn't fight easily. I sucked in quick sips of air.

Jackson's voice breathed into my ear, "You're going to get your beating, whether you like it or not."

The two shifter men who were about to run through me, stopped abruptly and chuckled. The taller of them stepped in front, grinning wide. His yellowed teeth broke up the dark space in his mouth. He cocked his fist back, his eyes twinkling with excitement, then shot it forward.

Squinting, I braced for the impact, but it never came. I opened my eyes and saw the shifter had dropped to his knees, clutching his head in pain. The others were also on the ground, groaning and holding their heads, much like they had when Lilith had used her witchy powers against them.

"What the hell?" Jackson said, then fell backwards into the dirt, writhing in pain like the others.

"What the hell?" I mimicked Jackson's astonishment and swiveled around. Roma was outside her car, her hand outstretched toward us, her face straining.

"Get in!" she called.

This time, I was good at following directions.

I sprinted to the car, but before I slid into the passenger seat, I turned around. "Stay out of my way, Jackson! Or I'll sic my Uber driver on you!"

I grinned at Roma. Talk about lucky charm indeed.

"Wait," he grunted through gritted teeth.

"Whatever," I looked at Roma. "Let's go."

She slowly backed up, still channeling her power against the Greybacks. As soon as she dropped her hand, she jumped inside the car. I was about to do the same, but Jackson stopped me.

"Wait!" He dragged himself to his feet. "I'll work with you, but I want one thing in return."

I paused. "What's that?"

"Blood."

Air caught in my chest. "I don't understand."

"It's come to Rouen. The Abydos, a powerful blood rumored to be over a thousand years old."

Ice filled my veins, and my legs trembled as if I was staring over a hundred foot ledge. I played it off, scoffing. "Never heard of it."

"Most haven't, but it exists." His eyes glowed yellow in the darkness. "And I

want it. I've heard the whisperings, and I know Dominic is searching for it too. I want you to be my eyes and ears. If you hear anything about it, you are to tell me. Do this and our pack will stay out of whatever else you got going on."

"Fine. If anyone makes a peep about crusty, old blood, you'll be the first to know."

"I'll hold you to that, and if I ever find out you've lied to me, or if you ever make a move against the Greybacks, we will kill you and everyone you love."

I believed him. I nodded once and dropped into the passenger seat, my armpits pooling with sweat.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

How the hell did he know about the Abydos? And Dominic's looking for it? How? I'd been so careful. I sunk into the seat and groaned.

At least they didn't know about me. If they did, they would've tortured me already to find the blood. I'd managed to keep it hidden for years, so what had changed? Why did people know about it now?

Roma turned around in a big circle, then headed back toward Rouen, leaving behind the small town that belonged to another time. Her sleeve came up as her hand spun the wheel. Her barbed tattoo was etched in red. Had it always been red?

Roma glanced at me sideways, her eyes traveling between me and the road. "Are you okay?"

"I will be." Maybe I should move the blood again. Or maybe moving it from its original hiding place, where it had been safe for the last several decades, is what had caused the problem to begin with. I probably should've left it there, but I didn't feel comfortable leaving it behind when I was hundreds of miles away.

I studied Roma. She seemed so laid back, a female Uber driver dressed in clothes from the nineties, her pants were even ripped in the knee, and yet her hair had been pulled into a tight bun. Not a single strand out of place. She was a walking contradiction.

"You've been holding out on me," I answered instead.

"And you're bleeding."

I reached forward and dropped the visor to look into the mirror. There was a

gash just near my hairline, and blood ran down the side of my face. I'd been too preoccupied to notice.

"Don't get it in my car," she said and handed me a napkin. "Bad for business."

I blotted at my head. The wound was deep, but it would heal soon enough.

"I'm not one for strong magic," she said, finally answering me. "But I'll use it if I have to." Her gaze flickered away from the road to me. "You going to survive?"

"Thanks to you I am. That was pretty badass. Do the other witches in Rouen know you have power?"

"Not many." She adjusted the rearview mirror. "And I'd like to keep it that way."

"If you keep my secret about meeting the Greybacks, then I'll keep yours."

She smirked. "You already knew I'd keep your secret, otherwise you wouldn't have brought me here."

"True. Did you see Jackson's face when you immobilized him?" I laughed and slapped at my knee. "I think he even shit himself!"

"He was slow getting up. Do you want to tell me why you were meeting with them?"

"I'd rather keep this one close to the chest, if you don't mind. I don't want to put your life in any danger."

"I appreciate that."

It felt like a short drive home. Ever the talker, Roma told me about how she'd discovered magic at the age of three. She spoke about her youth in the country, and the people who surrounded her. It was funny the way she talked about her childhood, like she had been raised in another century. They had no television, no radio, or distractions. It actually sounded kind of nice.

A few blocks from my house, she quieted down and grew serious. "You could've been hurt tonight."

"It worked out."

I wouldn't admit it, but I think I overplayed my hand tonight. I don't know what I was thinking meeting with Jackson alone and not expecting him to try and

hurt me in some way. Maybe I expected him to be a little grateful that I had warned him about the Silver Claws attacking their ranch.

But Jackson was not the grateful type. And now he knew about the Abydos.

She pulled up to the curb and parked. "It's okay to be scared. True leaders always are."

"I will never be anyone's leader. I've seen what happens to those on top." I shifted my weight in the seat to face her. "Thank you for helping me tonight. I'd probably have a different face right now had I come alone."

"Being alone is a choice, sweetie." Her gaze shifted over my shoulder and out the passenger window. "You have a visitor."

I turned and followed her line of sight up to my porch. Luke stood with his hands stuffed in his pockets, watching the two of us.

"Want me to stick around?" she asked.

"I got this. Thanks, though." I groaned, annoyed at the way my body was warming at his presence, when it should be cold. Damn, traitorous hormones. "Thanks again." I shoved money into her hands, giving her more than we'd agreed upon. She deserved it.

I turned toward the house, inhaled a breath, and prepared to meet the sexy shifter on the front porch.

CHAPTER 39



I waited until Roma drove away before I walked toward Luke. He stepped off the porch stairs and into the afternoon sun.

"Go for a walk?" he asked, then frowned when he noticed the cut on my head. "What happened?"

He touched my forehead, and a shiver raced down my spine. I batted his hand away, chiding myself. This wolf was nothing but trouble.

"It's nothing," I said. The wound had probably already healed, and what he was seeing was only dried blood. "Follow me."

I led him around the side of the house and through a gate, wishing I could talk to him, especially about the sacred blood I was hiding. I could really use some advice on what to do with a weapon so powerful it could either save the world or destroy it.

We walked into the forest, beneath a fading canopy of tall oak and cypress trees. The night smelled of leaves and winter frost. It was getting cooler. At least the sun still provided some warmth.

Luke followed a step behind me, smelling like man sweat, the good kind that made me think of lumberjacks and firemen. I swallowed the growing saliva in my mouth. My lower abdomen began to burn and the feeling spread between my thighs. Once again, my hormones stabbed me in the back.

I stopped when I reached a clearing, allowing the sun to shine the brightest. "Why did you come here?"

He shifted his weight to his other foot. "My gut tells me you had something

to do with that missing briefcase, which means you were inside that room of Silas'. Probably well before anyone else."

I laughed my best fake laugh. "What makes you think that?"

"First, I smelled you. A lot of you in that room."

"Of course you did. I was there with Gerald when they found it."

"It was more than that. You were everywhere. It was overwhelming."

My pulse quickened. Had I been that careless? "So, did the others say the same thing?"

"Just me." He moved closer, seemingly unaware he was doing it. But not me. I was hyper-aware of his body in relation to mine.

"And it's not a mistake," he said. "You were in that room a lot more than you're letting on. I also don't think the Greybacks were at Fire Ridge either. I don't know how you did it, but somehow you created the distraction so you could break into that secret room."

"Crazy talk."

His heated gaze bore into mine, and the air pressurized, causing a low buzzing on the back of my neck.

This time, he deliberately stepped forward, crushing the space between us. His hand came up to trace the side of my face. "I would sense you anywhere. It's impossible for me not to."

My heart slammed in my chest at his words. "I don't know what your angle is here, but just because you're tall, dark and sexy, doesn't mean you can make baseless accusations."

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "You think I'm sexy?"

I shrugged. "Some chicks probably dig your look."

His hand traced down and around the back of my neck. He gripped it softly, bringing me just a little bit closer. "And what about you? What kind of look do you dig?"

My eyes dropped to his mouth and back up to his eyes. I didn't mean to, but I licked my lips. He released a breath, and its warmth whispered across my skin, igniting a heat that rippled throughout my flesh. My knees weakened and chest heaved. Everything inside me wanted to claim him, to take him into my bed and,

maybe later, if I got to know him better, if I could discover his secrets, I could see him finding a way into my heart.

But...he was the friend of my enemy, and that made him my enemy.

I forced myself to take a step back and shook my head, trying to clear the dangerous thoughts from my mind. "Why are you really here?"

His mouth tightened, and the spell broke. He also stepped back, as if he just realized what he was doing. And yet, he didn't seem surprised by what had happened. Had he planned this? Anger replaced the heat in my abdomen. "Answer me."

His Adam's apple moved up and down. "I want to know what was in that secret room you found. I think we can work together."

I laughed, his motives made clear. "I get it. You didn't want to work with me before, but now that I might have something you want, you're ready to bare your soul. Am I close?"

He glanced away from me, shame stinging his face. "I'm sorry, but I really need to know what was in there. It's important."

I turned my face away, hurt by the way he had almost tricked me. His mini seduction had all been a show so he could get what he wanted. It made my stomach roll. "Screw you. You're just like the rest of them, but at least they're upfront about it."

"I wasn't trying to manipulate you." His voice was soft, pleading. "I didn't mean to..." He hesitated and glanced back toward my home. "It would mean a lot to me, but I understand. If you change your mind, let me know. You know where to find me."

And just like that, he was gone.

CHAPTER 40



I made my way back to the house, disappointment choking off my breath. A few seconds later, I heard the familiar roar of Luke's bike as he drove away. I shuffled my way through the leaves, feeling a little guilty. Maybe I should share what I found with Luke. It did seem pretty important to him.

But then I remembered his loyalty to the pack. I remembered how he had looked me in my eyes and told me that he would stop me if I tried to kill Dominic. He was also secretly meeting with Samira. Luke had too many secrets for me to be able to trust him. I yawned, deciding I'd had enough for today. I still had to get rid of Silas' disgusting crap, but I didn't think I'd be able to stay awake a minute longer.

I crashed on top of my bed, fully clothed. Just a short nap.

Nightmares invaded my sleep, slithering and twisting across my mind. I sat on a skiff, floating across a calm lake, my powerful arms rowing two oars that dipped deep into the silvery water. Objects bobbed around me. At first, they were fish, swollen and bloated, their bellies up. The cool air turned putrid, and I paddled faster to escape the stench. Dead fish transformed into human body parts. A gnarled hand, a torn ear, severed legs. They floated past me, growing in numbers. Heads and faces came next. Fat tongues squeezed past gray, chapped lips. Milky white eyes stared at me accusingly through sunken sockets.

I began to recognize the faces. My father. My mother. Siblings. Cousins. All watching me in passing.

My paddle jerked to a stop deep within the water, as if something had latched onto it. I was stuck in a sea of the dead. Bodies floated as far as the eye could see. The water slowly turned a dark crimson, the same color as the Abydos blood.

The mouth on a face nearest me twitched as if it were alive. I gripped the edge of the boat, my knuckles bone white, to lean closer to the face. Its eyes were sewn shut, but its mouth was moving. Twitching like it wanted to speak, its bottom jaw dropped suddenly, and a great cry tore through its bodiless head, shouting my name.

I sat up straight, panting hard and kicking at my sweat-soaked sheets that threatened to suck me under. Stars crowded my vision, and I clawed at my chest as if there was something physically stopping the air from flowing into my lungs.

Relax. Calm down. You're safe.

I thought the words over and over until oxygen filled my lungs again.

The dream had been so vivid. So real. Those images would haunt me for years.

After I showered, I watched a little television while I waited for Ryder to wake up, but as the minutes passed by, I grew restless.

I thought about the stuff in the duffel bag in disgust and goosebumps erupted on my arms. I didn't want to deal with that, not after that dream, so I went up to the attic instead and grabbed the box.

Back in my room, I carefully removed the lid as if its contents might jump out and strike me. Everything inside was neatly organized. There was a brown shoebox pressed against the sides, with a drawing of a car and two stick figures scribbled on its top. There was also a thick stack of envelopes held together by a rubber band and a set of blocks stacked evenly within a clear, plastic square. At the very bottom were some thick manila folders. Someone had taken great care of these belongings.

I removed the shoebox and opened it. I was surprised to find piles and piles of photographs. I grabbed them, curious, and flipped through them. Most were of the same child at various ages. Thick, curly blond hair. Light blue eyes that

twinkled when he smiled.

I turned one over. In neat writing, it said: Silas. Age eight. I turned over several more. They were all labeled. Most were of Silas, but there were some with his parents. I didn't see any pictures of him with siblings. Maybe he was an only child.

At the bottom of the stacks, I found a few photos with him and another child. I turned one over and nearly dropped it when I read Dominic's name. He was two years younger than Silas in the picture. They'd known each other that long? Were they related?

I searched the rest of the shoebox but found nothing to answer my question. No family reunions, no pictures with anyone else in them.

However, I did notice a pattern. As Silas grew, the twinkle in his eye, the dimpled smile, was replaced by a scowl and a cold expression. Something had happened to him along the way. I wondered with bitterness if anyone had killed off his family. Asshole.

I put away the shoebox and turned my attention to the letters. The rubber band encasing them looked new, but the letters looked old. I pulled one out carefully. The folded lines were deep, as if it had been folded and unfolded several times. It was a woman's handwriting. She talked about college, mostly about her classes and professors. Nothing interesting.

Based on the lack of personal items in Silas' apartment, I had thought him a cold, non-sentimental man, but that wasn't the case at all.

He just preferred to keep his memories, both good and bad, sealed up in a box, away from prying eyes who might try to discover his strengths and weaknesses. Which was exactly what I had been doing when I searched his room.

"What are you doing?"

I dropped the letters as if I was doing something wrong and looked up. I sighed in relief when I saw Ryder standing in the doorway.

I spread my hand, pointing to the boxes. "This is from Silas' hidden room. There are photographs of him as a child with his parents. And some with Dominic. Did you know they knew each other as children?"

He shook his head and joined me on the bed. "I didn't." He rubbed at the back of his neck. "Sorry I slept so long. I don't think I've slept that well in years."

"You needed it."

"How did everything go with Jackson this afternoon?"

"I'm in one piece."

"I guess that means he trusts you."

"I guess so," I said, not wanting to think about it because, one day, I might have to break that trust.

"What do you have planned today?" I asked, anxious to change the subject.

"I'm supposed to meet up with Lola in an hour to make sure she's okay. I don't think Silas will accuse her of anything, but I want to make sure."

I glanced at the clock and realized it was already late afternoon. "Shit! It's later than I thought."

I wanted to get rid of Hannibal Lecter's trophies before Lynx came home. I can't image the horror she'd go through if she saw those jars.

Ryder's phone buzzed. He glanced down at a text message. "Jerry's out front to give me a ride. I got to go, but I'll catch up with you later."

"I'll see you out."

I waited until Jerry drove off before I jogged out back, hoping no animals had found the jars. I needed to get rid of this crap before I had to go into work. The bag looked undisturbed. I slowly unzipped it.

I glanced inside, and my stomach churned. I shut it, trying to figure out what the hell I was going to do with this stuff. I considered burying it, but then animals would probably find them. Or, someone from the pack. I carefully dragged the bag back to the garage, happy I was alone.

I sat on the ground and looked around, trying to find inspiration around me. Today was trash day, and everyone had their cans out, but the trash guys hadn't come yet. They must be late for some reason.

I stood up, brushing off my jeans. I couldn't think of a better option than dumping them into my neighbor's trash. It was all I could think of. Dominic's so paranoid, anyone from the pack could show up at any time and check my trash.

This thought made me hurry, but I had to be careful I wasn't caught by any of the neighbors either. I dragged the bag away from the nosey neighbor who lived two doors down from me, and walked several houses down until I found one that looked promising. I should probably do this under the cover of darkness and not a setting sun, but I couldn't be certain Lynx wouldn't return for her car.

Checking to make sure no one was looking, I lifted the lid. It was only halfway full. Perfect. I would dump them inside, then grab some leaves and cover it. I lifted the lid and hefted the bag over the plastic lip.

The sound of a motorcycle coming toward me startled me, and I jumped, afraid it was Luke. There's no way I could explain away a bag of severed body parts. I turned abruptly, smashing into a brick mailbox.

The bag fell from my hands, and I heard a smashing sound. The smell was worse than I could imagine. Formaldehyde mixed with the smell of decomposing body parts. I gasped for air, realizing I'd gotten it on my shoes and jeans. One of the jars rolled out and continued down the hill. Had I not zipped the bag?

Shit!

I chased after it, looking like an idiot. Holy hell, I hoped no one was watching me. The jar picked up momentum and, just as I reached down to grab it, it slammed into the curb, splashing liquid on my hand. A swollen and gray tongue brushed across my skin before it landed on my shoe.

Yelping, I instinctively kicked it away and it flopped along the pavement. I lurched, nearly spewing the liquid in my stomach. Gritting my teeth, I pushed the bile down and stared at the tongue in horror, as if it might come alive and yell at me to quit being a jackass and to hurry up. Reacting quickly, I kicked it again, aiming for the storm drain. It skidded across the ground then rolled over a couple of times, stopping just shy of the sewer.

"Son of a bitch! You dirty whore!" I hissed.

I glanced around to make sure no one was watching me play soccer with the appendage, then shoved it down the drain, hoping I wouldn't see a cat making off with it later. I ran back to the bag, dumped it in the trash, then piled leaves on top of it.

I slammed the lid, completely grossed out and smelling like I worked in a

body parts lab.

The alarm on my phone buzzed. Time for work. Back in my room, I peeled the nasty clothes off my skin, dumped them at the foot of my bed, and showered quickly. Twenty minutes later I arrived at the club, courtesy of my favorite Uber driver.

By the time I got there, it was packed, more so than usual. Eddie spotted me from across the room, his thick brows pinched together, and his face red. I was late, and he was pissed. I disappeared into a crowd and headed straight for the bar while unbuttoning my shirt. I was going to have to put on one hell of a show to make things right with Eddie.

My shirt fell from my shoulders, leaving just my black sports bra. I grabbed two bottles of alcohol and jumped onto the bar, shouting, "Who wants a drink!"

Customers pressed to the bar cheering and whistling while I did my thing. I had to force the performance. This was the first time I'd done this since that terrible night with Silas. The only way I got through it was by not looking anyone in the eyes.

When I returned home, I was exhausted. Both mentally and physically. Silas, Jackson, Luke... the revelation about the blood. It was all too much.

I stripped my clothes in the bathroom and fell into bed, praying the sea of the dead would not return.

* * *

BAM! Bam! Bam!

"Briar! Wake up!"

My eyelids fluttered open. Sunlight filtered in through my window and a cold wind made me shiver. I settled deeper under my blanket.

Bam! Bam! More pounding on the door.

"Briar," Lynx's voice called from behind my closed door. "There are some scary men downstairs. They are insisting they talk to you."

I groaned and slid out of bed. Barely opening my eyes, I found a tank top and a pair of jeans on the floor to throw on.

"They're about to come up, Briar."

"I'm coming." I flung open my door. Lynx wore a bright green, short dress, contrasting with her red hair, which had been pulled up into a loose bun. "What time is it? And why are you all fancy?"

"Four. I have a dinner party with my mother." She grimaced just saying the words.

"In the afternoon? I slept twelve hours?"

"That doesn't surprise me with how little you've slept lately. I wouldn't have woken you, but these two assholes just showed up."

I walked down the stairs, meeting Gerald and Jerry on their way up. Gerald's brows were drawn together with his jaw locked tight, and Jerry's usual smile was gone. I stopped them from coming any further by holding my hands on the banister. "What's going on?"

Gerald looked behind me, clearing his throat. I turned to find Lynx peering around the corner.

She rolled her eyes, then stomped down the stairs, passing us. "I'll be in the kitchen if you need me, Briar."

As soon as she disappeared into the kitchen, Gerald said, "Dominic has ordered everyone back to Fire Ridge. I tried calling, but you didn't answer. I thought something might've happened to you."

I inhaled, ready to explain my strong need for sleep, but I coughed instead. What was that smell? I froze, suddenly realizing I was wearing my formaldehyde jeans. I rubbed my hand through my hair, trying to stall them. "Sorry. Long shift at work, plus searching for Greybacks. I guess I was more tired than I thought."

"You're tired?" Jerry snapped. "I haven't slept in two days."

"And that's my problem how?"

"Shut up, both of you," Gerald said. "Let's just get back. We're already late as it is."

I glanced down at my clothes. "Can I change first? You guys woke me."

Gerald motioned to the open door. "No time, sweetheart. Dominic is waiting. Besides, you look great."

"Shit," I muttered. I followed them down the stairs, glancing into the living room and looking for anything I could use to try and cover the smell on my pants. "At least let me pee."

"Thirty seconds."

I darted toward the guest bathroom, slammed the door behind me, and turned on the water. I really did need to pee. While using the toilet, I scrubbed at my jeans with a damp towel. When I finished, I searched the cupboard beneath the sink until I found a can of furniture polish. Lemon scent. I sprayed it on my jeans, hoping that would be good enough.

Gerald called my name from the living room.

"Hell balls, Gerald! I'm hurrying!" I quickly tied my hair back with one of Lynx's pink scrunchies and inhaled. I smelled like my grandmother's furniture with only a hint of something fouler. It would have to do. I flushed the toilet and opened the door.

"About time," Jerry said. "Dominic's going to have our ass hide if we don't hurry up."

I jogged after them and jumped into the back seat of an SUV directly behind Gerald.

Jerry grimaced, starting up the car. "What's that smell?"

"I told you I should have changed," I said. "These are my cleaning clothes."

Gerald swiveled around to face me. "I would've let you, but Dominic is on one. He's pissed as all shit that we can't find a single Greyback. He thinks someone in our pack knows something."

"Well, it sure as hell isn't me. If one of them saw me, they'd probably kill me for taking Ryder back."

Jerry glanced at me over his right shoulder. "I heard about what you did. That took some balls."

"Ovaries," I corrected. "Not like it matters, though. I still got punished." I mumbled the words as if I hadn't meant to say them.

"What do you mean?" Jerry asked.

"Nothing. Forget I said anything."

Gerald stared at me, his jaw set. "Jerry should know. The whole pack

should.”

“Know what?” Jerry asked, exasperated.

When I didn’t stop Gerald from talking, he said, “Dominic told Briar not to save Ryder. When she did it anyway, he had Silas punish her.”

“A punishment? I don’t remember that.”

“That’s because the pack wasn’t invited.” Gerald let the words sink in before he added, “Silas had her get naked and then whipped her. Alone.”

Deep, angry shadows marred his face, much like Gerald’s had when he first found out too. He faced forward, anger compressing the air around him. I’d never seen him without a smile.

“Whatever,” I said, trying to defuse the situation. “What’s done is done. Maybe I should’ve obeyed.”

Jerry slammed his fist into the dashboard several times making me jump. Gerald reached out, trying to calm him, but Jerry shoved him away. “There’s too much shit going down. Dominic is ruining our pack!”

“Careful,” Gerald warned. “He’s still our Alpha.”

Jerry turned to him real slow. “But should he be? This isn’t the first time I’ve caught him or Silas doing shady things.”

I leaned back into the seat, letting them do all the talking. It would be huge if I could get Jerry on my side. He was one of the older pack members and was seen as a father figure to many.

“I admit,” Gerald said, “punishing someone in private is highly unorthodox.”

Jerry snorted. “Unorthodox? It’s forbidden! Not only that, but have you seen that human Silas keeps in the basement lately? I don’t think the dude is even human anymore. These drugs Dominic is getting from the Nocturnas are straight out of a horror film. I don’t think we should be introducing it to the States.” He shook his head. “I can’t imagine what it would do to supernaturals.”

Gerald tapped on the back of the seat deep in thought. “It’s dangerous working with vampires. That’s what got my father killed when his pack tried to work with them. They can’t be trusted, but what can we do about it?”

Jerry swiped at his forehead. “Let’s see how this plays out. If things don’t settle down, maybe we can call for a pack tribunal. There hasn’t been one in over

ten years, but maybe it's time. The only problem is, who's going to challenge Dominic as Alpha?"

Gerald leaned back in his seat and rested his elbow up on the windowsill. "No one."

I finally spoke. "You could challenge him, Gerald." I meant it too. He would make a good Alpha. A stickler for rules and honor. He would always make the right decision for the pack.

Gerald laughed, but when he looked over at Jerry who was glancing back and forth between him and the road, his face expectant, he shook his head. "You can't be serious."

"I don't know. The gal's got a point. You're strong, smart. The other pack members like you. Why the hell not?"

"I'm better at following orders. Besides, I'm pretty sure Dominic could kick my ass in a fight."

I fell back against the seat, sighing. I wasn't sure he would win either. I had bested him in a fight after all, but then again, that wasn't really fair. I wasn't like most wolves.

I hadn't thought about who would become Alpha after I killed Dominic. I assumed I would just kill everyone involved with my family's death and move on. But what if I could leave the pack stronger than what it was? Some of these guys weren't half-bad. I bit my lip, thinking. I bet Luke could be Alpha. He'd make a great one.

Jerry steered the vehicle onto the long lane leading to Fire Ridge. The road was packed with cars parked on both sides. Dominic really had called every pack member back to the mansion. That was twice in less than forty-eight hours. Something bad was going to happen. I could feel it in my gut.

The mansion was packed full of people, practically shoulder to shoulder. I pushed my way through the crowd trying to find either my uncle or Ryder. As I made my way across the throng of shifters, I felt the tiniest pricks of coolness crawling across my spine. I glanced back only to meet Silas' deadly glare from across the room. I quickly averted my gaze. Dude was a creeper.

Dominic moved out of the crowd, walking halfway up the sweeping

staircase. He waited a moment while his commanding presence, the power he emanated as Alpha, silenced the room.

Once he had everyone's attention, he opened his arms. "Now that everyone has decided to show up, we can get on with why I called this meeting." His weighted gaze fell over the pack. "One among us is a traitor. No one will be leaving until I find who."

The strength of his Alpha power reached out in long tendrils, touching each one of us with invisible icy fingers. "And when I do, that person will pay with their life."

CHAPTER 41



*H*urried whispers erupted across the pack. Punishment by death was a big deal. It required the approval of everyone in the pack. Once again, Dominic was changing the rules.

I found Gerald in the crowd. He was shaking his head in disgust. Luke happened to be next to him, looking just as pissed.

“Everyone outside!” Silas barked. “Form three uniformed lines, and shut your damn mouths!”

It took several minutes to organize everyone. Every pack member age eighteen and older was there. Samantha stood on my left with Ryder on my right. My uncle stood at the end of my same line. Our eyes locked, and I saw the worry hidden beyond their glassy surface.

The evening sun hung low over our backs, and my heart pounded, waiting. Our shadows stretched from beneath us. My gaze lowered to mine. It looked darker than the others somehow.

Dominic walked out the back door with his usual entourage. Silas was just behind him, followed by Lilith’s sister, Maera. I wondered what she was doing here. I’d only seen her one other time.

Luke finished the procession, his head down as he typed furiously into his phone. He looked especially broody, if that were even possible.

Dominic, calm as ever, took his place in the front of the pack. He clasped his hands behind his back and lifted his chin a little. "As all of you are aware, the Greybacks broke into our home and destroyed what's ours right under our very

clueless noses. In addition, they stole something very valuable. A drug that would've made us richer than any of us could ever imagine. None of you would ever feel the sting of hunger again. Your families would be provided for for decades. Your children could go to the best schools."

The pack whispered to each other, some apprehensive, others excited. Dominic paused, waiting for everyone to turn their full attention to him again.

"I always believe in being honest with my pack," he said. "I think that's why many of you chose to follow me. And so I am honest with you now. We are in a fragile alliance with the Nocturnas. Everything depends upon the briefcase the Greybacks stole. If the vampires can't trust us with one briefcase, they certainly won't give us enough to distribute." He paused dramatically, his eyes moving over the crowd. "How many of you are willing to let the Greybacks steal your future? Your children's future?"

Shouts of disapproval polluted the air. A few howled. Jerry was one of them, sucked in by the Alpha's words and emotions.

Me, I wanted to roll my eyes.

Dominic continued. "I pondered for a long time, wondering how the hell the Greybacks were able to disappear so completely. And again, how they continue to evade us. They can't just disappear into the fucking air!" His face was red now, the only time I'd ever seen him lose control. "There's only one answer. They had help. From one of our own. Someone is feeding them information."

Heads turned as a rumble moved throughout the crowd. Everyone was looking at each other, giving each other distrustful or curious looks, as if they would be able to spot the traitor. I did the same. As long as Ryder and my uncle stayed quiet, no one would know our deceit.

Silas stepped forward, his cane hitting pointedly on the ground. "The traitor will be found! You can try to keep your lies hidden, but we have ways of uncovering the truth." He lifted his hand and waved Maera forward. "Do what you do best."

"With pleasure." She smiled slow and deliberately, her blue eyes so light, they were almost transparent. She wore a short black dress, black thigh stockings and a corset top that pushed her boobs up tight. Her high heels dug into the

ground as she stepped toward the first person in line, a smaller woman with short brown hair and upturned nose. She looked barely eighteen. "Do you know anything about the Greybacks' location? The smallest detail will do."

The young shifter vehemently shook her head, her bottom lip trembling. "I didn't do anything. I swear it!"

"We'll see about that, Tiffany." Maera leaned in, stopping inches from Tiffany's face, and searched her eyes. Maera lifted her fingers and brushed them across the top of Tiffany's head. Tiffany grimaced as if she were feeling physical pain.

Maera frowned, disappointed. "She's clean."

"Move on," Silas ordered.

Maera continued her interrogation. She took her time asking different questions, all related to the missing Greybacks. Whatever she was doing to their minds, it was clearly painful. Several flinched, while others literally cried out and begged for mercy.

I hadn't had much experience with witches, but I trusted my own power would be strong enough to mentally block her. I glanced sideways at Ryder and my uncle. But what about them?

My palms grew sweaty, and my pulse raced. The sudden beads of sweat on Ryder's forehead told me he was getting nervous too.

Maera dropped to the second row, taking her time to interrogate the pack by asking the most ridiculous questions. She was enjoying herself way too much. Silas, who had been unable to hold still in the front, had joined her. He paced next to her, eyeing her victims just as intensely. His hand, the one not holding his cane, opened and closed. He looked like he was just itching to beat someone. He reminded me of the human downstairs--waiting for the next hit.

They continued down the line but things were moving faster now, spurred on by Silas' impatience. What the hell was I going to do?

I was going to have to confess. Wasn't I?

They were almost to me. Maera approached Samantha, and eyed her curiously. She touched Samantha's face and ran a thumb across her lips.

Samantha growled. "Step back, bitch."

Maera chuckled. "I like this one."

"But is she keeping secrets?" Silas snapped. "We don't have time for your eclectic tastes."

"She keeps secrets, like the rest of them, but none that hurt the pack."

She stepped in front of me and stared into my eyes. I summoned my powerful wolf to mentally guard my consciousness, still undecided what I was going to do about Ryder.

Maera's power came on strong, almost too strong. My teeth expanded into sharp points, and my fingernails began to tingle, the way they always did before they snapped into sharp claws.

She laughed in surprise. "This one is strong."

Silas stepped close to me and sniffed. "You smell terrible."

"A problem I'm aware of."

A few of the shifters chuckled around me. I noticed Luke shuffling near Dominic, still staring intently at his stupid phone, but his head was tipped to the side, like he was listening for something. Disappointment washed over me again at his lack of concern. I quickly scolded myself. I didn't care about Luke.

Without warning, Maera grabbed my arms, her nails digging into my flesh. "Hold still. This might hurt."

A sharp pain, like the tip of a frozen needle, stabbed at my mind just behind my eyes. I sucked in a breath, but held my iron-clad mental grip. I couldn't let her pass. Silas continued to sniff me, his eyes traveling down my body. This worried me more than Maera who continued to pry into my brain.

"Let me in, viper," she cooed.

This bitch wasn't going to stop if I didn't give her something. My mind rolled through different memories, the least possible offending one.

She tapped my forehead. "It's like a bank vault in here. We may have to do something different with this one. I'd love to break her down. I bet her mind is chock full of beautiful secrets."

"Move on," Dominic ordered from the front. "We'll deal with her later."

Luke was staring at me now, his phone still in his hand, but his lips were open, just a little bit. Like he was surprised.

Ignoring him, I called up to Dominic. “There’s nothing to deal with, Sir. I just don’t like witchy fingers banging my brain. Makes me feel sleazy.”

Silas’ eyes bore into mine. “When we’re finished, don’t leave. We will question you further later.”

Ryder glanced at me nervously, just as they stepped in front of him. I ground my teeth. There’s no way he would be able to withstand her powers. I glanced across the row at my uncle. It was the same with him. They’d be tortured. Probably killed. I swallowed, nearly choking on the lump lodged in my throat.

The sun had long set, and my shadow was gone, abandoning me to the darkness. It only took me a second to make my decision. I couldn’t let Ryder or my uncle take the fall. It was my revenge that had brought us here.

I turned toward Silas. “Stop, I—”

"Hey, boss!" Luke called out. Dominic looked back at him. Silas and Maera also paused.

He held up his phone. “I just got a message from Brenda. She said two Greybacks just walked into her restaurant. What do you want me to do?”

My eyebrows lifted in surprise. What the hell were Greybacks doing in town? Jackson and I had a deal.

Dominic didn’t hesitate. “I want them captured and questioned.” He looked over the pack. “I want ten men to leave right now. As for the rest of you, stay close. If we find the Greybacks’ location, we fight them tonight.”

I inhaled a shaky breath at how close I had come to confessing. I eyed Luke. His timing was highly suspicious. Silas called out several names to go with him. I was one of them. Dominic also ordered Fire Ridge’s security team to go with him, which included Luke, along with his own personal bodyguards.

When I walked past Silas, he grabbed my arm.

“I want you close to me,” he breathed, his breath smelling of garlic and green olives.

My stomach tightened, and I resisted the urge to yank free from his grip. He kept a hold on my arm, practically dragging me to his SUV. He opened the door to the driver’s seat and waved me inside.

I guess I was driving.

Samantha, Jerry, and Maera crowded into the back seat while Silas slid into the passenger seat.

“Drive to Antonio’s on Fifth Street,” Silas barked, his hands gripping the dash. I thought he might be anxious for a fight with the Greybacks, but he kept glancing at me as if I had pissed on his shoes. Could he be upset that he wouldn’t be able to question me later now that Greybacks were found? Maybe he wanted another naked whipping session. Fuck that. If he ever tried it again, I’d cut his balls and prick off and have them shoved down his throat so fast, he’d choke before he could cry.

“Speed up.” Silas’ voice snapped through my thoughts.

I adjusted my grip on the steering wheel and pressed harder on the accelerator. When we arrived at the restaurant, Dominic ordered Silas to block all the exits and to wait until we were called in.

Following orders, I posted myself at the front door with Silas while Samantha and Jerry rounded the back, in case anyone tried to escape. Maera stood to the side of me, adjusting her dress. She had no intention of getting involved if a fight broke out.

While we waited, I thought about the two Greybacks. I doubted Jackson had approved them coming into the city. What if these shifters knew about my arrangement with him?

The front door flew open, startling me. Luke saw me first and opened his mouth as if to say something, but when he saw Silas, he shut it again.

“What?” Silas snapped.

Luke motioned us forward. “You can come in.”

Silas brushed by him, but when I passed Luke, his hand rested on my hip. I looked up, surprised. His gaze burned into mine as he pushed me forward, closing the door behind us.

His hand left my hip as soon as we were inside, and he rushed to move in front of me. The dining room was clear of customers and wooden tables had been pushed up against red booths. The staff huddled together in the corner, frightened, and whispering softly to each other. They probably imagined this to be some kind of disagreement between rival gangs. If only they knew who we

really were. They'd be wishing for a gang fight.

Two Greybacks, one female and one male, sat tied to chairs in the center of the room. Both had already been beaten, their faces bruised and bloody. The man had a knife wound in his shoulder, and his blood ran down his large bicep and dripped to the floor. Dominic stood over them, his mouth twisted into a scowl. Silas stood shoulder-to-shoulder to him, opening and closing his hands as if he couldn't wait to get in on the action.

Luke settled in just a step behind them. I joined Jerry and Samantha, who were coming in through the back door.

"Again," Dominic said over his shoulder to Terrence. He moved out of the way so Terrence could step forward away from the other shifters.

Terrence slammed his fist into the woman's face. Her head snapped back and blood sprayed from her nose. She whimpered, but gave no other reaction.

I narrowed my eyes, looking closer. They both stared into the distance, their eyes glazed over. The woman wasn't even looking at Terrence. I nervously played with my ring. Something was wrong.

Terrence growled, rubbing his knuckles. He looked at Dominic expectantly.

"What's the problem?" Silas asked Dominic.

"We can't get them to talk."

Maera pushed through them, licking her lips. "Let me try."

"I'll do it." Silas was already unscrewing the top part of his cane. He unsheathed a dagger from the long tube and squatted in front of the woman. "You have one chance. Tell me the location of your pack and your Alpha."

He barely waited a second for the woman to respond before he rammed the dagger into her kneecap. I flinched as did several others. She didn't respond, not even cry out, but her eyelids fluttered several times.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted Samantha over by the humans. She was calming them down, while also trying to block their view of the vicious beating.

Silas scowled and dug the knife in deeper, intent on causing more harm but she didn't waiver in her resolve. He snarled and yanked back the dagger. "What's wrong with her?"

“Let me see.” Luke leaned down and peered into each of their eyes. He snapped his fingers, but they didn’t react. He focused on the male, pulling his eyelids up. The male’s eyes rolled to the back of his head. Huffing, Luke let them go. “It’s like they’ve been brainwashed into silence.”

“Brainwashed? But why?” Dominic leaned closer, studying them.

Luke grabbed the man’s arm and shoved up his sleeve. “Or drugged. There are track marks.”

Dominic cursed.

Luke straightened and moved closer to me as if he sensed a storm brewing.

Silas poked the tip of his dagger into the woman’s cheek until he drew blood. “I think it’s more than that. I’ve worked with plenty of druggies, and this is not a normal reaction. If I didn’t know any better, I would say they’ve been compelled.”

He backed away, as if they were contagious.

Terrence drew closer, trying to get a better look at their eyes. “That would take a mighty powerful vampire to compel a shifter.”

“A powerful vampire.” Dominic looked at Silas meaningfully.

“I’m on it,” Silas responded and left the restaurant alone.

I leaned toward Luke, whispering under my breath, “What does that mean?”

Luke stared after Silas, his jaw a straight line. Ignoring me, he turned his body away from Dominic and quickly typed into his phone.

Dominic turned toward the employees who were still huddled together. “Did anyone see these two with anyone else?”

A dark-haired woman came forward, her eyes stern. “They came in alone.”

Luke pocketed his phone. “I already questioned them, and they all say the same thing. Those two walked in on their own and announced publicly they were Greybacks. They weren’t trying to hide. It’s like they wanted us to know they were here.”

Out of nowhere, Dominic kicked forward, shattering a table in front of him. Everyone jumped and stepped back, staring wide-eyed.

But Dominic wasn’t finished, not even close.

CHAPTER 42



Dominic bent over and jerked the leg of the table clean off, then pounded the holy hell out of the rest of the wood. Splinters flew in all directions, and we had to move away to keep from getting hit. He screamed at the table, a string of profanities that made several of the employees burst into tears. His dark hair flopped around, covering his dark, rage-filled eyes.

I slowly moved forward, inching my way toward Samantha and the humans in case they needed protection from the psychotic demon who was in desperate need of some Lithium.

But just as quickly as the fit came on, Dominic straightened, and his expression fell flat. He calmly smoothed back his hair as if he was in front of a mirror preparing for a date. After adjusting his jacket, he walked out of the restaurant, all without looking at us.

Luke didn't miss a beat and followed after. "Pack them up, boys."

The rest of us looked at each other as if to say, "Did that really just happen?"

Jerry looked especially upset, like someone had just broken his favorite superhero action figure. He shook his head sadly and forced the male shifter to his feet. I grabbed the girl's arm gently and helped her up too. She didn't protest, even as we led them outside and into our vehicles to be questioned later.

The air had cooled considerably as the moon rose into the star kissed night. Normally I drew comfort from the millions of sparkles that refused to be swallowed by the darkness, but after what I just witnessed, the void inside me would last awhile.

Silas had left with the SUV we had come in, so we all had to crowd into Dominic's vehicle. Dominic sat behind the wheel, another uncharacteristic move. Luke slid into the passenger seat and motioned for me to sit on his lap. I hesitated, but when I saw everyone else crowd into the back of the small space, I agreed. He wrapped his warm arms around my waist and pulled me against his chest. I leaned into him, surprised by how well we fit together. I might've enjoyed it more, but the heat of everyone crammed into the vehicle was making my chest tighten.

As if sensing my sudden anxiety, Luke reached over and rolled down the window just as Dominic pulled the car onto the road. The cool air rushed into my lungs, and I relaxed more fully into Luke, even sweeping my hand up his arm to his chest.

Why did this feel so natural? It was as if he was an extension of me.

If it weren't for Luke, the ride back to Fire Ridge would've been uncomfortably silent and stuffy. It didn't help that we had two eerily quiet enemy shifters shoved in the back. It was difficult to look at them without shivering. They had no reaction to anything, not to what Dominic did, nor to being shoved into the back of the SUV. They were like zombies, but without the slobber and the whole brain eating thing, thank goodness.

Luke's fingers began to stroke my side, sending shots of pleasurable electricity throughout my body, but he didn't seem to realize he was doing it. He stared out the window, brooding.

As soon as we pulled up to the mansion, Dominic threw the SUV into park and jumped out. "Lock the shifters up." He slammed his door behind him.

Maera climbed over Jerry and rushed to get out of the car, running after Dominic.

"Jerry and Terrence," Luke said, "take them downstairs." His phone buzzed from within his pocket. Keeping his arm around my waist, he yanked it out of his pocket and read the message away from where I could see.

"See you inside," Samantha said, eyeing me curiously. She was probably wondering the same thing as me—why the hell weren't Luke and I getting out of the car?

I shuffled in his lap, opening the door to climb out, but, without looking up from his phone, Luke placed his hand on my thigh, holding me still. I waited until everyone had gone into the house, then shut the door.

I turned to face him. "Tell me what's going on. Everything."

Luke slipped the phone into his pocket. When he looked up at me, his gaze seemed more relaxed somehow. The tight lines in his face were gone.

He settled his hands on my thighs and laid back, looking comfortable. "What do you want to know?"

"What happened earlier, when you stopped Maera from mind-reading Ryder? I know that wasn't a coincidence."

The edges of his lips tugged upwards and his thumbs edged their way under my shirt, making goosebumps break out on my arms.

"Why don't you tell me how you blocked the witch?"

I frowned, huffing a breath through my teeth. He wasn't going to tell me unless I told him my secret, which I obviously couldn't do. So I changed the subject. "Does Maera often invade pack member's brains?"

His smile disappeared. "Never on the scale that was done today. You need to be more careful. You could've been caught and they would've killed you."

I poked at his hard pec. "Good thing a tough, sexy man was there to save me from the big, bad wolf."

"Damn straight." He grinned, running his thumbs higher. He stroked my sides, burning a line of fire into my skin. He leaned in to whisper. "Next time, you'll have to beg me for help first."

Heat rushed through my veins, but I put my hand on his chest and pushed away. "There won't be a next time. Do I look like a helpless maiden? I can take care of myself."

"It didn't seem like that to me."

"I was doing just fine." I needed to clear my head from his scent, from the way he was making me melt into him. I scrambled to get away from him by opening the car door and climbing out. The fresh autumn air breathed across my flesh, cooling the heat plaguing my body. I slammed the door shut, trying to make some space between us, but he followed quickly behind me. He placed his

hand on my arm. “And Ryder? He was involved somehow, wasn’t he? That’s why you looked so worried earlier.”

I swiveled around. “What?”

“Did Ryder help you steal that briefcase?”

“Why do you care?”

“Because, Ryder is different. You shouldn’t get him involved in your shit.”

“I’m being careful.”

He eyed me, letting his gaze slide over my face. He stepped into my space. “I’ve never seen anyone block Maera. Never. Until today. Until you.” He grabbed my arms and pushed my back against the car. “You may be able to take care of yourself, but if you’ve gotten Ryder involved, and they found out, they would’ve killed him. Probably tortured him first. Especially about this. Dominic’s never wanted something so badly in his life.”

“Don’t you think I know that?”

“Then you’d better watch his back better so he doesn’t get killed trying to help you.”

I growled. “I had it handled. I don’t need you to save me.”

He pushed his body flush against mine and my heart rate spiked at the contact. “I disagree.”

“Think again. I will protect those I care about at all costs.”

“What is it about you, Briar? What makes you think you can take on the world all by yourself?” He leaned in, his eyes searching for something I hoped he wouldn’t see. “Why won’t you let me in?”

“You have no room to talk. You’re a vault, just like me.”

He groaned. “I try, Briar. You have no idea.”

“I don’t see it. All I see is Dominic with your balls in his vice. What the hell does he have over you?”

He glanced away. “I can’t tell you.”

“It must be something big to keep an Alpha male like you in line. Such a good little soldier, you are. It seems you only care about Dominic.”

He pulled back, his blue eyes darkening. “That’s not true.”

“Then what do you care about?”

“Shit, Briar. You have no idea.”

“Then tell me, Luke,” I said, softening my voice. “Help me understand.”

His phone buzzed again. He stepped away from me, leaving me cold to check it. After a few seconds of reading whatever was on the phone, his brow furrowed, and he slowly looked up at me.

A moment later, he shoved the phone back into his pocket. “Fuck this. I’m tired of fighting you, Briar.”

Moving faster than I’d ever seen him move, he grabbed my shirt and yanked me forward, slamming his lips against mine. His lips were harsh, an inexorable force against mine as his tongue pried at my lips, commanding me to open myself to him.

I wanted to beat him over the head. I wanted to force him to tell me everything about him and his secrets.

I wanted to give in to him.

I moaned, wrapping my arms around his neck and leaned into his hard body.

Our lips fought against each other, each unwilling to give up control to the other. He wrapped his hand around the back of my hair and fisted it, forcing my head back. “You will open yourself to me. I will be the one to smash down your walls, to make you mine.”

Then he kissed me again, and I growled, finally opening my mouth to let his tongue slide in. It was silky soft and stroked mine possessively. It was heaven’s temptation, and I wanted to taste it forever.

But I only gave him a moment before I bit down, and he yelped. I wrapped my hand in his shirt, clutching it, staring fiercely into his eyes. “No one forces me to do anything.”

Instead of pulling away from me like I expected him to, he chuckled, let go of my hair, and swiped a drop of blood from his lip off with his tongue. He whispered into my ear. “A little pain doesn’t scare me.”

I shuddered, feeling his words shoot right through me. At my response, his eyes glazed as he stared into mine. “I’ll never force you to be mine, Briar.” He slowly lowered his lips to my neck, raking his teeth softly down to the space where it met my shoulder, while his fingers slid up to cup my nape. “Instead, I

will make you beg for it.”

I couldn't stop the heat shooting through my belly, or the way his mouth was pulling me into him. Those soft lips slowly caressing my skin, commanding me to be still.

His other hand moved over my hips, and he slid them up to my rib cage, gripping my flesh tight. “You have no idea what you do to me. Every time I close my eyes, you're all I can think about. And no matter how hard I try, I can't stop wanting to make you come apart under my mouth.”

He lowered to his knees, scraping my shirt up to softly nip at my stomach. The sight of him on his knees before me had me melting into him. The way he was making me feel. The way he was tearing me apart. I wanted him, and if he kept at it, he was going to win.

“I...,” I breathed heavily, “... don't come apart.”

His phone beeped again, and he jerked up, grabbing my ass to wrap my legs around his waist. I could feel his hardness press between my legs. He kissed me again, holding me up with one hand. With his other, he opened the car door. Pulling on my bottom lip with his teeth, he nipped it softly, then shoved me into the car.

I bounced onto the seat. “What the hell?”

He leaned over, and I raised myself up to jerk him in with me, but he pulled back, grinning. Then he lowered himself slowly until he reached my lips, this time kissing me softly, gently, forcing me to slow down. He cupped my jaw with his hand, tracing my bottom lip with his thumb. After a few seconds, he pulled away, but I grabbed his shirt, trying to keep his lips against mine.

He didn't let me. He just stared into my eyes, his gaze twinkling. “I told you to ask for it.”

I frowned, stubborn as hell.

“Your loss.” He stood up, his shirt slipping through my fingers. Just before he closed the door, he winked and circled the car. A rumble escaped my throat, angry that he'd just kissed me then tossed me into the car like a rag doll. Angry that he wasn't kissing me anymore.

He jumped into the driver's seat and started the car. “We gotta go.”

“Where?”

Grinning, he shifted the car into gear and began to drive. “Silas gave me orders. It won’t take long, but I can’t put it off any longer or take you with me. I’ll drop you off at your house first just in case Maera wants another crack at you.”

“What about Ryder or my...” I stopped myself just before saying “uncle”, “Vincent?”

“Vincent? Is he mixed up in your shit too? Hell, Briar, who else are you conspiring with?”

“No one. Just forget about it.” I straightened my disheveled shirt, my skin still on fire.

He sensed my frustration and took my hand in his. Lifting it to his lips, he scraped his teeth along my knuckles. “Don’t you worry, pup. Tonight, I will claim you in every way possible.”

He said the words with such passion and possessiveness, I sucked in a breath, my chest heaving. Without warning, he slammed on the breaks and swerved to the side of the road. He leaned over, grabbing my chin. “I can’t stop kissing you.”

He kissed me again, harsh enough to bite my tongue.

“Screw Silas.” I pushed him back and straddled him, kissing him back just as fiercely. We were squished together, the wheel at my back. The angle was awkward, but he’d opened something inside me that came rushing out, filling me up, overflowing all feelings. I couldn’t stop it, couldn’t push it down.

I had to have him.

His hands roamed over my back and moved up to my neck, pressing me to his mouth, gripping it like he was claiming me, like he fucking owned me. I couldn’t stop touching him, running my hands over his chest, loving that he was rock hard beneath me. I moved my hand down to his crotch, squeezing it lightly. The guttural noise that escaped his throat made me grin. His hands snaked up my shirt, brushing across my stomach as his lips left my mouth to trace down my throat.

For a brief moment, my reasoning mind broke through my physical desires. I

leaned away, breathless. “Shit. You need to go.” Silas would be pissed if he was late and might even want to hurt Luke for it. I couldn’t bear the thought. I added, “But come to my house tonight.”

He leaned back, staring up at me with hooded eyes, he nodded, brushing my lips with his thumb. “It’ll probably be late.”

“I’ll wait as long as I need to.”

He kissed my mouth briefly. “Just text me when Silas leaves.”

I pulled back abruptly. “Silas?”

He tucked stray hairs behind my ear. “He’s at your house.”

“Why?”

“He’s waiting for Samira to question her. He thinks she’s the one who compelled the Greybacks.”

I moved back to my own seat, caught off guard. “Did she?”

“Without question. I texted her the moment I found out Maera was interviewing pack members. I didn’t think you’d be able to block her mental attack.”

I stared out the window as Luke pulled back onto the road, but he kept one hand on my thigh, slowly rubbing it up and down. “A lot of people care for you, Briar. We don’t want to see anything happen to you.”

It took us a while to get to my house and he let me out a few houses down, pulling me into his arms to kiss me harshly, with a promise to meet me later. When he let me go, I had a funny smile on my face, amazed at the way I was feeling. Light and carefree, something I wasn’t used to. I liked it.

My heart felt strangely warm as I walked into the living room, but as soon as my eyes locked with Silas, it turned to ice.

Silas smiled slow and cruel. “Just the person I wanted to see.”

CHAPTER 43



Silas scooted to the edge of his seat on the sofa, his very presence upsetting everything good about this house. “I figured you’d come here instead of obeying Dominic’s orders.”

“Orders?” I asked, and closed the door. Stay cool.

“He didn’t give permission for anyone to leave.”

“You left.”

His hand tightened on the arm rest, and his left eye twitched. “I don’t need anyone’s permission, but you sure do. Maybe you need another private punishment. I sure enjoyed our last one.”

Samira glanced at me, her brows furrowed in confusion, but I kept my eyes focused on Silas, determined not to show any fear. He held no power over me. I said it again in my head so I believed the words.

An uneasiness settled in my throat as he continued to stare at me with cold, dark eyes. They were holes that promised pain and agony. Something wasn’t right.

“I’m glad you’re back,” Samira said, ignoring everything Silas had just said. “I could use some good company.”

I finally looked her way. She was sitting across from Silas, leaning back with her legs crossed. She was moving her mouth in a strange way—was she chewing gum? That was something new. But she definitely looked relaxed. Like Silas’ presence didn’t bother her at all. And that’s when I knew she was sending him a signal: I’m not afraid of you.

“How’d you get home?” she asked.

“A kind pack member dropped me off.”

By the knowing look in her eye, she knew who I was talking about. “Good. What—”

“I was just talking to Samira about family,” Silas interrupted. His angry gaze swiveled to hers as he tapped his cane on the floor. “How important it is that we can count on each other. Ever since you started working with us, we’ve considered you like family, despite your being a vampire. And one thing family never does, is betray each other.”

She casually tapped her fingers on the chair’s armrest. I bet she was counting each touch in her head. “I absolutely agree.”

Silas nodded, and I could tell this conversation hadn’t gone as he expected or wanted. “Rightly so. Family is important.” He looked up at me. “Where did you say yours was from?”

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

He bristled and pressed his hands to his arms as if he was cold. “That’s not the kind of reception I expect to receive from a pack member. You should be honored to have me in your home.”

“Honored isn’t the word I’d use.”

He leaned into his cane and used it to help him to his feet. He opened his mouth to say something but Samira interrupted him. “He came by to see me. He had some questions about the two Greybacks who were found at the restaurant.”

“And did you learn anything?” I pressed my lips into a straight line to keep from laughing in his face. So far I’d always been a step ahead of him, thanks to good friends, friends I hardly deserved. I’d have to repay Samira and Luke somehow.

“She has given me some good leads to follow up on.” He touched the top of his cane to his forehead. “I just remembered, Samira. If we cannot recover the briefcase, then we will need you to set up another meeting with the Nocturnas. We will need more drugs.”

Ah, I understood now why he hadn’t pressed the issue about the compulsion thing. He still needed her. Badly.

Samira shook her head. "The deal they made is with the Silver Claws, not me. It would be bad business for me to intervene on your behalf."

"But as a vampire, you can explain our loss in a way they can understand. I trust you can do this?"

She reached up and slowly removed her glasses. "And if I refuse?"

He chuckled as if that was the most ridiculous thing he had ever heard. He stepped toward me and leaned in slightly. "You still smell."

"Are you finished here?" I said quickly, before Samira karate chopped him in half. I opened the front door, letting in a breath of much needed fresh air.

"For now, but Briar, you will return with me. I'm sure Dominic is wondering where you are. Plus, there's something I want to discuss with you."

"I have to work tonight."

"I'm not asking." He walked onto the porch, then paused waiting for me.

"You don't have to go," Samira said. She had come to her feet faster than I could blink.

I looked from her to Silas. If I left with Silas now, I'd be in a car alone with him. Maybe this was my chance to get rid of him once and for all. I couldn't pass that up.

"I'll be there in a minute," I said to Silas.

He huffed, and I expected him to argue, but he said, "I'll wait in the car. I'll give you three minutes, but then I'm coming in after you."

As soon as the door closed, Samira asked, her voice low, "I trust everything went as expected?"

I cleared my throat, a thank you itching its way up. I wasn't used to someone helping me. Not without a motive. What was hers?

"How did you do it? How did you manage to get two Greybacks away from their pack, compel them, and put them in a restaurant in such a short amount of time? And compelling a supernatural? I'm impressed."

She walked into the kitchen with me trailing behind. She opened the fridge and pulled out her jug of blood. "As soon as Luke texted me saying you would be in trouble, I acted. I was already nearby watching the Greybacks so it made my job easier."

Surprised, I opened my mouth to ask her how she knew where they were, but she kept talking.

“It only took three minutes to locate a couple. Shifters always have men patrolling away from their pack, a weakness I exploit often. It took less than thirty seconds to compel each of them. I don’t normally do this. It is forbidden among my kind, but I had no other choice with the short amount of time I had been given.”

“But why did you do what you did?” I asked. “Couldn’t you have just caused an explosion or something?”

“Luke told me to find a Greyback and make it so he couldn’t talk. He said it was the only way. Was he wrong?” She guzzled from the jug, nearly drinking it all.

My mouth fell open, watching her drink all that blood cold.

“You don’t mind that it’s cold?”

“I prefer it.” When I still stared at her, she chugged down the rest, shrugging. “It’s an acquired taste. But warm blood isn’t good for me. It reminds me too much of the living.”

I wanted to ask her what that meant but the clock behind me chimed, reminding me that Silas was waiting for me outside.

Instead I sighed, realizing Luke had been right. If Samira did anything other than produce a compelled Greyback, then eventually the witch would read their minds. It had been the right thing to do.

“One last question. Why would you help me?” No one helps without a motive.

“Because anyone working against Dominic is not my enemy. We may have different reasons for wanting his destruction, but our end game is the same. We can help each other, if you’d allow it.”

“I don’t trust you, or anyone, for that matter.”

“Whatever you have planned, you can’t do it alone. You proved that today. And I could use your help. There is much strength in you, like there is in me.”

“Meh. I think I’ve got a little more.” I winked at her, but when she didn’t take the bait, I continued. “Fine. You want me to trust you? Let’s start with why you

want to destroy Dominic.”

She looked at me pointedly. "Because he wants something I've been looking for, for a long time.”

“And what's that?”

“The Abydos.”

CHAPTER 44



“Abydos?” I nearly choked on the word. What the hell? Did the city put out a memo? It seems everyone knew about it.

“I think you know something about it,” she said, staring at me pointedly.

“I don’t.”

She moved toward me slowly and silently, a shadow darkening the room. “I think, you’re messed up in something much bigger than you could ever imagine. It’s time I heard the truth.”

A horn blared outside. I exhaled. “Sorry, but I have to go.”

I rushed up the stairs, my heart pounding as I thought about the Abydos hiding in the cave. Was it safe there? I mentally slapped myself for being so surprised about Samira’s knowledge of the Abydos. Of course, an old vampire like her would know about the blood. It was a legend in some circles.

But I had to think long and hard about aligning myself with her. What would she do for the blood? Was this all a ploy so she could get her hands on it, just like Dominic? The powers the blood gave would work the same whether on a shifter or a vampire. Either way, it was dangerous.

I tore off my pants and quickly pulled on a pair of skinny jeans. I should’ve been more careful. The fact that Silas kept pointing out the smell on me made me wonder if he suspected something.

Rushing outside, I expected Silas to be pissed that I’d taken longer than three minutes, but he didn’t say a word when I hopped into the passenger seat. This was the first time I’d seen him drive. Again, I got the feeling that something

wasn't right.

I glanced in the backseat, to make sure we were alone. We were. My pulse raced. This is my chance. I could kill him now and no one would know.

As if reading my thoughts, Silas picked up his phone and dialed someone. "She just got in. I'm bringing her back to Fire Ridge. We will be there in twenty minutes."

Any thoughts of killing him disappeared. Unless I could make it look like an accident.

While my mind worked through different scenarios, I asked, "So what's this about? Did I do something wrong again?"

He turned the steering wheel onto a main road and pressed on the accelerator. "I just have some questions for you. Nothing to worry about."

"Will the witch be there again? I don't like witches."

"Interesting for someone who lives with a witch."

"Lynx is different."

"Is she now?" He laughed a sound that made the hair on my arms prickle. "You know who her mother is, right? Blood will always be stronger than friendship. You would be wise to remember that. In fact," he glanced at me sideways, "if you're living with Lynx, there's a reason. Cassandra doesn't make a move without it being well thought out, including in her daughter's life. I'd watch your back."

I shifted my weight against the cold leather of the seat. "Don't you worry about me. You've got bigger problems."

"Now those are the first true words you've ever spoken to me."

"I've told you the truth from the beginning, yet you still refuse to believe me. If you can't get over it, I'll just find a different pack to join. I thought yours was the best, but I'm starting to believe otherwise."

"We are the best, and soon we will be the most powerful too. None will be able to stand against us, including the Sangre Nocturnas. Our power will stretch beyond Rouen all the way to Coast City."

"That's a grand vision," I scoffed. "Besides, I hear Coast City has some kind of super vampire who's cleaning up the filth and will kill anyone who dares to

stop him.”

He chuckled. "When we get what we want, we won't be worried about some vampire with a hero complex. Coast City will be ours, just like Wildemoor and every other city between."

"What makes you so sure? Is it because of Scorpion's Breath? That drug isn't going to give you control, it's just going to make people crazy."

"Scorpion's Breath is just a distraction. Once people become hooked, they won't even see what's coming before it's too late. No, we have something much better."

I wet my lips and swallowed, hoping beyond hope he wasn't referring to the Abydos.

"Then what are you waiting for?" I baited. "Why not skip to the main event now?"

"Patience, my dear. One step at a time." He patted my leg. "First we have to find it. Our secret weapon. It's hidden in our very city. Never have we been so close to ultimate power!"

I bit the inside of my cheek, words escaping me. Had Silas insisted I stay close to the pack all this time because they found me out? Maybe Samira told him something that made him connect the dots. But how could she know? Or maybe even Lynx. She was a witch after all, from a powerful family. Maybe this whole time I was just a pawn on a chess board in a game everyone else was playing but me.

I considered my options. I could kill him now, sneak back and take the blood. Leave the city.

Except that left Dominic. And Samira, if she really had sold me out. Maybe she knew I had it from the beginning and that's why she wanted to live with us. I was grateful now that I'd kept the blood outside of the house. When she said that she wanted the blood, I'd assumed that she wanted to keep it out of Dominic's hands, but maybe they were working together.

I took a deep breath, stopping my thoughts from spiraling. I had to find out the truth first before I made assumptions. If Luke was right, then Samira could be trusted. For some reason, I had to know that first, before I killed Silas. I was

just beginning to open myself up to others, beginning to trust them. She'd helped me, or so I thought. Was it right to trust her?

Besides, I had everything in place. First Silas, then the biggest monster of them all—Dominic. I was so close, I could taste his blood on the back of my throat. I just needed a little more time.

Time I could take. If they really believed I had the blood, they would've already tortured the location out of me. For now, I was safe.

It was well into the night when we reached Fire Ridge. Most of the pack had already left, which gave me another clue that Silas had plans for me. But I didn't mind, as long as we were alone. I could handle him if he tried anything stupid again.

After I exited the SUV, Silas motioned for me to follow him. "We're going another way. Follow me."

He headed away from the mansion toward the forest beyond, typing into his phone with one hand. Probably telling Dominic we had arrived. I stopped briefly and stared at the front door to the house, wondering if I should tell at least Ryder I was here.

"I said, follow me," Silas snapped as he put away his phone, looking back at me like a master angry at his pup. He was breathing quickly, much the same way he had when we were driving to the restaurant earlier. Whatever he had planned, he was getting excited about it. And that meant that I was going to hate it.

I followed slowly behind him, a growing sickness twisting my gut. The mansion was growing further and further away. I inhaled a slow breath. That could be good for me. No reason to panic just yet.

We approached the woods, but Silas kept walking, taking us deeper into the black. My wolf vision took over, noting that all the animals were scurrying away from us.

"Where are we going?"

His only answer was the sound of leaves crunching beneath his footfalls. He stopped by a thick, gnarled tree and bent down, brushing aside a pile of dead leaves to reveal a circular iron door.

"What is this, Silas?"

He lifted it, unveiling a circular staircase leading down. The darkness within was all encompassing and screamed sociopath lair. Plus—tight space. "This is weird. I'm out of here."

"But don't you want to join Ryder?"

I stopped mid-step and turned back around. "Ryder? Why would he be down there?"

"When he found out we wanted to ask you some questions, he said he wanted to be there. He's a loyal friend."

The way he said loyal made pin pricks explode all up and down my spine. Had they questioned Ryder and found out about our connection? Had Silas already tortured Ryder down in that hole? Surely I would've sensed it if he had.

But I had to know, and I didn't want to do it alone.

"Why don't we have Luke or Gerald join us? The more the merrier for a Q and A session, right?"

"They're busy, but there are cameras down there. Pack members are watching." There was a muddy gleam in his eye, one I hadn't seen before. He was lying. "Now get down there. You're wasting my time."

Everything about this situation felt jacked up. Why would he question Ryder all the way out here? In an underground bunker? There was only one comforting thing about that dark hole. I glanced back at the mansion. It was secluded and being underground, probably soundproof. I could kill Silas. Blame it on the Greybacks. This could be my best opportunity. Maybe my only one.

As I stepped into the narrow stairwell, terror washed over me. I gripped the sides of the rail, holding my breath as darkness swallowed me. The walls seemed to be closing in and sweat dripped down my sides. I rushed, hurrying down the stairs before nausea could take over.

"Good girl," he said. The sound of his cane hitting the stairs as he walked behind me echoed in the concrete encased hole.

Cold blackness greeted me at the bottom of the stairs and it took a few seconds for my night vision to adjust. My heart was pounding and I clutched the wall, feeling dizzy. Silas finally reached the bottom, and I sprung up, not wanting him to know that I'd been freaking out. The tunnel walls were all made

of concrete and smelled surprisingly clean, not at all like we were underground. The concrete floors looked recently swept too.

"There's a door at the end. Go through it."

I turned toward it, my heart thumping against my rib cage. I traced my hand down the wall as sickness threatened to overcome me. My instincts were screaming all kinds of warnings. I reminded myself that I would never let him have power over me again. If he tried playing some sick game, he was dead.

After walking maybe thirty feet, I reached a steel door. I fumbled with the handle, anxious to get into a space bigger than the tunnel.

"Step aside." Silas removed a key from his pocket.

I sucked up against the concrete as he passed by me. His body held no scent. Odd for a shifter. Odd for anyone, actually.

Sliding the key into the lock, he turned it, opening a heavy latch. The door groaned, an eerie sound in this darkness, as he pushed it open. He flipped on a light, illuminating a space much bigger than the tunnel.

Blinking, I quickly stepped inside and filled my lungs with air, but it caught in my chest when I saw where we were. The entire room was encased by concrete like the tunnel. There wasn't a speck of dirt to be found. I couldn't even smell dust, only the faint aroma of some kind of floral chemical. There was a table pressed against the back wall, with two chairs neatly arranged under it. A small black suitcase lay on the table, lined up perfectly with the wall behind it.

A single metal chair sat in the center of the room. It had been bolted to the floor. Chains lay looped in a perfect circle next to it. I couldn't see any other doors, nor were there any other tunnels branching off. There were also no cameras that I could see.

"Where's Ryder?"

"Back at the mansion where he belongs." Silas closed the door, sealing us in this tomb together. "Have a seat."

"I'll stand." I watched him carefully, waiting for whatever surprise he had in store for me. My wolf hummed just under the surface, ready to take over when I needed her.

His eyes burned into me, and I could feel the buzz of his excitement running

through the room. He placed his cane on top of the table. "I gave you an order."

"I'm done taking your orders."

He appeared in front of me. I blinked and stepped back, surprised. He grabbed my arm and yanked me close. "You've made that clear, but I assure you, following orders can bring the ultimate gratification, if you have the right master."

"And you think you can be that man? Maybe bend me over your knee, give me a bare ass spanking with that whip of yours? I bet you'd like that."

"There are other things that can be just as effective. Smaller things."

"No thanks."

He wrinkled his nose in disgust. "I was hoping you would be more...curious and maybe willing to have a little fun down here. I thought if you could, I would convince Dominic that you weren't against the pack." His eyes lit up. "But, believe me Briar, I'm not opposed to forcing your compliance."

He gripped my arm tight and tried to shove me into the chair, but I didn't budge. "I said, have a seat!"

"Go to hell."

He took two steps back, and eyed me up and down, assessing me with a frown. "I must admit, I'm disappointed."

His breathing grew heavy, and his eyebrows drew close together. He reached behind his back and, pulling out a gun, pointed it directly at my chest. "This gun holds several silver bullets. If you disobey me again or even breathe wrong, I'll drill you with them. Now take a fucking seat!"

CHAPTER 45



Very little could've stopped me from attacking Silas, but silver bullets were not something I screwed with. I had been shot with one several years back and bled so much, I nearly died. The only thing that had saved me was me digging out the bullet so my body could finally heal. It was the worst pain I'd ever felt. I thought about going for the knives in my bra, but they would do nothing against his gun.

"How are you going to explain this to the pack?" I asked.

"Sit. Down." He motioned toward the chair with the gun.

I remained standing. "When they find out what you're doing to me—"

"Luke isn't coming for you!" He pulled the trigger, screaming. The loud pop hurt my ears, but a heartbeat later all I could think about was the exploding pain in my shin. A silver bullet had pierced the bone, and my whole lower leg throbbed. I dropped to the floor, moaning and gripping at the wound.

He bent over and grabbed my shirt, pulling me close to growl in my ear. "You think Luke is going to save you?" He grinned, as if expecting me to be surprised. "The errand I sent him on will keep him busy all night long. If he ever returns."

I groaned, still reeling in pain. "What did you do to him?"

"I only did what I have the right to do."

"Which is what?"

"I know you've grown close to him, that he's helping you." Reaching down, he grabbed my chin, forcing me to look into his eyes. They were furious. "I'm

higher up in the pack than Luke. I get first rights on any new pack members, and that arrogant son of a bitch wanted you for himself. But you are mine. I'm supposed to get first rights!"

I blinked, wiping his spit off my face. "And Samira?"

I had to know her role in all this.

"She was in on it with Luke, I'm sure. Only an old and powerful vampire like her could've compelled those Greybacks."

So she had been helping me. I could trust her after all.

He shoved my head back. "Now, get in the chair, or I'll put another..." He abruptly stopped talking and eyed me up and down with a slimy gaze. "Actually, take off your clothes first. I want to see your naked skin covered in red."

I sucked in a hitched breath at the request, stunned.

"Now."

Every part of me rebelled against the request, but I couldn't risk getting shot again. I needed the last of my strength if I was ever going to gain the upper hand. Reluctantly and carefully, I removed my clothing, scowling as Silas watched on, licking his lips and adjusting his crotch.

When I was finished, he motioned the gun toward the seat. "Get in."

Small movements racked my limbs as I climbed my way onto the hard chair. My jaw clenched hard when I had to slide my leg over and accidentally hit it on the chair's metal leg. I sucked in a breath, trying hard to relax. My wolf was growling and furious, but the silver prevented her from revealing herself.

"Wrap those chains around your leg and lock them."

I was deliberately slow as I did as he asked. Any chance of attacking him from this far away was out of the picture. Somehow, I had to draw him in closer, but he was smart. Smarter than I gave him credit for.

With my teeth clenched, I growled, "Why are you doing this? I've only ever done what was asked of me."

His eye twitched and nostrils flared. "Did you like what you saw?"

"What?"

"In the hidden room. Did you like the... knickknacks?" His gaze flickered to the chains. "Lock them."

He backed up further and began to unscrew the top of his cane with just one hand, his fingers moving expertly as if it was something he had practiced. When I didn't lock the chains, he raised the gun again.

I moved to obey, even though it was hard to form a rational thought. The pain was running up my leg and into my thigh now.

I whimpered a little, dragging my foot closer to the leg of the chair. I locked it and looked up at him, just as he was setting his cane on the table. My eyes filled with intense heat. I couldn't wait to tear him apart.

"Answer me." He put one of his hands behind his back, hiding something.

"I don't know what you're talking about. The room was empty."

"Other leg. Chain it good. Then get your arm." He stepped closer to me. "I know you saw them."

He was slowly taking away any chance I might have at battling him.

And he knew it.

"The room was empty," I insisted. I fumbled with the chain, still writhing in pain.

"Don't lie to me!" His scream echoed through the chamber and his eyes were frantic, unreadable, as he came toward me. "I hate liars. I had higher expectations for you, Briar. You could've ruled alongside us, a mighty weapon in our arsenal. But when you lie to me, I can't trust you."

I snarled, severely pissed off. No one yelled at me.

Time to shift.

I called on the ancient power that coursed through my blood. I didn't exactly understand it, but I knew it was strong. Strong enough to climb up the slippery, stone walls of an old well as a child. Strong enough to snap Silas in two.

"You're right," I seethed. "I saw the jars, you disgusting pile of shit." I looked up then, prepared to reveal myself to Silas just before I took his life. But he was staring at the ground as he walked behind me.

"Unfortunately," he began, "it's too late for you. I just can't trust you like I'd hoped."

Before I could get him to see the ancient power glowing in my eyes, a sharp sting pierced the back of my neck, followed by a cool liquid rushing into my

veins.

“What the...?” My wolf disappeared. Just gone like she had been sucked away in a tornado. My head began to spin, and my vision blurred. It dawned on me in that moment where Silas had been hiding the needles he’d been using on the human. In his cane, of course. “What did you do?”

He locked the last of the chains around me and moved back, watching me curiously. He no longer looked angry.

I lifted my eyebrows trying to get my eyes to focus.

Silas smoothed back my hair. “There is one way you can help me. And it’s convenient since Dominic is hesitant to try the Scorpion’s Breath on any of the wolves in the pack.” He smiled. “I would’ve preferred to use it on someone else, but since you are a lying bitch, you will do just fine.”

He cocked his head. “Tell me, how do you feel?”

My muscles had relaxed, and I sunk into the chair. I probably would’ve fallen off if my legs hadn’t been strapped to the chair.

“I feel good. Like I’m air.” My voice was deeper than usual. Was it even my voice? I stared up at the white ceiling. I think I was smiling. I felt like I was smiling.

“Now that you’re being more cooperative, let’s start over. Tell me, how did you do it?”

My eyes rolled into the back of my head. The room had turned pink. No, orange. The ceiling swirled into a dark storm. It started to rain, and I tried to reach up to catch the drops in my hand, but my arms wouldn’t budge. A sharp pain erupted in my leg, bringing me back to the concrete room.

Silas stood in front of me. “I must know. How did you get the briefcase?”

I laughed in a voice that was not my own. It was too shrill, too manic. I began talking. I couldn’t stop. The words just fell from my mouth like water over a cliff.

I told him everything. My alliance with Ryder, my uncle, and even how Samira and Luke had helped me. I confessed how I had warned the Greybacks and gave him their location. I hated that I was talking, but I wasn’t in control any longer. It never dawned on me that I would be the one to ruin my own plan.

The room burst into colors and sparks lit up around me. I jumped, trying to claw my way out of the chair, afraid I would catch fire.

Silas grabbed me, holding me still. “But why? Why spend so much effort to destroy us?”

The scene in the room changed. I was back in the woods. The smell of sweet rolls and homemade root beer filled the air. Music echoed through the trees. Violins, cellos, and French horns hummed a sweet lullaby and angels came from heaven to hear them. I looked around me, amazed at the white satin ribbons and sheer drapes that weaved their way through the tops of the trees. The whole place was glowing. I danced below them, twirling my dress round and round.

My brothers, Stefano and James, were with me. They were laughing and talking excitedly. Our mother came to shush us. It was time. I could barely stay in my seat.

The music changed: a familiar sound I’d heard last summer when my aunt was married. A moment later my favorite person in the world appeared at the end of the row. My soon-to-be new sister, Sarah. My other brother, Will, waited for her at the end of a small platform. She walked down the aisle, smiling brilliantly, and when she winked at me, I giggled.

Everything was beautiful. The world was perfect.

They stood together beneath a wooden arch, graced with ivy and lilacs. A preacher spoke about finding your true mate, and how important it was to find that special someone to spend the rest of your life with.

I couldn’t wait to find my true mate.

But then, everything changed.

Satin ribbons dripped red, screams of terror replaced the violins, and the smell of copper and gunpowder polluted the air.

Rain dropped, falling from the dark sky above me, releasing its pent up rage. Or maybe it was me. Was I crying?

“Keep talking.”

Was I talking? I wasn’t sure, but the memories kept coming, battering my mind like a spiked wrecking ball. I cried out as the pain from the memories ripped me to shreds. I clung to the shoulders next to me, screaming.

Suddenly Dominic was there, holding my small hand to prevent me from running away, and I sat upright.

This. This was something new. Something I hadn't remembered before.

He was forcing me to watch Silas, who was bent over Will's body. Silas' eyes gleamed in the night, and he stabbed and stabbed. Stabbing Will everywhere, except for in the place that would kill him.

My shoulders shook, and I sobbed as I remembered Sarah, laying near Will, and in so much pain. She couldn't save my brother; Silas had shattered her legs. She watched helplessly but didn't cry. She was so strong. Instead, she whispered words of strength and encouragement to my brother.

And that. That's what infuriated Silas the most. It made his wrath so much worse. Because Silas hated kindness.

My mind began to clear and the colors around me faded.

I remembered breaking free from Dominic's hand. I had to leap over my mother's body to escape. Half of her face was missing. Dominic and Silas raced after me, chasing me into the woods. My little legs couldn't out run them.

They found me and pinned me down.

I remembered being afraid. I didn't want a face like my mother.

But they didn't kill me. Instead, they tossed me down the well. I remember those two faces, staring down at me with shadowed, black eyes. Their laughing and joking.

They sealed me up in that tomb.

For three days, I was stuck in there, in the cold and wet. And after three days, after I'd shed all my tears, screamed my voice hoarse, and battered my little fists into the wet and mossy stone wall until they bled, I realized I was on my own.

I would have to save myself.

And so I did.

"You're Isabella? Isabella Moretti?"

I jerked free from my memory, and Silas came into focus. His face was a mask of shock, and he was sitting on his ass in front of me, staring up at me as if I was a fucking librarian at story time.

I nodded. "That's me."

I was dizzy, slow, and sluggish.

“How did you survive?”

I shook my head, but the words came anyways. “I began to climb. Up and then down. Stepping. Grabbing. Slipping. Falling. Over and over until my mind shut down. I became a machine.”

A tear slid down my face, but I shook my head again. No. I wouldn’t cry in front of the man who had forced so much evil upon my family. I bit my lip hard and the pain helped me focus. My mind began to clear as I fought back against the drug, using the ancient power that had been bestowed upon me in my darkest hour.

And then, my wolf was there, stronger than ever. And she was pissed. She hovered beneath my consciousness, growling and screaming, ready to be released.

“Then what happened?” he asked, his eyes wide.

“My body began to change,” I answered, my voice deepening. My wolf was coming.

“How so?”

“My bones shifted and cracked. They grew longer. Fangs grew in my mouth.”

“I don’t believe it! You couldn’t have shifted that young. It’s impossible!”

“Is it?” I opened my eyes and stared at him, hoping he’d feel the power within them.

“Holy shit!” He scrambled backwards, forgetting the gun near my feet. “Your eyes!”

A smile crept up my face, my fangs making it more scary than friendly. Using the power my ancient wolf gave me, I kicked my leg free of its chains, shattering the links.

His eyes widened, and his mouth fell open.

My hands came next, easily snapping the restraints.

He stuttered as I rose to my feet, towering over him. I felt no pain, no sadness. Even the sting from the silver bullet was gone. All that was left inside me was rage as powerful as a thunderous storm across the ocean, with waves so

high, none could withstand the force.

“Impossible,” he hissed, but his voice faltered.

I stalked forward, grinning. “You keep using that word, and yet, here I am.” I spread out my arms. “Proving the impossible.”

The blood drained from his face, aging him twenty years.

“My face will be the last thing you ever see.” I leaned toward him, inches from his face. “I’m going to enjoy killing you.”

CHAPTER 46



Silas scurried to his feet, his back bumping against the wall. “Stay back! I order it!” He slid against the wall, edging toward the door. “Dominic will hear about this.”

“No. He won’t.”

He reached into his jacket pocket and yanked out a small blade, frantically waving it in front of him.

I kicked his hand, and the motion shattered his bone. The blade dropped to the ground and clanked against the hard floor. I expected him to cry out in pain, but instead he lifted his arm. His hand hung limp at the wrist.

“What did you do?” he cried, and tried to fix his hand by lifting it, but it flopped back down. He stared at it in wonder, the way one looks at an abstract painting. “You broke it.”

I kicked at him again, aiming for his thigh. This time, when the bone snapped, he screamed in pain and collapsed to the ground.

It was my turn to question him. “Does Dominic know about your obsession with body parts?”

“My obsession?” He carefully pressed his back against the wall, cradling his broken arm to his chest. “Do you really think I am the type of person who would keep dirty, smelly bottles around?”

“What?” I touched my head, thinking hard. Silas was meticulous in everything he did. I thought back to that room. How dirty it had been. How unorganized. So unlike the contents of the box I’d stolen.

My head snapped up. I'd gotten it all wrong.

"Tell me," he said, his voice strained, "did you bother to look beyond the door at the back of that room?" He gritted his teeth. "You think a few jars of ears and eyeballs are grotesque? You don't know shit." He spat at me.

I wiped the spittle from my face. "So Dominic is the sick bastard?"

"He's a visionary with a strange and sometimes messy hobby, but you haven't seen nothing yet. He has a friend, someone important who's taken a special interest in him. Once they find the ancient blood, those who stand against us will drown in their own blood."

"His friend sounds like a real douche. I look forward to kicking his ass too."

Coldness seeped into my veins.

He eyed me, looking me up and down, rage mottling his face. "I told Dominic we should've killed you that day, after questioning you, of course. It was dangerous to leave you alive, especially since you might know where your father kept the Abydos."

"You're right. He should've killed me."

His mouth parted slightly. "You have it, don't you?"

I said nothing.

He chuckled through a painful grimace. "You have no idea the shitstorm you've stepped in. Those in power know the blood is here. In Rouen. It's only a matter of time until they trace it back to you."

I crossed my arms, leaning down. "How do they know it's here?"

"Because you moved it from its resting spot. Your father had it spelled so other supernaturals couldn't sense it, but you disrupted all that. Good luck finding someone powerful enough to mask the relic's magic again. The last warlock died protecting his spell and the blood's location."

"I make my own luck." I crouched until I was at eye level with him and gripped his shirt. "You killed my whole family. Every single one of them! And you've been torturing and killing ever since." I scrunched my face, feeling disgusted. "And you thought I was just like you. You thought you could train me to inflict pain and torture others? I was laughing at you behind your back. You're nothing but a filthy disgusting dog, following Dominic's orders like he's the

fucking sun god.”

I leaned closer, smelling his weird clean smell. “You don’t know how happy I am you brought me in here, where no one is around to hear you cry. No cameras to record your death. I’ve been waiting years for this moment.”

“You’ll never get away with it.”

“I’m not afraid of Dominic.” I punched him in the gut and air whistled through his mouth. He sucked in a breath, trying to suck oxygen back into his lungs.

“It’s not Dominic you have to worry about it.” He coughed. “He’s a saint compared to the real monster that will come for you as soon as it discovers you have the blood.”

He surged forward, startling me, as he shifted in a single beat of my heart. He knocked me back and sunk his teeth into my throat.

Blood sprayed from my neck and leaked onto the floor. I opened my mouth to cry out, but the crimson liquid bubbled in my throat, making me gag. His teeth sunk in deeper and crushed my wind pipe.

My wolf howled, the sound vibrating my mind. This isn’t how she was going down. I could already feel my neck beginning to heal. I just had to get him off me.

Bringing up my knees, I slammed into his chest with such force, his body flew through the air. His teeth ripped from my flesh, and he slammed against the wall. He bellowed, barking like an injured asshole as he scrambled to his feet. His claws scratched at the concrete as he limped for the door to get away from me.

A single burst of power flowed from my mind and my neck immediately healed. I jumped up, my blood burning at the sight of my prey running. It spurred me on with a hunger reserved only for the most powerful of predators. This bitch was mine.

My discarded bra was near my feet. I grabbed the knife from it and ran after him. I was much faster than him and appeared in front of the door blocking his escape. He yelped and stumbled back.

“You didn’t know I could move as fast as a vampire, did you?”

Cornered, he did the only thing he could do. He lunged for me again, his jaw reaching for my throat. Before he could make contact, I slammed the knife into his hairy gut, smiling at the feel of the silver blade sliding into his flesh. His body began to shimmer and take shape back into his human form.

I kept the blade in him as he gripped my shoulder, his eyes white. He forced a smile through the pain. "That won't kill me."

"I hoped it wouldn't." I grinned wildly as I circled the knife deeper, my knuckles disappearing into his stomach. "This is for my brothers."

His blood coated my hand and dripped to the floor. I jerked my hand upward, severing his guts.

"This is for my parents." Fire burned in my eyes.

He gaped at me, his mouth open. Blood filled the dark space and drained onto the floor. My wrist slipped into his stomach as I cut even higher with my small knife, wiggling it in every direction to cause the most pain.

"And that is for the sister I almost had."

I yanked out my hand. A pile of bloody intestines came with it and slopped to the already red concrete.

I didn't look away from his face, didn't even blink, until that final moment when that last sliver of life faded from his eyes.

It was a strange feeling. I expected to feel some satisfaction, but instead I grew angrier. My breathing quickened, then hitched painfully in my chest. I stood up and backed away from him.

His eyes remained open, staring at me accusingly.

My anger turned to rage, and I tossed the knife down. "You brought this upon yourself!"

Maybe it was a small remnant of the Scorpion's Breath still in my system, but I swore his mouth opened and hissed, "We are the same."

Screaming, I rushed him and kicked him in the gut, over and over until copper red painted the room, and my bare leg was bloody. The bastard deserved everything he got.

I gasped for breath and leaned over, my hands resting on my knees. All I could see was red. The color was everywhere.

I began to shake. Maybe it was the ancient power going dormant again or maybe the drugs clearing from my blood, but all the pain from before returned in full force. The silver bullet, still lodged in my leg, made every bone in my body throb. It was the only wound my wolf couldn't heal.

I needed to get out of here. Away from the smell of blood. Away from all the red. Maybe then I could dig out the bullet.

Gasping for air, I threw open the door, nearly ripping it from its hinges. I stumbled down the darkened hallway and to the spiral staircase. My hands were numb. Flashes of me gutting Silas shocked my mind, and I nearly fell to the ground several times. Focus!

I clawed my way to the top of the staircase, partially on my knees, then threw open the iron hatch, gasping in the cool night air. I collapsed against the cold ground, feeling both amazing and terrified.

I laughed, even as tears stung my eyes. I finally killed him.

My body continued to shake. I inhaled several hitched breaths and wiped at my eyes. I needed to think. This wasn't the time to have an epic meltdown. I pulled myself upright.

Somehow, I had to cover this up. I needed to stay in the pack so I could do the same to Dominic.

The thought of cutting someone's belly again, even Dominic's, had me falling against a tree. So much blood.

I needed help. I needed to find Ryder or my uncle.

I ran, tripping over roots and rocks. Pain shot up my leg with each step. I should shift, but I couldn't feel my wolf anywhere. The silver must have driven her away.

The blood on my body was sticky and had cooled in this chilly fall weather. Only monsters wear this much red.

My body crashed into something immovable, and strong arms wrapped around me.

"Briar! What the hell happened?" a familiar, deep voice asked. "I've been looking everywhere for you."

I sucked in a shallow breath and looked up. Luke's blue eyes searched mine

frantically.

“You’re back,” I whimpered, and fell into him. All the way. And unlike any other time, I didn’t try to stop it. I had never needed him more.

“It only took me thirty minutes to realize Silas had sent me on a goose hunt. That’s when I knew something was wrong.”

I gripped him tightly. “Thank God you’re alive.”

He pulled back, looking me up and down, searching for some gaping wound that might explain the blood covering me. “Where are you hurt? Who did this to you?”

“Silas—”

His eyes darkened, and the wolf came alive in him. “I’ll kill him! Where is he?”

“—is dead. I killed him.”

He stumbled, surprised, and glanced around. “Where?”

It took a lot of effort to push through the bloody mind-fog screwing with my thoughts. “Underground. He took me to a secret room and injected me with Scorpion’s Breath. He was going to kill me.”

My legs buckled suddenly, and I fell forward.

Luke caught me. “Briar!”

His hands were warm against my cool flesh. I hoped he wouldn’t ever let go. I didn’t like being this cold. My vision began to fade.

“Something’s wrong,” I mumbled. That’s when I remembered the bullet still embedded in my leg. Silver. It was slowly killing me. I might’ve been able to fight against it, but the combination of the drug that was probably still in me, and the fact that I’d just cut through a dude’s intestines had fractured my mind.

“Briar!” He looked me over again. “Don’t close your eyes. Just stay with me.”

My lids grew heavy as darkness threatened to pull me under.

“Stop being so damn stubborn and obey me!” he growled, and shook me. “Where are you hurt?”

I forced my eyes open, but it was as if barbells had been taped to my lids. I forced them open. I couldn’t give up like this. Dominic, the sick bastard, still had

to pay.

Using the last of my reserves, I managed to whisper, “Silver bullet. Leg.”

In the distance, I heard shouting. Someone was coming toward us. Any chance I had of covering up Silas’ death was gone. Everyone would know I had killed him. The moment might’ve been bitter sweet, but it was ruined when the whole world turned black.

CHAPTER 47



I was being carried, even though I couldn't feel anyone touching me. It was as if I was floating.

I definitely felt dead.

My eyelids were heavy, but I managed to blink them open. A dark canopy of trees filled my vision. Faint moonlight twinkled between the empty spaces, shining like silver beneath a water's murky surface. I couldn't keep my eyes open, and they fluttered shut.

There were voices. Two? Three people? Their words made no sense but by their tones, they were frantic.

I sifted through my fractured memories. Mostly all I saw was red. It made me want to vomit. Something had happened. Something bad, and yet good all at the same time.

"Hold on, Briar!"

My eyes opened briefly. Luke stared down at me, his face pale and sweaty. He looked so worried and scared. I'd never seen him like this before. I didn't like it.

That's when I remembered my fist buried into Silas' stomach. My eyes closed again, wanting to forget the brutal violence caused by my hands.

But Silas was dead.

Hadn't I wanted that?

I did, I just didn't realize my revenge would include such horror. Maybe I should die. I had done no worse than Silas.

But if I died, then Dominic would live.

“Fight this, babe. I need you.”

By sheer will, I pried my eyes open. I couldn’t go just yet, not while Dominic still breathed.

Luke was smoothing my hair back while talking to someone at my feet. I could feel pressure, but no pain.

With limited faculties, all I could do was think. I skipped over the horrible memories—I had too many of those—and thought of the last several months. I had found my uncle, someone I thought was dead. I had discovered I was capable of making friends and even had begun to trust others again. That alone was huge for me.

I thought of Lynx and how sweet and kind she was. Someone like her needed to be protected from the evils of the world. Ryder, too. They were so much alike. Maybe I’d set them up, if I ever got the chance.

Then there was Samira. Hard and dead but with a soft and human center. There was so much I could learn from her. I think she knew more than anyone else what it felt like to be a monster.

My mind wandered to Roma, the witch with secrets, but the good kind, I thought. She looked out for me and that was a good feeling. It’s what a mother would do.

Finally, I thought of Luke. I’d never felt such powerful feelings for anyone else in my life. He could be the real deal, if only we could both let go of the past. We could heal each other, and hopefully screw each other too.

There’s no way I could die now. Not when life was just getting good.

A sharp pain in my leg broke through my body’s numbness, and a scream tore through my mouth. Black splotches crowded my vision again. I gripped Luke’s hand hard.

“I don’t want to die,” I gasped, finally finding my voice.

“You won’t. The silver is gone. Rest now because you’re going to need all the strength you have for what comes next. I promise you though, Briar, you won’t be alone. You can trust me to get you out of this.”

Comforted by his words and the feel of his gentle touch against my skin, my

breathing slowed. He was right. What came next could be my greatest battle yet. Silas was dead and Dominic would want revenge.

For now, I had to trust Luke would take care of me. There was nothing else I could do, especially with darkness threatening to overtake me again.

And so I gave into it.

For I was a Moretti, daughter to Apollo, the great Alpha of the Silver Moon pack, and Morettis never go quietly into the night.

As soon as I wake and have gathered my strength, I will be the dawn that destroys the darkness of Rouen.

It is my destiny.

THE END

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