



DEE
CARNEY

TAMING
her wolf

A Fire Creek Shifters novel



Taming Her Wolf

By Dee Carney

For disgraced physician Kim Sharpe, Fire Creek was supposed to be a sanctuary, a place to hide from media scrutiny and the public eye. But when a group of wolf shifters break into her clinic and demand she save the life of a packmate, her serene world unravels. And when the wolf dies despite Kim's efforts, she's dragged into a hunt she can't control, led by a man she desperately wants to understand.

All shifters live with their beasts, but Chris "Brick" Preston's is dangerously close to the surface. And it wants Kim. Sex keeps the beast sated for now, but unless Kim can help him find a more permanent solution, Brick risks becoming a feral, banished—or put down—by his pack.

With each incredibly intense encounter, Brick and Kim grow closer. But time is not on their side. When Kim is faced with betraying the pack in order to save Brick's life, the consequences may be more than they can survive.

94,800 words

Dear Reader,

I don't know about you, but I need more hours in my day just so I can get more books read. No matter how much I read, I always feel like the next great book is right around the corner waiting for me, and that there just aren't enough hours in the day to get to everything I want to read. I love my job, but sometimes I wish I'd win the lottery so I could just spend my days reading.

This month's Carina Press releases will have you wishing you could just spend days reading, because it's an incredible lineup of books from Marie Force, Shannon Stacey, Lisa Marie Rice and so many other talented authors. You won't want to take a pass on any of them!

Sam and Nick are back in Marie Force's romantic suspense [*Fatal Frenzy*](#). With Inauguration Day fast approaching, Sam's loyalties are divided between a heartbreaking case at work and her need to support Nick as he takes the oath of office as vice president. You won't be able to turn the pages fast enough to find out what happens next! Don't forget, the first seven books in the Fatal series are now available in print, starting with [*Fatal Affair*](#)!

Shannon Stacey launches a brand-new trilogy this month, and it's available in print, digital and audio. What do you get when you mix the sexiness of Boston firefighters with Shannon's trademark humor and romance? In [*Heat Exchange*](#), the first book in this hot new contemporary romance trilogy, meet Aidan Hunt, one of the men of Boston Fire, and the woman he just can't stay away from, bro code or no, Lydia Kincaid. Look for [*Controlled Burn*](#), Rick's story, in December 2015.

Love the Men of Midnight series by Lisa Marie Rice? Never picked one up before? Don't miss this sexy, sexy installment of her cracktastic romantic suspense series. The boy Summer Redding loved and thought dead is back—now he's a hardened warrior, a man out for revenge, and he'll fight to the death to protect what is his, and that includes her. [*Midnight Fire*](#) can easily stand alone, but you'll want to pick up the other books in this series as soon as you turn the last page.

In another cracktastic read, Caitlin Dufresne swears she doesn't regret any of the sacrifices she's made in her ruthless quest to be the best lawyer at her elite Chicago firm, but a one-night stand with the sexy, stubborn IT guy makes her realize she may have been missing out on more than she knew... [*In Her Defense*](#) by Julianna Keyes is a sexy contemporary romance that will hit all the right buttons.

Also in the sexy contemporary romance category this month is author Jill Sorenson with [*Shooting Dirty*](#). Seasoned stripper Janelle Parker gets tied up in a dangerously sexy affair with Ace Clemmons, the tattooed criminal who shot her ex. Now she has to deal with both him and his motorcycle club.

A.M. Arthur's popular Restoration Series wraps up with another great male/male romance, [*Taking a Chance*](#). The last thing Ell wants is a broken heart, but that doesn't stop him lusting after the sexy carpenter working on his kitchen. Auggie can't stay away from Ell, but intense attraction may not be enough to overcome a secret from their shared past.

If you read Caitlyn McFarland's debut dragonshifter romance, [*Soul of Smoke*](#), you'll be anxious to get your hands on [*Shadow of Flame*](#), the second book in her Dragonsworn series. To end a war that has raged for a thousand years, Kai Monahan and Rhys ap Ayen, her shapeshifting dragon mate, must navigate a labyrinthine network of spies, prejudice and divided loyalties—but if they can't stop denying how much they need each other first, they'll lose everything to an enemy they never saw coming.

Maybe mystery is what you're craving this month? In [*Cover Story*](#), another intriguing mystery by Brenda Buchanan, Maine newspaper reporter Joe Gale's vigorous coverage of a murder trial involving a member of a high-profile political family leads to a relentless campaign of intimidation by a shadowy force determined to keep the truth buried.

Also this month, Dee Carney starts a new paranormal romance series, Fire Creek Shifters. All shifters live with their beasts, but in *Taming Her Wolf* Chris "Brick" Preston's is dangerously close to the surface. And it wants Kim Sharpe. Sex keeps the beast sated for now, but unless Kim can help him find

a more permanent solution, Brick risks becoming a feral, doomed to be banished—or put down—by his pack.

With all of these to choose from, you might want to call in sick to work one day. (I'll write you an editor's note. I'm sure your boss will accept that, right?)

Until next month, here's wishing you a wonderful month of books you love, remember and recommend.

Happy reading!

Angela James
Editorial Director, Carina Press

Dedication

To Marianne, who helped me research some of the science in this story. (I hope she doesn't mind that I took some creative license with what she told me. Y'know, *writers*...)

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“There are nights when the wolves are silent and only the moon howls.”

George Carlin

Chapter One

The sounds of blood pounding through his ears and the thumping of multiple pairs of feet crashing down on fragile twigs and dry leaves kept Brick Preston focused. It kept him from checking behind him, specifically to monitor the status of the adolescent, to see if he was still breathing.

The moon hung low in the sky, its creamy and pale yellow not yet at its full potential, still vying with the sun for dominance. Brick's wolf paced inside him, the scent of blood agitating them both.

How much *fucking* farther?

Instinct prickled his skin, the urge to shift into something faster, stronger and harder screaming along each centimeter of his nerves. If Abe had any chance of surviving, they had to get him to help.

In minutes, Doc Casper would be closing up shop. Every attempt to reach him on a cell resulted in an automated voice suggesting the caller leave a message. If they got there too late, the young man would succumb to his wounds. So much blood.

"How's he doing?" he shouted over his shoulder. The run should have made him pant a little harder, but the punishing pace put them that much closer to medical care. The humidity of a dying summer thickened the air, not helping matters any. Burning lungs wouldn't be enough to stop any of them.

"Hang on, Abe." Whispered words, not answering Brick. Directed at the kid.

Hang on, Abe.

The adolescent's sobs had ended a while ago, each of the men coming to an abrupt stop when the last cry had sounded. Brick's heart had hammered as he'd backtracked at a jog, not wanting to know, but needing to know Abe's fate. But then Rowan had called out, "Go!"

Brick had turned and broken into a full run again. All of them had. They'd picked up pace, none of them questioning the urgency. It couldn't have been more than three or so miles to the clinic and faster to carry him directly there than to backtrack to one of the vehicles. He questioned that decision now, especially with the thick air, like breathing through pea soup, slowing them

all.

Brick looked back in time to catch Rowan jostling the boy's body as he struggled to clear a split log. The branch snagged his trouser leg, but he maintained his grip. Despite the rough handling, a barely audible grunt was the only sound Abe made.

What the hell had he been doing way out here in the middle of God's nowhere, anyhow? Their Alpha had placed a curfew on all the adolescents for a reason. God damn the coward killing their kids. Brick was determined for Abe not to be included in the fatality count.

"Do you need me to take him?" he called.

"Right behind you." Unlike him, Rowan sounded out of breath, no doubt from handling the extra one hundred twenty pounds of dead weight, but steel determination strengthened his words. He wouldn't drop his younger cousin, and he'd be damned if he gave him up until close to his own last breath. Brick couldn't blame him.

Using the fading sunlight, partially hidden by the canopy of trees, he scoped ahead of them. With every whip-thin tree they passed, he expected to see the little clinic that had served their pack for at least thirty years. Casper understood their need for secrecy and somehow kept his meager staff silent about what they saw too.

He hadn't been this way in a while, though. Now, being unable to reach the physician, regret shoved its way forward. Over the past year, they'd lost half a dozen adolescents to a serial murderer with no apparent rhyme or reason to his choice of victims. The only commonality among the group was the fact that they belonged to the pack. Were the pack's young to care for.

Bury.

"I'm going ahead," a quiet voice said. Brick shifted his attention to the man who'd sped up to run alongside him. Of all the men who'd convened to help, Morris's presence surprised him the most. He kept to himself mostly, like Brick. Why had Morris been in the wilds? "It's not much farther, and it'll give him time to prep."

Brick nodded and almost immediately, the younger man shifted. His wolf's tawny coat sprouted, while an expression of extreme pain flickered across Morris's face. The fleeting transformation felt like the skin of the entire body splitting open and all bones buckling simultaneously, but the moment of agony passed so quickly, it was hardly remembered. Once the wolf was set

free, overwhelming joy infused the body, demolishing any memory of what had transpired during the shift.

He followed the sight of black-tipped ears before the wolf itself was lost from his human sight. His own wolf whined before yelping at him twice. Brick understood how he felt. It made more sense for the wolf to join his packmate on four legs than the slower man on two.

Then the other entity inside him—the beast—lunged.

Brick stumbled, caught off guard by the force that crashed into the metaphysical barrier keeping the beast and wolf contained. He didn't claim to understand how it worked—hell, he wasn't sure anyone knew—but the son of a bitch was testing Brick's patience with its animosity.

He went down hard on one knee, gritting his teeth against the sharp punch of pain. His head snapped up and he pushed himself back into a run before the others trampled over him. The sensation of pinpricks raced along his skin, the beast once again trying to break out. Sweat beaded along his forehead, his body unused to the ill-timed punishment.

Although a small part of him wanted to turn around, to see who'd noticed the fall, Brick faced forward. He was thankful for being in motion. It kept the fine tremor in his hands from being evident.

He didn't need this shit right now, and damned if he knew how to put a stop to it. If the others found out, the consequences would be dire.

"There," he shouted. The soft blue of the painted building peeked at them from behind a wall of trees. A chimney stack made it an unusual building, and not once could Brick ever remember seeing the fireplace lit, but right now, the brick structure felt like home base. Once they broke past the tree barrier, several feet of clearing would make the final stretch less taxing. So close...

Everyone knew the way to the back entrance, closest to the inside examination rooms. Rowan and Danny headed in that direction, while Brick decided to move to the front of the building. He wanted to see if Morris had any luck in locating Dr. Casper and if for some reason he hadn't, maybe he would run into the older man himself.

He'd just turned the corner when Morris's voice stopped him. "Think we're too late."

"Nobody here?" Brick gulped down air, reminding himself to spend more time running on two legs.

“Not a one.” Morris stood nude, comfortable in the humid evening air. He sniffled, then wiped beneath his nose with the back of his arm. “At least the front door’s locked. There’s a car in the lot, but I haven’t seen or heard anyone.”

Dread wormed its way through Brick’s insides. “Go around back, see if they need your help. Kid was looking worse last time we checked.”

If push came to shove, they’d break in, forcing themselves inside to deal with the consequences later. If they went from a full-on shove to straight-on ass kicking, they could pop the lock on the car and borrow it for the hour-long drive into the city. He’d never say it out loud, but Abe would more than likely not survive the trip.

Brick searched his mind for options, couldn’t come up with any that were more reasonable. *Fuck*. He hated this.

By the time he got back, Rowan and Danny had Abe on the ground. Rowan was on his knees, his face hovering just above Abe’s. Brick gasped when he looked at the paleness of Abe’s face. The color around his dry lips was unnatural and for a split second, he was certain the boy was already dead.

Rowan strode toward them from the direction of the woods with a determined and fierce look. He held a large rock in one hand and before Brick could ask him what he was doing, or what he intended, he hurled the rock against the window. The window smashed, glass shattering into the building. If anyone remained inside, there was no way they didn’t hear the noise. One glance at Abe’s prone body, and Brick brutally extinguished any guilt that tried to flicker to life.

Rowan thrust his arm into the window, oblivious to the shards of glass protruding from the metal frame. A quick flick of the wrist resulted in a soft *snick* as the latch released and he could yank open the door from the outside.

“Ready,” he called to the men on the ground.

Danny pulled Abe’s flaccid body into a sitting position and then hauled him over his shoulder, fireman-carry style.

“Get him patched,” Brick said, his heart a thunderclap in his chest. “Then Morris, see if you can locate some keys for that vehicle.”

“You?”

“Gonna get started on getting it running without keys, in case they ain’t around.” All of the men had very rudimentary training for trauma, but Brick

knew their combined knowledge couldn't replace a real doctor.

When this was all over, they'd find Casper and figure out what went wrong, why he hadn't returned their distress calls, but until then, the next best thing meant transporting Abe out of there.

As he was leaving, Brick glanced back to where the body had lain. The pool of bright red blood caught the reflection of the rising moon. It would have been a beautiful painting if it hadn't meant that a young man edged that much closer to death.

* * *

Kim stared at the balance in her accounts and fought back a surge of panic. Just under six hundred dollars. Over ten years as a physician, and that meager amount made up what remained of her career. She glanced at the phone, sending it mental vibes to ring with a job offer, sighing when it stared back at her in glaring silence.

Once upon a time, she'd pulled in over three hundred thousand in a slow year.

Once upon a time, people had actually trusted her to take care of them.

Once upon a time was gone now, and would never return. The most she could hope for was living in peace. Maybe with some luck, the reporters wouldn't figure out to where she'd disappeared. If that same luck held, she'd dodge angry mobs attempting to drive her out of practice again.

The small town of Fire Creek couldn't pay her well, but the Town Council hadn't asked many questions. Neither had she. But they could have prepared her better. The patients were kind enough, the staff competent, but she couldn't pay her bills off runny noses and GI upsets. Especially when the patients brought in a dozen freshly laid eggs as payment for services rendered.

Glancing at the cartons stacked on her desk, she tried to muster up some gratitude for them. When Mrs. Abrose, friendly but wearing threadbare clothes, had given them to her earlier, she'd beamed with pride as Kim had taken the "payment."

Heaven help her.

Kim glanced at her savings account again, winced, and then shut down the depressing page. There were other spreadsheets needing her attention.

How the mighty had fallen. If things didn't change soon, she'd have to give up the place she rented and perhaps turn one of the exam rooms into a living space. The clinic was small, had been well maintained and was located out in the middle of BFE. It appeared relatively safe. A coat of paint or two—

Kim straightened. What was that noise?

She strained her hearing. Alert. Searching. Nothing came though and, by increments, she relaxed. Just a normal, everyday sound.

Still.

She typed. Waited. Another keystroke. Paused. So close to finishing the payroll numbers for her three employees.

This was insane. Too much binge-watching of zombie shows must have rattled her nerves, making her jumpy. Maybe dial back the late-night horror and spend more time on HGTV. To go all panicked and dumb over hearing a noise? In the woods, no less? *Hello!* It's what the woods did.

Seconds passed, and then a good minute of nothing but the sound of her own breathing. Tense muscles eased. Fingers began typing again, momentum building.

Fire Creek meant quiet and mundane. Nothing to worry about at all.

The four-thousand-person population guaranteed small-town living, small-town issues and smaller-than-small-town crime. The real estate agent swore a single woman would find her neighbors friendly and life simple.

After a day like today—a sprained ankle, two stomach viruses and one pediatric fever—her rumbling stomach seemed to think it had earned a reward. Sorry, baby. A bacon cheeseburger with crispy fried jalapenos, grilled onions and barbecue sauce might only be a forty-five minute drive from the clinic, but the best she could do was a bowl of cold cereal. Or a fried egg. Lots and lots of fried eggs in her future.

Amused at her own expense, she pushed away.

And glass exploded in one of the exam rooms.

Shit. Shit. Shit!

Kim jumped to her feet, the sensation of ice splintering inside her veins. Her heart kicked against her ribs, the ham sandwich she'd eaten earlier rancid in her stomach.

Okay, maybe that was a little melodramatic. There was no need to panic. Not yet.

She made her way to the door of her office, torn on her next steps.

A small instinct, the kind harboring no common sense whatsoever, insisted she calmly, but cautiously, make her way to the rooms and investigate the source of the noise. The much larger, more rational and less suicidal instinct ordered her to hit the front door running and not return until she had the sheriff in tow.

She peered down the hallway, afraid of what she might find.

Her medical school diploma hung in between black-and-white portraits of the wilds surrounding Fire Creek. At first, she couldn't figure out why the décor caught her attention. She froze as her brain caught up to her sense of self-preservation.

Lights in all of the exam rooms were off, but there were reflections in the pictures. Shapes shifted in the glass, the outline of several men.

Don't scream. Oh, but the urge clawed the back of her throat. It scrabbled there, a moment away from breaking free.

Her mind fractured, making it impossible to decide on her next action. If she moved, they'd see her. If she didn't move, they'd see her. Because she didn't move, goose bumps rode along her skin. Because she didn't move, she watched them. Their slow, deliberate movements.

These men searched for something. Probably drugs. Didn't *Newsweek* do some sort of documentary recently on small-town crimes? Meth heads taking over America.

She had to go. No drugs on premises, but the men were more than welcome to the eggs. She'd simply do them the convenience of not being there while they pillaged.

Thankful she'd worn uniform clogs instead of typical squeaky sneakers, Kim drew a deep breath and then eased down the hall toward the front door. Her heart throbbed in her neck, but she swallowed past the fear and kept moving.

Along the way she mentally focused on the location of her car. Her keys. She practiced in her head how to turn the knob and whether she should fling open the door or slip through it with the stealth of an adulterous lover.

The loud moans of a wounded person in obvious pain rippled toward her, putting a temporary pause on her escape. Was she leaving someone in trouble?

The thought hadn't fully formed before a broken sob punctuated the air. There was something off about it, but she couldn't put her finger on what.

The sound seemed distorted somehow.

The men had brought in someone who needed help, but they'd broken into her clinic to get it. What kind of right-thinking people did that?

"Easy, Abe," a deep voice rumbled.

Kim solidified her plan. She'd leave for help and come back with the sheriff's office. When they returned, she'd see to whomever needed her assistance, but she wasn't about to stay and hope the men had arrived with good intentions. If they somehow returned too late, she'd find a way to forgive herself for it later.

She kept moving, holding the flaps of her lab coat close. It prevented her keys from jangling and giving her away. The door stood only a few feet ahead of her, and she had no plan of being discovered while freedom was within grasp.

Taking the time for one quick glimpse over her shoulder, she reached for the knob and then turned it. The metal was cool and slick beneath her sweating palms, but her grip remained firm. The universe stayed on her side, the door swinging away without a sound.

Kim slipped outside. She expected to hear shouts demanding that she stop or halt. Maybe the rough tackle of a burly body into hers, making sure she didn't go anywhere. But when she pushed the door closed, hiding that she'd made it through in the first place, a ray of hope deep in her soul began to shine.

Her car waited directly in front of her, and she tasted freedom. After she finally crossed the paved lot and then touched warm metal, she could have whooped in relief.

She slid the key into the lock, exhaling as she did. Soon this would all be over, and she'd be laughing about it. Being silly for no reason. Or surviving very well.

The crunch of footsteps on the gravel behind her stopped every thought cold.

Chapter Two

Brick had been about to jog to the car when he'd spotted her, the woman with a dangerous calm about her.

His first and only concern had been Abe's condition, but her white lab coat snagged his attention. He thought he knew Doc Casper's staff, and this lady wasn't one he remembered. With her short, spiked brown hair and long, dangly earrings, his initial glance told him she was out of place. The purple shirt she wore, although plain and simple, suggested quality. Something soft, but not uncomplicated cotton or a discount store markdown. The dark blue jeans gave off the same air. Although she seemed to attempt a try at being a local yokel, she hadn't perfected the art of uncomplicated living. The jeans hadn't seen wear and tear, no fading at the knees or butt. If they were older than a week, Brick would eat his left boot.

Although he wanted desperately to see to the men and Abe, he waited for her to approach. Her presence unsettled him, a man used to sealing his agreements with a handshake. The one with Casper went back a long ways, and Brick didn't know which of his staff knew about it and which had been kept in the dark.

Not everyone in Fire Creek would take kindly to their pack being a part of their town.

The woman in front of him smelled like magic. The force of it snapped him back to the reality of her presence and the curiosity she stoked. In his long life, he hadn't run into the particular scent often. The aroma reminiscent of the instant before the clouds opened in rain, the flash before tinder caught flame and the moment when a baby drifted into slumber. Elemental power. A healer's gift.

She was of the kind put on earth to mend bones, stitch cuts and fix ailments. Her nature made the animal spirit within him stretch from lazy rest and point its snout into the air to inhale more of its aura.

He'd taken several steps closer to her before the other animal—the beast—roared its displeasure, the raw sensation like an explosion beneath his skin. Brick had to take a step back and tighten his jaw, a brief struggle to bring the

beast beneath his control again. Although the beast fought to turn Brick's head toward the sky to check the location of the moon, he knew the full moon wouldn't rise until next Tuesday. The beast knew it too, but the *urge*...

"The narcotics are inside," a quiet voice said, feminine and strong.

Shit. He'd been unfocused, moving closer to the woman without having realized it. His control was slipping, and no one could afford that. "Who are you?"

"I don't need to turn around and see your face. Let me go, and I won't report the break-in to the authorities for an hour. Plenty of time for you to take what you need and leave. No problem. No fuss."

"Answer the question," Brick said. He resented the implications of her words. Yeah, they'd come here to take her drugs, but only the ones the pack needed. Part of the arrangement with the doc. The derision in her voice made it seem like they'd be hocking the stuff at the elementary school.

"My name's Karen."

A lie. He couldn't place why he knew so, but he knew she wasn't a Karen. He canted his head a fraction. "Try again."

Her fingers curled in, loose fists ready for a brawl. She said nothing.

Just as well. What he'd seen of the woman so far, he knew a storm brewed beneath the surface with her. A fighter.

His abdomen tightened, an itch to see more of her, to touch her, sparked to life. "Is the doc inside?" As much as she intrigued him, he hadn't forgot Abe's condition. It'd been just a hair better than critical, and Brick couldn't afford to be wasting it on a mystery that didn't want to be solved.

"Sure. You go get him. I'll wait here."

"No chance of that. Need you to come with me."

"I'm not looking for any trouble."

He grabbed her by the arm, yanking backward. "Good, 'cause neither am I. Just want to get inside, see Doc Casper." Except that didn't explain why he wanted her to go with him. Damned if he *could* explain it. He wasn't in the business of hurting women or children and had no plans for this one. Maybe the impulse had something to do with the innate ability radiating from her.

If he had his way, he'd tilt her head back and taste her lips. Lick them until they were swollen and full. He wanted to drag his mouth over her skin, moving down until he tasted the brine of her neck. An instinct buried deep in his soul begged him to bite her there, bite until he'd drawn blood.

He shook off the unnatural craving for her, a woman whose face he hadn't seen yet. The blood hunger might have been his beast out to play, and that didn't bode well for any of them. *Down, boy.*

"You're looking for Dr. Casper?" She spun to see him, allowing him to study her face for the first time. Steel and experience stared back at him in the guise of wary brown eyes. The severe haircut was wrong for her angular face. He would have expected a more petite nose, fuller lips.

She wasn't a classic beauty, yet beautiful nonetheless.

"Oh, wow," she said. She took a step forward as if forgetting her fear. "Your eyes. I'm not trying to hit on you or anything, but I've never seen a color like that. Are they real? I mean, no offense if they are real, but it seems like they can't be real because they're just so exotic."

His mouth began to water, swallowing hard his only relief. The animal and the beast both surged to wakefulness. Their cloaked emotions, whether curiosity or something else, unsettled him. He had little more than a cursory perusal of this woman, yet all of him reacted with strong emotion. For Abe, for now, he set it aside and ignored words that burrowed beneath his skin.

"Casper's a friend of mine. He in?"

Her eyes widened a fraction. "I—I'm sorry to tell you this. He passed a few weeks ago."

In the moment the emotional blow of her words struck him, Brick's gaze dropped on the white coat she wore. Embroidered in bright blue ink, he read the most important words of Abe's young life. *Dr. Kimberly Sharpe.*

"Karen, huh?" She had the decency to look chagrined when she realized he'd read the name on her coat. "You replace him?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"Then Dr. Kimberly Sharpe, you're definitely coming with me." Mindful of the force of strength he used, Brick tugged on her arm again. Thankful she didn't put up a fight, he attempted to keep the mood as nonthreatening as possible. "I'm sorry to hear about Doc. What happened?"

"Stroke. Got through the first one okay, but had a second, fatal one at the hospital." A pause. "Is it true that you were friends?"

"Yes," he said gently. "My people come to him when we need medical assistance and supplies."

"Then why'd you break in?"

"Couldn't afford to wait. We're not looking to start any trouble, but we

need help now.”

Dr. Sharpe practically melted, the tension easing away from her body. Hadn't occurred to him why she'd been so hostile and defensive until now. If she figured they'd been up to no good, the smart woman should have been trying to make a getaway. Her behavior made sense. Made him feel like a dick.

He stayed at her back as they walked into the clinic though. Just because she felt better didn't mean she wouldn't run, and they needed her. “I'm Chris Preston,” he said, giving the name on his birth certificate. “By any chance did the staff mention me or my brothers when you took over the place?”

As they moved deeper inside the clinic, the sharp tang of Abe's blood assaulted Brick's nose. His wolf began to circle, a low whining sound issuing as it recognized the scent. Also agitated, the beast trembled before throwing the full force of its body against the metaphysical barrier keeping it contained.

Startled, Brick tested the edges of his control, but the singular fracture that'd been there for a few weeks hadn't spread. His heart surged every time he measured its sharp edge, always taking too long to settle afterward, despite the lack of change. So long as the ominous crack didn't spread, his life wasn't in complete danger. He wouldn't be a threat to those around him.

The day the fracture spread, he'd go to his Alpha and ask permission to go feral. It would come to that, he knew with a grim certainty, but not today.

Today, the pack's focus was on Abe.

The nerves in his spine prickled as a howl of pain blasted from the room where the injured young man lay.

Dr. Sharpe yanked her arm out of his grip and took off toward the room. “What the hell?”

Brick lunged, catching her before she'd taken a few steps. “Did they tell you? Who we are?” he barked.

“What?” She was distracted, her attention on the exam room. Although she tried to pry away his hand, wrapped tight around her upper arm, she also seemed content to attempt dragging him bodily. “No. I don't know about you or your family. Whatever it is can wait.”

Damn it, not like this. “There are things you don't know—”

“If you can't afford the fee, we'll figure something out later. If you're contagious with something, tell me quick so I know how to be prepared. You

illegal? I don't care. You said you were friends with Dr. Casper, and that's good enough for me. Really, mister, there's not much you can say that's going to make me not help whoever's in that room and hurting."

Easy for her to say now. When she saw what awaited her... "Right, but we had an arrangement—"

"With Dr. Casper. I get it. Now, either talk fast or let me go. The longer we stand here, the more concerned I'm getting. At the very least, let me make sure he's stable. I smell blood and that's not a good sign."

There was no doubt they needed her. Based on Abe's wounds, Brick couldn't be certain if he'd make it to the next pack-friendly clinic, over an hour away. But the moment Dr. Sharpe was exposed to their world, there'd be no turning back for her. Either she would keep their confidence or she could be executed.

Not knowing what else to do, Brick released his grip. "Go. Help him."

* * *

When putting her back to him didn't result in a knife plunged into it, the tension at her temples stopped the insistent pounding.

Kim didn't know what to think. That he'd introduced himself also put her mind at ease somewhat. How many thugs went out of their way to state their names and business? Not that she was planning to be his bestie now or anything just because he possessed a modicum of manners.

Nor could she explain the shiver that had traveled through her at the sound of his voice. The unexpected desire to hear him speak in those low tones again. It made no sense. She couldn't get over the magnetic pull of incredible blue eyes or the chiseled jaw seemingly made from marble. Perfect lips and curling lashes...

Oh, hell. Kim snapped back to the matter at hand. The more important stuff she needed to dissect. The man's explanations were plausible enough, she supposed, but there were holes in his story. His agitation concerned her as well. What kinds of arrangements might Dr. Casper have gotten into with his patients?

Heads of cabbage, freshly laid eggs and fish caught from the lake this morning didn't seem Chris's MO. Something told her whatever Chris Preston had exchanged with her predecessor went beyond a simple trade of goods.

But she'd have to sort it out later. "What am I dealing with?" she tossed over her shoulder as they barreled down the hallway together.

"Assault. Mostly knife wounds."

She almost tripped in disbelief and disgust. Assault was a deliberate act. A crime.

In this setting, trauma cases were the worst and most difficult to deal with where supplies were limited. With any luck, this one would be easy to stabilize, because she didn't have the experience or the supplies to handle much. She'd come here to be a family doctor, taking care of head colds and the like. Trauma, complex cases, she couldn't handle. *Wouldn't*. "Call for an ambulance," she said when passing over the threshold. "I'll get him stable and—"

Kim didn't understand the scene before her.

Men surrounding the table, applying pressure to weeping wounds. She expected to see reddened flesh, pink skin hot and angry.

What lay before her, the *thing* twisting in total agony on the metal table, didn't make sense. Matted fur covered in blood. Two legs and two arms, but claws at the ends instead of hands and feet. The misshapen head, elongated nose. Snout. A barrel chest rose and fell in choppy rhythm, ribs pressing against thin skin in horrific regularity.

Goose bumps erupted over her skin, every inch of it crawling as if sending a signal to the rest of her body to flee. Something held her voice captive, the only reason she didn't—*couldn't*—scream.

As quickly as she'd done the assessment of the thing on the table, self-preservation at last kicked in and she stumbled backward. Her arms flailed out as she made contact with something at her back, and she knew with absolute certainty that the monster had somehow managed to get behind her. It would dig its claws into her shoulders and use those terrifying teeth to attack her.

She regained the ability to scream, letting loose an ear-piercing screech. All the men in the room who'd been surrounding the creature winced and ducked their heads, some covering their ears.

One of them looked up sharply, plugging his ears with his fingers. "Knock that shit off!"

Kim was spun around by a pair of hands and when she warily lifted her gaze, it wasn't another one of those creatures holding on to her. Instead,

Chris watched her with concern.

“There’s no time for this. Just know he won’t hurt you. *Can’t* hurt you right now.”

Her heart beat so fast it made breathing difficult. “What is that?”

“Just a young man barely out of boyhood. He was attacked tonight, and what you see before you is the result.”

“Th—that is *not* a man.”

“Doctor, we don’t have time for this. I’ll explain as much as I can. After. For now, he needs your help.”

They needed a veterinarian, not a physician. And she couldn’t be certain of that. What lay there was some cross between a man and an animal. The exact type of creature, she had no idea. She’d never seen anything like it before.

Chris urged, “He won’t hurt you. He’s lost a lot of blood and is unconscious.”

In case pigs were flying and he was telling her the truth about the *thing* not being able to hurt her, she kept her voice low. “I don’t know what you expect me to do. I can’t even look in that direction without almost breaking out in hives. It’s all I can do to not pee myself right now. I swear I’m not trying to be cruel, but I’m *terrified*.”

“I’ll be right here with you, and so will all of these other guys. You help him, and we’ll all be forever in your debt.”

“I don’t think I even have the right training...” She hated how her voice shook, the high pitch giving away her reluctance to do anything more than stare in morbid horror slash curiosity.

“Do what you can, and I’ll walk you through what I know. Please. He’ll die without your help. Give him a chance to live.”

It’s like he knew just how to stab her in the heart.

In medical school, she’d boasted the steadiest hands of any of her peers, but now they trembled like a leaf caught in a hurricane. Damn it, she did not want to do this.

“Show me,” she said in a tremulous voice.

Chris took her by the elbow, turning her to face the nightmare again. Leaden legs refused to move, and he had to use a gentle force to propel her forward. For a moment, she didn’t think she could do this.

The men tending to it flushed wounds with sterile water, tying tourniquets on the extremities. One man kept a large hand splayed across its chest, the

slow rise and fall of the barrel shape an indication the creature still lived and breathed. He'd be able to feel its heartbeat beneath his palm too. Smart move.

She said to Chris, "What's its—his name?"

"Abe."

Without looking at it in the face, she said, "Abe, I'm going to take care of you. This is going to hurt, but it's only so I can figure out what's going on."

He might be unconscious, but elongated finger-like claws curled in as if he'd heard her. The motion, the neediness behind it, made her heart clench. Was there really a young man, an adolescent, hidden somewhere in there?

"Gloves. Over there," she said as she leaned closer. One of the men, she didn't care who, handed her the box only a moment later. She withdrew two, snapped them on and began to palpate Abe's body, looking for the most heinous wounds. "And the gauze. It'll be in the top drawer, right side."

She went for the chest first, looking for any signs that Abe's lungs had been compromised by the knife or whatever instrument had been used to decimate his body. Whoever'd gone after him made certain he'd suffer. Based on her quick assessment, many of the gouges were a touch more than superficial, intended to inflict more pain than damage.

Kim pushed aside fur, leaning closer to each wound she spotted for a visual inspection. As she worked, she took inventory of their location and seriousness. "Someone find a razor or trim what's here. I can't see what I'm dealing with."

Without looking up to see who undertook the instructions, she blew out a breath and kept working. So far she counted thirteen serious wounds. How many more?

Her focus narrowed on a wound on his lower abdomen. She couldn't put her finger on why, but the look of it disturbed her. When she'd gone into family practice, she'd hoped to never run into this type of critical medicine.

Her mouth flooded with saliva, her own pulse drumming too hard and fast, but she managed to push aside rising panic. Someone else needed her to stay calm. She'd freak out later.

A soft sound of metal sliding across metal pulled her out of a sinkhole of reverie. Scissors worked carefully to remove the bloodied fur. Not ideal, but they'd do for now.

"I really hope you called for help," she muttered. Dark red blood poured freely from the seventeenth wound. "I can only work on so many of these at a

time. And anesthesia. What can I use? I don't know how much..."

God. Would she have to figure out how much pain medicine to give this creature? What if she miscalculated and killed him?

Damn it.

Damn it.

"Hey," Chris said in a warm voice, "he can handle a lot. Do your best without pain killers."

Relieved, Kim looked up and for whatever reason at that moment, she noticed all of the men surrounding her. She didn't home in on their individual faces, but took in the collective. Tall, brooding, threatening. She understood that if she made one wrong move, if any of them didn't like what she was doing, they would attack en masse, and she had no hope of survival.

Blood drained from her face, the room beginning to tilt as she considered his directive. "Oh, God," she whispered. "I can't do this."

Gentle, callused fingers slid beneath her chin and then tilted her face toward his. Intense blue eyes searched her face, giving her a moment's reprieve. A place to focus. If he had any idea at all what he wanted out of her, he'd reconsider.

From far away, a male voice said, "You with me?"

Even as she nodded, her legs turned liquid. Her vision blurred then doubled before starting to squeeze in. No one had to tell her this wasn't good.

Not good at all.

Chapter Three

Brick caught Morris's attention. He shook his head at him because this was going south fast. In a minute, they'd have two patients.

Danny tossed something at him, and Brick snagged it midair at the same time he slipped a hand around her waist. His fingers crushed the ammonia inhalant, and he waved it beneath her nose.

Dr. Sharpe jerked away from him, but Brick held fast. "Dr. Sharpe! *Kimberly*," he barked. "He's going to bleed out if you don't do something."

It seemed to be what the woman needed to hear. "Kim," she muttered. She shook her head and pushed away the ammonia he continued to hold beneath her nose. With a shaky voice, she said, "Suture kit. Keep holding him."

Someone found the kit and plopped it next to Abe, who remained ominously silent. Brick made sure her eyes refocused before letting her go. Without speaking, Kim threaded and then pushed a needle into Abe's flesh. She gripped the implement so tightly, he had the sudden thought it might snap beneath the pressure. And for someone in the medical field, the pallor of her face worried him. She'd gone a sickly green, the edges of her lips paling in contrast.

"Breathe," he whispered. It wasn't to keep the men from hearing his words, but provide a small amount of reassurance to the doctor thrust into a situation that was well beyond her comprehension. He didn't envy her and didn't know if he'd ever be able to explain why she'd been caught up in a war that had nothing to do with her.

"What's happening? Who is this...kid, and why was this done to him?"

Rage tunneled through Brick. His gaze swept over the feral form. The situation was too precarious to determine whether helping his wounds now would help him in the long run. With Abe having shifted before the full moon, Brick had no idea whether or not Abe would be able to return to human form. If they'd be forced to keep him like this for the rest of his life. "He was caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. There are people who would see us harm."

"Jesus. What kind of people would do this to another human being—" She

caught herself as she realized the misnomer she'd applied to Abe. Smart cookie that she was, Dr. Sharpe had to know that he could never be classified as simply as a human. She kept her head down as she worked and said, "What is he? You never said."

Brick looked at his pack brothers, a few of them staring at him, the others watching Dr. Sharpe at work. They'd done a fair job of bandaging the more minor wounds, applying pressure to the worst ones until the doctor could attend to them. An unspoken warning was sent from Rowan's eyes, a small but curt shake of his head following. None of them knew Dr. Sharpe and with any luck, they'd never have to deal with her again. The only reason Doc Casper had been brought into the fold was because he'd been their only choice for medical care. Then again, if she'd replaced him, they'd more than likely need her help again in the future.

"It's not something you'll likely understand, Miss," Rowan said.

"She's a doctor, Rowan," Brick corrected.

"Sorry, Miss—Doctor. Force of habit."

Dr. Sharpe looked up at Rowan and smiled. The oddest sensation rifled through Brick as he watched their nonverbal exchange. Like every woman he'd ever seen Rowan with, she seemed to soften having had received his direct attention.

Although they'd previously been on a hunt, Rowan looked as if he'd stepped straight out of a fashion magazine. The dark T-shirt stretched across a well-honed body, his skinny jeans laughable among the brothers but a fashion statement when out in the world. One might think the tousled hair was by design, and maybe it was, because he simply had to run his fingers through his hair before it settled into the current style. With dark eyes, long curling lashes, a straight nose and gleaming white teeth, straight-as-an-arrow Brick couldn't deny the man's attractiveness. Good thing he used it to the advantage of the pack. Nor had Brick ever seen him use his potential for sluttiness in a way that negatively affected the adoring woman. They might not be blood brothers in the literal sense, but he considered Rowan family and would have no problem kicking his ass if he took advantage of anyone the wrong way.

Don't hate the player, hate the game.

"Come on, guys," she said, voice still adorably shaky. She showed a brave face, but Brick could taste the fear surrounding her. His beast treasured it.

“It’s not like I’m ever going to forget something like this, and I really need to know what I’m working with if I’m going to be most effective. What kind of anatomy should I be using in reference to Abe?”

The other men around them began to shift from side to side. All knew the stakes. If Dr. Kimberly Sharpe went to the wrong people about their existence, she would endanger the lives of hundreds of men, women and children in Fire Creek alone.

“He’s one of us,” a new voice said. “Lycanthrope. Werewolf. You know these names?”

The tension holding Brick hostage eased away at the sound of his Alpha’s voice. The powerful black man strode into the room, watchful eyes taking in the bloody scene. Tall with waist-length locs, he would assume command, taking away from Brick the responsibility of telling Dr. Sharpe anything more about their kind.

She didn’t miss a beat, though. “Who are you, and what does that mean?” She resumed work on Abe, but her stance suggested she sacrificed some of her attention to the newcomer. “Are you really trying to tell me that you’re some sort of shape-shifter? That you turn yourself into *this* on purpose?”

Knox Reid moved deeper into the room, and a new type of tension filled it. While the men hadn’t been completely relaxed, having the leader of the pack directly in front of them put them on alert. His life was more important than all theirs combined. All of them knew it and he respected them for their loyalty. Wherever he went, his men’s focus would be on his safety and well-being.

“That’s exactly what I’m telling you. Our pack is a hybrid of man, wolf and what you see before you. Telling you about our kind also means you can be assured you’ll be handsomely paid for your services and have my personal thanks after this is all over with.”

“This has got to be the craziest day of my life,” Dr. Sharpe muttered.

Brick levied a new kind of respect for her. She didn’t miss a beat, her hands moving tirelessly over Abe. If Knox allowed him, he would see to it that she learned more about their pack directly from him. Her education would be his pleasure.

She shook her head, as if flinging off the idea that they could be what they said, but the evidence was bleeding out in front of her.

Knox moved closer, his shoulder brushing against Brick’s. Although he

knew it an irrational thought, Brick almost became paralyzed with the sudden fear his Alpha would somehow absorb the secret he harbored through their physical touch. If Knox learned of Brick's flaw, his potential for going feral...

"*Shit!*" With impressive speed, Dr. Sharpe jumped onto the table and straddled Abe's waist. Her hands flew to his chest, throwing one on top of the other, and she began to perform compressions. "He's coding, he's coding! Anyone with medical training check his pulse."

He knew rudimentaries, so Brick bolted forward, slapping two fingers over their patient's wrist. The pulse moved in a thready rhythm, jumping with strong urgency each time Dr. Sharpe pressed down on Abe's chest. "What's happened?"

"I don't know. Too much blood loss, probably. I don't know—" Her eyes narrowed, all trace of beauty replaced by a fierceness that made his heart clench. "There's a defibrillator in the next room. One of you go. Go! And you with the gray top, get me a clamp from *that* drawer."

The men crashed into each other in their efforts to help. Metal instruments clanged and crashed to the ground while drawers were ripped off tracks, cabinets banging into the walls as superhuman strength shoved them open.

Brick leaned closer to Abe's head. "C'mon, kid, stay with us. Don't you fucking leave yet."

Grim horror engulfed him the moment he watched a thin stream of blood bubble up and then drool down the side of Abe's slack mouth. A reddish film coated his incisors and canines.

Werewolves shouldn't be this easy to kill. This made no sense.

Whoever had targeted Abe, at least the sixth in a series of crimes against their kind, would die a long, slow death at Brick's hands, and he'd feel no remorse about the retribution afterward. He knew he was only one of many who'd gladly step up to serve justice.

"Where's that defibrillator?" Kim screamed. Her head snapped up, her powerful gaze colliding with Brick's. In it, he found raw horror and stark dread. The gaze of a physician losing her patient to death's grip.

He tried to relay some confidence to her, but the ball of agonizing emotion growing in the pit of his stomach turned into a grimace of overwrought pain. He'd known Abe since he was a pup, watching him grow into the awkward but intelligent young man he'd seen only yesterday.

Morris pounded into the room carrying the device Dr. Sharpe desperately needed. She yanked it away from him, ripping out cords that dangled limp and useless. “Too much fur, too much. Scissors! Start clipping away, one area above his heart, one on his side.”

More blood dribbled from Abe’s mouth as she pumped harder, her own breaths sounding rushed and inadequate. Brick knew she wouldn’t be able to stand up to this much physical exertion for much longer. He stood ready to replace her as soon as she needed him to.

“Check him.” She threw her hands in the air, long enough to shoot Brick a pleading look.

Following her prompt, he pressed his fingers into Abe’s skin, looking for an elusive pulse. Brick waited for the jump beneath his fingertips, the sign that he still fighting to live. When nothing happened, he shifted his fingers. Again. And again.

The ball of dread became so much worse as realization sunk in. “Nothing,” he said. “There’s no pulse.”

* * *

Kim’s mind raced, searching for possible solutions. A way to maybe—

It almost physically pained her, but she stopped searching. Her skills as a physician went only so far, and for poor Abe, they hadn’t gone far enough.

She sagged, for the first time noticing her proximity to Abe. When had she scrambled over his body to straddle him? Every inch of her skin crawled as revulsion crept through her. It took considerable effort to climb down in a calm, deliberate manner rather than jump off while shrieking at the top of her lungs.

By the time her feet were on the ground, an internal tremor shook her from head to toe. No matter how she tried, she couldn’t drag her eyes away from his vacant stare either.

The thing—the monster—would haunt her nightmares for months.

His blood now stained sections of her jeans and although her palms itched from the desire to wipe them on the rough material, Kim stood erect. Her throat worked furiously as she swallowed over and over again, rising bile pushed down with each effort.

She’d done it. She’d touched the doglike thing, had worked on saving its

life. In the end, it had been for naught.

Her gaze went to the wall-mounted clock, noting the time of death. When completing the paperwork for the morgue later, she'd need to know it. What was she going to say to the EMTs when they showed, or to the hospital assigned to assume responsibility for the body? What would *they* say in response when they saw it—him? She couldn't very well keep him a secret.

As she scanned the room searching for answers, half a dozen men surrounded her, all of them taller than her by a foot. Each outweighed her by an easy hundred pounds. No weapons were in sight, but without a doubt any one of them could break her in half should he choose to.

None of them looked happy.

"Thank you," Chris said. She swung her head around to find him, noting the sadness weighing down his tense jaw and pulling his lips flat. "I'm sure you did your best and I'll let his family know that."

"His...family?"

Rowan stepped up. "Parents, girlfriend. They'll be very grateful to you. His mama makes a hell of a fried pie. Consider yourself ten pounds heavier already."

If he was attempting to make the mood lighter, he'd succeeded. The tightness she felt around her temples and jaw relaxed, the rest of her body following suit within moments. Her heart remained heavy, but she knew from experience that later tonight, after saying a small prayer for Abe's peace in the next life, it would lighten. Another week, and it would be gone altogether. This hadn't been the first patient she'd lost and no matter how hard she tried or worked, it wouldn't be the last either. First year of residency had taught her how to cope reasonably well. Life had taught her the rest.

"What happens next?" She couldn't face Abe any longer, instead seeking succor in Chris's presence.

"Depends on you," Knox said.

Kim tilted her face toward his, the hue of polished mahogany, her heart beating madly. His presence seemed to fill the room, demanding acknowledgment from those around him. Even Chris, a man whose own existence reminded her of molded steel, dwarfed next to him. And for that reason, self-preservation, she inched closer to Chris.

Knox might be gorgeous, but with Chris she found a reasonable amount of safety. "What do you mean?"

Before he could answer, a catchy tune lifted into the air, and once it started to play a second time did Kim recognize the instrumental version of “Little Red Riding Hood.” Knox blew out a breath when he pulled out the cell responsible for the music.

“Go,” he said as a greeting. He began to move away, his gaze soft as it roved over Abe, then shot to Kim in a look of what could only be classified as all-consuming concern. “On our way. Doctor in tow,” he barked into the phone. Jabbing a finger on its console ended the call. “Bring her. We’ve got a problem.”

Kim backed away from Chris, who’d spun to face her. “What’s going on? I’m not going anywhere until I get some answers. Who he is, who you are and what you want with me.” She bumped into a cabinet, wincing at the sharp edge digging into her ribs. Tomorrow there’d be a righteous bruise to mark her escape attempt.

He reached toward her, hand outstretched.

“No time for it, Brick,” Knox yelled. He hurried toward the passageway. “One more injured, and I don’t know how badly.”

“Oh, God,” Kim murmured.

His dark eyes flashed in her direction. “Kids...all of them kids. This one might still be saved, so we need you to come with us. *Now*. Sean, Kelly, bring Abe home, then join us when you can. I’ll text you the location.”

Despite the urgency of Knox’s words, Chris remained a shelter in the storm, hand extended. A rush of conflicting thoughts bombarded her as she stared at it.

She couldn’t deny Chris’s rugged good looks, those eyes the color of the sea surrounding a Caribbean island, and his gentility called out to her. If she’d met him back when she’d frequented coffee shops or in the aisle of a bustling grocery store, he’d have had no problem getting her to offer a suggestion on a new brew or help him pick out a ripe fruit. As recently as yesterday he would have made her want that old life back, if only to give him the opportunity to seduce her at least once. She would have probably succumbed.

Today, she’d been traumatized and wasn’t in the mood. Ignoring his hand, she said, “Thought you said your name was Chris.”

He shrugged. “Brick is a childhood name that stuck.”

“Who calls a kid ‘Brick’?”

“One day I might tell you how it came to be.” His gaze slid past her where Knox stood. A new seriousness overtook his expression at whatever sight met him there. “Until then, I have to insist you come with me.”

Mouth set, Kim shrank away from him. “I’ve done what you’ve asked of me already. You asked me to help, and I did. Please don’t get me further involved.”

“You’d let the next one die?”

“Of course not.” She’d love to pretend nothing about this situation scared her to death, that a little motivational speech from a man she didn’t know would be her call to action. But she’d come to Fire Creek for exactly the opposite of the adventure thrust upon her tonight. Her worn soul sought peace and quiet.

Kim stared at his hand, as steady as any surgeon’s, despite the length of time he’d held it aloft while she wavered. Common sense told her she had no business here, that no one would blame her if she turned her back. What if the men were lying?

But what if they were telling the truth?

Indecision left her own hands shaking. Some raw, brave part of her wanted to touch his palm. To repeat feeling the warmth from before, to battle the chill overtaking her now.

Kim gasped when a firm grip seized her upper arm. She tried to jerk away, but she found Knox held her with no discernible possibility of releasing her. “We don’t have time for this,” he said. Dark eyes flashing with emotion, he looked down his nose at her. “*We need your help.*”

When he jerked her toward him, she scrambled to keep her balance and struggled to find Chris. “You’ll be there?” she asked him.

A nod. “I won’t leave you alone.”

“Can I trust you? All of you?”

The muscle in Chris’s jaw ticced. His brow was furrowed, and a sliver of hope escaped Kim, a blind faith suggesting he would step in and save her from the unknown. A shutter fell over the blue of his eyes, emotion wiped clean from his face. He broke their stare, and she knew some unspoken meaning resided there. “You can trust me,” he said at last.

A part of her calculated the probability of making an escape. A more broken part of her adjusted the calculation to include Chris actively working against her, while her stomach churned the crushed glass of despair the

thought caused. Factoring in the secluded wooded area surrounding the clinic, her unfamiliarity with the terrain in the dark and the projected skill of the seasoned hunters filling the room, Kim almost released a sob of frustration.

“Fine. I’ll help as much as I can.” When Knox pulled her arm, her exhausted brain directing her feet to follow.

Chapter Four

Brick's wolf slammed itself against the barrier again and again. Each time he fell, only to rise again to four large paws, sides heaving. Its teeth were bared, fur bristling. Hackles raised.

For once, the beast remained quiet. Watching. Waiting.

He didn't know her. *They* didn't know her. But his wolf had some strong feelings. The beast's quietude, while welcome, concerned him also. Maybe they *did* know something he didn't.

"All good?" Sean slapped the side of Brick's arm as he brushed by to get outside.

The wolf growled without real heat behind the response. Still, it was unexpected, and Brick paused long enough to take several deep breaths. Between each, he spoke gently to the wolf in the silent communication of host and entity. Flashes of images and rushed impressions of impassioned feelings bombarded Brick. His best and placating responses not satisfactory to the wolf who'd constructed an inexplicable bond to the woman in distress.

Allowing himself a final minute to grieve the loss of a promising young man, he dragged away his gaze and then went to join the others. By the time the wolf accepted a small compromise of attending the doctor, Brick found himself climbing into one of the pack's black Tahoes alone.

His hands flew to the steering wheel, threatening to crush it beneath his grip when he watched Kim being escorted into one of the other vehicles. His heart raced in reaction to the wide-eyed fear on her face. He wanted more than anything to go to her and say it would be okay, but he couldn't be sure of that yet. She'd been thrown in the deep end head first, left to sink or swim. He couldn't imagine the thoughts rushing through her head right now.

He'd make it up to her, somehow. When Knox came with reinforcements, as usual he'd seen to it that his brothers would be taken care of. Abe left the clinic surrounded by pack and family who'd loved him. It hurt Brick's heart to not be one of the ones to see him taken to his family, but with the danger to the pack still ongoing, he'd go where his Alpha needed him.

Fog dimmed the taillights of the vehicles already pulling away, but

keeping tabs on them wouldn't be an issue. He just needed a minute to think.
Dr. Sharpe. Abe. His own beast.

Every ounce of willpower went into keeping his body language relaxed when the passenger door opened and Knox climbed into the vehicle. Knowing better than to question his leader, Brick's reply was to give a curt nod and then follow the trail of the others.

"Head to Matt's place."

"Yeah."

They rode in silence for a few minutes before Knox finally asked, "Is this going to be a problem?"

Brick stiffened. "We'll get whoever's targeting the adolescents," he said. An almost deliberate attempt to deflect what had to be the focus of Knox's question.

"No doubt." Knox reached for the oh-shit bar as the SUV bounced over the rugged terrain. "But that wasn't what I meant."

Brick kept his attention on the dirt road.

"I don't doubt your loyalty to the pack, Brick. You've never once given me reason to."

Internally, he winced. If his Alpha knew what he'd kept hidden...

"But what I just saw—I don't know what to think. If I didn't know better, I'd say that you'd *paused*. Do you want to tell me anything? Anything at all?"

What could he say? That he'd met a woman for a few minutes and for whatever reason, she'd elicited responses from both his wolf and his beast, not to mention his dick? "No pause, Alpha," he said instead.

Although they'd grown up together, the atmosphere surrounding them both now thickened with cloying tension. Brick had no idea what would happen next. His loyalty to Knox was absolute. For a woman to cause a tremor in it both confused and startled him.

"Good." A glance proved Knox looked ready to relax into the seat, conversation over. Brick felt the heat of his gaze one more time first though. "In order for our pack to survive, the people within it have to be strong and reliable. To do that, they need stability in their personal lives. I wouldn't expect you to sacrifice that. Do you understand?"

Relief at the redirection to general pack matters threatened to drown him. At least one of them could stop thinking about the pretty doctor. But he couldn't be certain where Knox was leading him with his statements. "No,

Alpha.”

“I need strong members by my side. Not those who follow blindly and without question. So far, I’ve found the best suited to do that are well-balanced. Tunnel vision serves no one.”

Brick still didn’t follow the direction Knox headed, but he nodded.

“Good,” Knox said.

When Knox failed to elaborate, Brick figured the matter over, although he couldn’t understand what had triggered it in the first place. After a pause, he asked, “Did you notice the way she smelled?”

“Shampoo.”

“No, she’s got healer energy in her.”

“Enough for you to notice?”

Brick took a deep breath, reliving the experience of having her close. The olfactory memory washed over him with such potency, his abdomen tightened. “Yeah,” he said softly. “I noticed. She’s got elemental in her.”

He’d not only been drawn to the scent of her, one that claimed her on a soul-deep level, but he’d paid strict attention to everything else about her. The way her shirt had gapped while she worked, revealing a delicate, pink bra beneath. Now he wondered if beneath those dark blue jeans, a matching pair of panties might be hugging her hips.

“I haven’t heard about elemental magic in a while. She’d be someone we’d want to have around. The pack could use a healer.”

Brake lights flashed ahead, and Brick knew he’d have to shift his focus soon. It would be next to impossible to do if he didn’t accept a few truths right now and let his Alpha in on them too.

He opened his mouth to speak more about his imminent loss of control, but then frowned. “Where is all this coming from, Knox?” He pulled the car to a stop, giving Brick a chance to look at him.

Knox’s broad grin met his gaze. “You paused.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

The pause thing again? Weren’t they discussing Kim and how the pack needed a healer?

The beginning of their conversation flashed back to him, when Knox had lightly admonished Brick for putting a woman before the pack. He’d tried to brush off his behavior, but apparently his Alpha hadn’t believed the lie after all.

Busted. “Go to hell.”

The grin turned into outright laughter at Brick’s expense. “Brother, you are so sprung on her. Blame it on the elemental magic if you want, but I’m thinking your wolf is doing some panting of his own, and that doesn’t have anything to do with magic.”

A smile fought its way onto his lips. “She’s hot.”

That brought more laughter from Knox. “She’s hot, yes, but I think there’s more to it than that. You’ve never put anyone before pack until today. You make me proud.” He pantomimed wiping a pretend tear from the corner of his eye.

Despite the teasing, Brick didn’t find the accusation funny. “She doesn’t come before pack.”

“No, she won’t. But if things go right, you’ll put her before everything else. And I’m really glad to see it.” The smile slid away from his face. “I mean it, be happy. If you think your doctor might be the one for you, I’m ordering you to go after her.”

It was a command that Brick wouldn’t have a hard time with. Now that he knew he had his Alpha’s support in pursuing her, it would make the task that much more enjoyable. “Later. For now we go after the fucker messing with our kids.”

Knox gave a curt nod. The expression on his face hardened before he shoved open the door and exited the vehicle. Brick did the same, with a new understanding that Knox would take care with Dr. Sharpe. It settled an unease he hadn’t realized had been present.

He grabbed the bag he’d brought from the clinic for the doctor. He figured it would be something she’d need for the injured person.

They strode in silence toward the back of the house. The wolf whined softly and almost on its heels, Brick picked up on the cause of it. The coppery drift on the breeze spoke of violence in the night.

“Not a lot of blood,” Brick said, throat tight.

“If it belongs to one of our young, it’s too much.” They could detect the difference in shifter blood, even at this distance. Whoever was hurt belonged to them. Pack.

Knox broke into a jog. Without question, Brick followed, heading toward where the scent of blood originated. They were behind the others, and it would be where he’d find Kim. As much as he wanted to see her again, he

wished it were under better circumstances.

A beam of light danced over the grass ahead of them in a single burst, then cut off. None of the pack would need the artificial light, not during the approach of the full moon. The others had made concessions for the human in their midst, for which he was strangely grateful.

While the wolf had chosen to go quiet, his ears forward and on alert, the beast shifted restlessly. It paced its borders as if on the hunt.

With his mind's eye, Brick followed its movement, unsure how to interpret its behavior. Unlike the wolf, who followed predictive patterns straight out of a *National Geographic* special, the beast was a creature of instinct and urge. Given only one night each month to reign free, it was the least understood part of the werewolf shifter. And of the three entities, the most powerful yet the most reckless. It loaned the lycanthrope strength and healing they wouldn't have otherwise.

When it began to shove the borders, Brick gritted his teeth against the sensation. With Knox being only a few feet away from him, he didn't dare show any sign of inner turmoil. The beast sent out images into his mind like shards of glass that cut into his thoughts and bombarded him until he could think of nothing else.

Brick wanted to fall to his knees and allow the beast free. It would eliminate the sensation of shrapnel destroying his barriers. His heart thumped against his chest, racing to a speed that frightened him. Beads of sweat burst out on his forehead. Before he could focus on the changes though, pain exploded beneath his skin, forcing him to slow. Each step an increasing agony.

His vision dimmed, narrowing down to a pinprick. If Knox knew what was transpiring behind him, Brick couldn't tell. He didn't think so, which gave him a little more time to gain control. He had to.

As pain ricocheted through his bones, he came to realize one thing for certain. He was in so much fucking trouble.

* * *

Kim flicked the flashlight beam on the handsome man next to her. He blinked against the harsh glare of the light and ducked out of its way. Not before she caught sight of the reddened end of his nose. Morris sniffled, then let out

three quick sneezes in succession.

Kim asked, "Is that a head cold?"

The one Brick had referred to as Rowan snorted. "Not him. Colds are rare for us. It happens, but only once in a blue moon."

"Really?"

"Yeah, that's a human thing, and those types of illnesses don't jump species. You'll hardly give me a cold, and I'm not likely to give you the flu. It's helpful."

She could see how it could be.

They kept their voices low, and Kim swore she stomped through a field of bubble wrap while the men seemed to float on air. In the car she'd been unable to observe their mannerisms, but now seeing the grace of their steps and the elegance of their movements, she wondered how they got away with passing themselves off as human.

Morris sniffled again. He cut his eyes to her, ice-blue that sent a thrill of cold through her veins. He had to be one of the most beautiful men she'd ever seen. Tall, with curling dark hair and a fine layer of stubble covering a strong jaw. He was probably the kind of man to leave a wake of women melting in their panties wherever he went. In other words, the kind of man who brought trouble with him.

"Allergies." A combination of annoyance and shame rippled across his expression.

Rowan looked at him with mild disgust. "You ever heard of a wolf that's allergic to the outside?"

"Oak pollen. Shut it." It came out sounding like *shubbid*. Kim glanced away to keep him from noticing her smile.

A shrill whistle caught their attention. Morris picked up the pace, but Rowan fell behind Kim. When she would've stumbled, he caught her by the elbow and kept her up right. "Thanks," she murmured but it fell on deaf ears. Rowan peered beyond her, and Kim followed his gaze.

Ahead of them, a small building made out of wood waited. It was a nondescript structure, probably used to store lawn mowers, fertilizer and other sundry garden tools. The area around it was kept manicured, a neatly coiled hose hanging from a hook. While the design wouldn't win any architectural awards, it appeared functional.

Both men went stock still, the air around them growing thick with tension.

She didn't know what brought about the change until Morris sniffed the air. Another one of those wolf traits so ingrained that the men probably didn't realize they displayed it on occasion, more than a normal person would. His top lip lifted from his teeth, baring a snarl that sent a shiver down her spine.

"What is it?" she asked softly.

"Blood. Not a lot of it, but it's wild. One of ours." He slid past her. "Stay behind me in case there's trouble."

Her heart threatened to seize, but Kim fought down the sensation. There was a kid or, God forbid, more than one kid, out there who needed her help. She couldn't save Abe's life, but maybe she could make a difference here.

A sudden flashback of the creature left behind on her clinic examination table assaulted her, and fear curled its way inside. The ride over had been so uneventful, so mundane that she'd felt less like an abductee and more like a little sister. The men had brought up memories of Abe, some amusing, others tender. They'd grieved for the young man whose life had been cut short. Her heart went out to them for their loss.

She'd appreciated their respect for Abe, and her own esteem for them had grown in small dividends. By the time the car had stopped, she'd been forced to remind herself more than once that she'd been kidnapped. If she went along with them now, without trying to get away or defend herself, how much more would they ask of her? When would her services to them end? It might very well be possible that they'd take her back to some secluded area and never release her again.

No, if she wanted this nightmare to end, she had to get away.

With their attention ahead of them, it would be so easy to fall back. To walk away without their notice. The white lab coat left behind in the car was easily replaceable. Her life was not.

Rowan crouched, almost duckwalking toward the shed. "Matt should be around here somewhere."

"Yeah, but so might be the killer."

Kim stiffened at the reminder. Shouldn't they be calling the sheriff? That they kept going, seemingly unconcerned, must have meant they knew something she didn't. Did she want to stick around to find out what?

"I told him to be careful."

"But he hasn't picked up the phone since?"

"No." A grim answer.

She almost paused. Almost changed her mind. So far, these guys hadn't harmed her or threatened her in any way. A serial killer, someone who'd claimed lives already, might be out there.

Might.

She had to be willing to take a chance that her odds of escaping were much higher than the odds of running into someone who targeted adolescents. They'd only kidnapped her now, but what if they resorted to something worse later?

Kim took another step backward, cautious about drawing attention to herself. As her foot came down, she prayed it wouldn't land on a fallen branch or a crunchy, brittle leaf. She had no illusions that if they caught her trying to get away, she wouldn't get a second chance.

Certain her booming heartbeat would serve as a traitorous homing beacon, she kept her gaze trained on the men. She slid one hand over the glass end of the flashlight, slowly covering the beam in small increments. They seemed to know the way around without the light, but carrying it at full fluorescence would be a dead giveaway of her location. She'd just have to hope no gopher holes dotted the way back to safety. Classic horror-movie scenario where the heroine twisted her ankle while running from the monster. These men were indeed monsters.

"I think the scent is coming from behind the shed," Morris said. He peered from side to side before trotting forward.

"Why such a small amount?" Rowan picked up his pace too, neither man looking back.

Kim took another step backward. Then another. Her thumb slid over the black power button of the flashlight and at the same time, she stepped behind a large oak.

"Doctor?" A pause before a stream of expletives hit the air at full force.

"Go!" Rowan barked. "Find her, and I'll try to track Matt. And for God's sake, keep your cell on."

Move. The command meant nothing to her feet though.

She remained, back pressed against the rough bark, one hand gripping the flashlight so tightly against her breast that her fingers ached. But her feet were frozen. Somewhere out there, men were searching for her and she was paralyzed from the ankles down.

Her chest tightened. Air getting harder to come by.

Fighting off a looming panic attack, she forced her lungs to open up. To take in desperately needed oxygen.

Goddammit—move!

Blowing out a breath between her teeth, Kim shoved away from the tree. The flashlight became a weapon and she flipped it so she could grip it like a bat. Ready to swing at the first thing that moved in her general vicinity.

But as she crept forward, eyes darting in all directions to track her surroundings, it felt as if every creature in Fire Creek had converged in this little area. Leaves that hadn't moved before were now jitterbugging like each one vied for first place. A moth fluttered from one tree to another, bouncing from branch to stem, only to start the process over again.

She swallowed hard, dead certain that anyone within a fifty-mile radius heard the racket. With every step, she waited for one of the men to come crashing through the brush and drag her back to the injured kid.

They'd said there wasn't a lot of blood. She hoped so. Prayed so. She wanted whatever kid awaited help to be fine without her. The last time she'd put the patient's needs before her own, she'd ended up treating an animal for her troubles. Fool me once...

Kim dropped to her knees, breath held, as someone came toward her in a hurry. Her fingers curled tighter on the flashlight and she braced herself, ready to swing with as much power as she could muster. Instead of slowing though, the owner seemed to pick up pace, running past the area where she crouched. Headed in the direction of where she'd left behind Rowan and Morris. Had they called for help in finding her?

She waited for more sounds, any indication that they were doubling back to find her. Between the trees and the bushes and the darkness, she couldn't see for shit no matter how hard she stared into the night. Although an inner voice urged her to stay still, she knew if she waited around, they *would* find her. If she had any chance of escaping at all, she had to move now.

As she rose to standing, another urge to turn on the flashlight bombarded her. Her skin was crawling with sensation, the hair on the back of her neck at ninety-degree angles. Someone was out there, but on her life, she couldn't see or hear them.

This time when she took her first steps, she did it like a batter at home base. Elbows high, shoulders relaxed and ready to take one hell of a swing.

Someone was out there.

She'd managed several steps without being accosted, but her nerves were still on screaming alert. Her arms were beginning to sting, unused to the unnatural position. But the choppiness of her breathing had evened out, and a concentrated calm kept her focused. When they came for her, she *would* be ready for defense.

A noise sounded to her left. She'd been so preoccupied on what might wait directly in front of her that it surprised her. Not enough to drop her defensive stance, thank God, but enough to make her slow.

When she turned, she expected nothing to be there. Hoped nothing would be there.

The flashlight was already in full swing before she recognized the shape for what it was.

She couldn't see it. Not all of it. Only a vague impression.

Tall. Broad. *Huge*.

Dangerous.

Chapter Five

Through the beast's keen sense of smell, Brick could smell her fear. It radiated into the air, tantalizing its taste buds. Brick's mouth salivated in response, a new, gnawing hunger churning his gut.

She could try to defend herself against him, but he was unstoppable like this. It was nothing to take away the flashlight she waved, disarming her before the blow landed. She made a sound, a clicking noise in the back of her throat and the scent of her fear spiked.

The black flashlight crumpled beneath the force of his curled fist. Forgotten once tossed aside.

Brick struggled to regain a sense of control, to keep the beast from breaking through its barriers ahead of its time, but he couldn't very well do that and keep the doctor from bolting from him in terror. And for the love of God, the last thing he wanted from her was her fear.

But the beast had other ideas.

It pushed at the thin, crumbling barrier keeping it contained. Brick grappled with it, digging his fingers into its form, pulling it back and away from the surface. They'd never done anything this before, the beast never rising to the surface like this. To his knowledge, no one had ever struggled with the entities inside the way he was now. The beast was always allowed to roam free the night of the full moon. It was an understanding and arrangement that went back for generations. Why it chose to leave its metaphysical home now he couldn't understand.

Brick wanted to scream at the doctor to run. To get away. But he was so close to loss of control that he was afraid if he directed even the smallest attention toward her, the beast would be able to take advantage.

Even the wolf was aware of the struggle going on next to it. The beast and the wolf could not interact, but the wolf scratched at the barrier as if it would try to get the beast if it could. A protective animal by nature, the warning growl it issued should have made the beast wary. However, at best it gave the beast incentive to claw its way out.

When the doctor began to scramble away, both the beast and Brick lunged

for her.

Oh shit, oh shit.

Someone in the sky was looking out for the doctor, because Brick's fingertips only grazed the hem of her shirt. She twirled away from him, almost stumbling in her haste but managing to get upright and run.

But the urge to chase her, the wolf and the beast both conspiring against Brick...they wanted to chase. They *needed* to chase her.

He stayed rooted to the spot, the man inside him wanting to keep her safe. From himself. What a fucking joke.

There was movement to his right, and Brick turned. He came face-to-face with the blue eyes of his friend and he found it difficult to hold his gaze, dropping it as soon as they connected. Words—excuses—formed and vanished, none of them adequate enough to explain to his long-time friend what was transpiring. Everything in him tightened at the realization that he'd been caught.

Morris watched. Studied.

The man inside Brick knew something colossal had just transpired. Morris only had to go to their Alpha with news of what he'd seen, how Brick teetered on a loss of control. It would be within Knox's rights to have Brick ended.

"I can't..." The words came out garbled, almost unintelligible.

"Fix it now." Morris didn't wait around for Brick's reply. Instead he chose to rush in the direction the doctor had taken.

The moment the beast saw Morris go after the doctor, instincts kicked in. It no longer fought with Brick for control, instead sending the urge, the impulse, to go after her. Get to her before the other man did.

Confused, Brick hesitated.

The beast would not be deterred however. If Brick thought he struggled against it before, it was nothing against the thrashing and wildness the beast exhibited now. It bared fangs, hissing at Brick or maybe Morris. He couldn't tell.

With dawning horror, Brick realized that the beast was angry—no, fucking pissed—with Morris. The horrible realization that if the other shifter caught up with the woman, any chance of keeping the beast contained would vanish. That the need to protect, to kill if necessary, overrode all of the beast's subliminal messages to Brick. They didn't communicate often, but a time like

this, he was not about to second-guess the message being sent to him.

This was bad. So fucking bad.

He took off after them both, justifying that he needed to get the doctor back to help Knox and adolescents. If there was a situation there and she was needed, this took priority. Knox would understand.

He couldn't say why, maybe the beast's influence, but running after Morris was as effortless as breathing. The rush of it similar to being in wolf form.

The breeze he made by running seemed to give him a jolt of energy. The wolf's ease of movement, the fluidity of it, followed similarly. As if should he take a deep breath, his lungs would expand, filling an overly broad chest that wasn't his. Somehow he managed to channel the best of both worlds through the beast. Man and wolf combined against all logic and experience.

It didn't surprise him when he overtook Morris. His friend shouted, "Hey!" But Brick didn't stop running. He could scent her on the wind, and she was too close for him to stop now.

When he caught sight of her short hair, the pretty shirt and long legs pumping fast in dark blue jeans, Brick forced himself to move faster. She tumbled to the ground after he dove toward her feet. He heard the breath knocked out of her as she hit the grass, but if there was any doubt of whether she might have sustained an injury, it was gone the moment she landed a kick to his groin.

When the pain hit, his stomach immediately dropped, the breath rushing out of him in an expelled push. A wave of nausea swept over Brick and he swallowed frantically to keep the bubbling bile down. A simultaneous spasm engulfed his entire body, and the shock of it kept him immobile for what felt like a week, but should have only been seconds. By the time he could think straight enough to defend himself, she was on the move again.

Dr. Kim Sharpe was quick and efficient. Just like when she was working on Abe. She kicked at Brick twice more. Once in the ribs, once at the point of the sternum. Before he could recover, catch his breath, she was on her feet and running again.

If for a second he thought the beast might be enraged, he was in for another surprise tonight. There was approval coming from the beast, a satisfaction that she could take care of herself against him. It stirred things inside the beast and Brick to the point that he couldn't distinguish the feeling as his or the beast's.

Movement behind him got Brick on his feet again. No way was he letting Morris near the doctor, not when he was so...*enamored* with her.

Jesus Christ. That was it was it, wasn't it?

She turned them on. Both of them.

When he caught the good little doctor in his hands, they were going to have a long talk about her behavior. About why she'd abandoned his pack brothers, leaving herself alone and vulnerable. He thought he'd been clear that they were the good guys. She had nothing to fear from them. Obviously, she didn't believe him.

She was pretty and feisty and strong. She might be prepared to put up one hell of a fight, but unlike the first time, she wouldn't catch him unawares.

This time when he caught up to her, he wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her backward. He anticipated the kicking and the clawing, but when he bent his head next to her ear to quietly tell her to stop struggling, he was assaulted by the scent of her shampoo. Maybe it was perfume. Maybe it was just her.

Whatever it was, it made him almost moan in appreciation. There were so many things whirling in that one delectable scent. Elemental magic, fragrance and wild, feminine beauty.

He might have lingered on the way she smelled, the crisp, clean sweetness, but then his brain zeroed in on the way she felt in his arms. Like she belonged there. It took only a split second for his brain and body to recognize and appreciate the way she felt.

Her heart thumped like a wild thing trapped in a cage, her breathing rough and jagged. The tension in her limbs made him ready for another attempt at getting away, but he relaxed his hold on her a fraction. He wouldn't let her feel more threatened than necessary.

"You've got a career in track and field, Doctor." To his surprise, the beast had retreated. When had that happened?

"Brick?"

He frowned at the gun-shy stroke of her voice across his senses. "Yeah. Didn't mean to scare you. But you were going for broke."

Her forehead dropped to the ground, the tension deflating like a popped balloon. "It was you back there? I had no idea. I thought I saw...hell, I don't know what I saw."

"It's dark," he said, offering an easy explanation for what she'd seen.

“Yeah...it is.” Kim’s voice was soft with an underlying awareness in her tone. She might have been struggling for air with his bulk keeping her pinned to the ground, but damned if he could get his body to move from the spot.

She felt so *good* beneath him.

Brick dipped his head to the nape of her neck, inhaling that intoxicating scent once more, memorizing it. Later, he’d recreate the scent from his memories.

Now, he knew she was needed elsewhere. Knox and the others were waiting. Determined to be the strong man his pack needed him to be, with a shudder he reluctantly let her go.

* * *

Oh, God.

Her knees screamed from where she’d scraped them against rubble and dirt. She’d probably fallen on a rock, now poking her in the ribs. Even her upper abdomen protested from where she’d skidded along the ground after Brick had tackled her.

She couldn’t help but remember that he was wolf beneath that rugged exterior. Wild, untamable wolf.

Approaching footsteps made her look up. Morris, another one of the men who’d been kind to her in spite of the circumstances, slowly approached. Although she expected him to be upset with her for the quick defection, the other man kept his attention on Brick. In turn, Brick looked at him with an expression Kim couldn’t read.

“Are you all right?” he asked Brick.

What the hell? Shouldn’t he be asking her that? She got to her feet, annoyed at the brotherhood between the two men. Making a dramatic show of brushing off the grass and dirt clinging to her clothes, she said between gritted teeth, “I’ll be just fine. Nothing a few ibuprofen and a shot of whiskey won’t cure.”

“If you hadn’t run, you would be doing just fine. No one would have been chasing you in the dark. And your clothing and pride would be intact.”

“My clothing?” Kit looked down to find her shirt missing at least two buttons and exposing frilly lace and delicate material. The pink bra she wore when laundry was a week or two past due for the Laundromat was on

permanent display for God and sundry to see. At her feet, she spotted one of the AWOL buttons, but any others seemed to have gone out of sight or were buried beneath dirt.

Brick muttered an oath. He grabbed at his shirt, lifting it up and off his head before Kim had the chance to even clasp her own gaping shirt closed. Eyes averted, he thrust his at her. "Here. Take this."

By now, Morris had turned his back. "Sorry, Doc. I didn't think. Where we're from, it's no big thing... Thought you might've known."

"No," she said, voice with a tremor in it. "Not a breeze in sight to help a girl out." She tried to make a joke of it, something to lessen the tension that seemed to have erupted, but it fell flat.

"When you're ready, we ought to head back. Got a text that it's not him, the guy after our kids."

"Thank God," she murmured.

"You're still needed, maybe for a few stitches, but nothing too serious."

"Glad it wasn't worse," Kim said. She meant it, not just for her sake, but for the kid and everyone worried for him. No doubt she'd added a layer of stress that none of them appreciated, but could anyone blame her? If given the chance to try and escape again, she'd take it.

"Could have been," Morris admonished.

She waited for him to say more, to point out the fact that she'd run at the first opportunity. When a bead of silence passed, she resigned herself with the understanding that the men required a physician.

Brick's shirt was soft and inviting. As she pulled it over her head, the smell of an old wood fire enveloped her. It was comforting and cozy. Nothing she would've expected to come from him. "Ready," she said.

While Morris turned with almost exaggerated speed, probably suspicious that she'd run again, Brick seemed to take a moment before facing her.

She'd forgotten he'd be bare-chested.

Holy crap was he bare-chested.

Wow.

His skin was flawless, finely dusted with dark, curling hair over a broad, developed chest. The contours of his abdomen should have been the envy of models everywhere. Every part of her itched, a longing to trace over his musculature almost pathologic.

Her gaze dipped before she could recall it, checking up the package she'd

felt a short while ago, for far too brief a time. Fortunately for at least one of them, the darkness of the night kept him hidden.

“What are you doing out here by yourself?” Brick asked. He glared at Morris, as if the fault lay with the other man.

“Doesn’t matter now,” she muttered. No sense in letting him know that she’d tried to dodge the others and get back to safety. The fact of the matter was that she’d been unsafe being away from the men. Not with them.

Without speaking, the trio returned to the little shed where Knox stood. If he was surprised by their return, she couldn’t tell. “About time you got back here. It’s not as bad as we thought.”

Kim steeled her stomach, ready to face the results of another violent act. “Morris told me the same. What am I dealing with here?”

“See for yourself. *Oh*, and Brick brought this for you.” He paused long enough to look at her. “Let me know if I should send Sean back to your clinic for anything more.”

Her eyebrows lifted as she recognized her leather doctor bag Knox held out. It contained basic supplies and would come in handy. She didn’t want to feel grateful to see it, but that he’d thought to bring it for her loosened another knot in the rope of tension that now made her spine. Forced out of the clinic at such a quick pace, still struggling to understand the men and the information they’d imparted, the bag had been furthest from her mind.

“Thank you,” she said to him. “But it won’t be of any good if I need complex instruments.”

“Not sure that you will, but you’re the doctor. Clinic’s not too far away and if there’s something back there that you need, let me know and like I said, I’ll send one of the men to get it.”

It helped to see him at ease, a part of her worried the injuries were worse than they’d let on. But their leader seemed to hold everyone’s well-being in high regard. Whatever the crisis, her concern for it eased down to a simmer.

A twinge of guilt over having tried to get away from them wormed its way through Kim, but she squashed it without a second thought. The kids would be getting the care they needed, and she was still stuck.

“This way,” Knox said.

Although the moon lit the field with a modicum of light, Kim had a hard time working her way toward the shed. At one point she stumbled, but Brick caught her elbow, keeping her upright.

“What happened to the flashlight?” Morris asked.

“Lost along the way,” she mumbled.

Brick stuck out an elbow. “Hold on to me then.”

A hot blush crept up her face, but she nodded, taking the proffered arm. Now more at ease at being able to find her way without stumbling again, she looked around. They were on some sort of farm, the distant sounds of animals drifting toward her. There was also a distinct earthy smell in the air. The comfortable clogs she wore left impressions in the soft dirt, the gentle suction as she lifted her foot reminding her of the recent rains.

Kim tried to ignore the fact that Brick walked next to her. Between the aroma coming from his shirt and the way her fingers curved on his bicep, she failed miserably. If given half the chance, she would’ve loved an opportunity to explore the rest of him.

Hell, she’d love to study all of them in detail, now that she thought about it. Did being a shifter somehow make them different beyond the obvious?

“I’m really not prepared to do this,” she said. “Not my specialty at all. Don’t you think he’d be better off going to a big hospital instead of being treated by a country doctor?”

From behind her, Knox spoke up. “That’s not what I hear, Doctor. Word is you’ve got a lot of experience handling different types of medical needs.”

“What?” Her heart began to beat faster, her spine stiffening. “What do you know about my experience?”

“It didn’t take long to make a few phone calls, have someone check out your history. Town Council has your resume on file, too.”

“Of c-course.” She’d come to Fire Creek to start over. No one was supposed to know her or about her past. Kim glanced at Brick. What did he know? “But the truth is, I’m out of practice.”

“Your resume says you have more than enough for what we need. In fact, I think Mitchell here will be just fine under your care.”

They’d been led down a field of corn. Brick pushed away stalks as they bent into her path, keeping the way clear for Kim. Tempted to thank him every time, she soon realized the futility of it. If there was one thing she could say about all these men, it was that their mamas had raised them right.

Large farm equipment, maybe a tractor but she couldn’t tell, sat in the middle of an opening. A large cluster of bodies milled toward the opposite end of it. Soft crying could be heard as well.

The blood began to race in her veins as adrenaline surged into her system. Whatever the issue, she was about to find out.

Chapter Six

It had to be going on close to after ten. Fatigued, Kim sat with her back against the big tire of the tractor, relieved the evening had gone so well.

Somehow, the boy, Mitchell, had managed to get his hand caught between two movable parts, cutting open the skin and trapping him from getting help. After almost an hour of listening to him wail, Sean had managed to extract his hand from the engine. The kid had left behind a large chunk of flesh, but mostly his pride. The patch job Kim had to do afterward wouldn't have been a hard task for a first-year medical student. It was the sort of thing she'd come to Fire Creek to do.

"Tired?" asked Brick.

Kim blinked, her fatigue dragging out the split-second response into something that seemed to take a week to complete. She was exhausted but in a good way. She'd forgotten what it was like to serve a small community, as she'd done during residency. What she'd done tonight didn't involve the high-tech of her most recent years, but did fill her with pride. "Yeah, but I'll live. Can't wait to scarf down something and then crawl into my bed."

"Oh, shit. Can't believe that no one thought about feeding you. Here we are trying to convince you that we don't mean any harm, and no one bothered to get you a simple sandwich."

"We were all caught up in the flurry of the moment. Don't worry about it. Back when I used to work sixteens, I didn't remember about eating until I was in the car trying to decompress."

Brick didn't say anything for a moment. Most everyone else had left already, the task completed. She could hear Knox talking with someone off in the distance, but she couldn't tell which of the other men remained.

"By the way, I never said thanks for grabbing my bag. It was smart thinking."

"Just trying to help."

Now, was it a trick of the light or was this burly man blushing? She wanted to smile, but decided to change the subject and put him out of his misery instead. "Are you getting cold?"

Somehow she'd managed to ignore the fact that he was shirtless for most of the evening as well. Something about having to slip into doctor mode forced her to focus on the patient and nothing else.

"Nothing I can't handle."

"Could—could you grow fur?"

"Not exactly." He laughed. "One day soon I'll have to show you what it is we can do. What you saw of Abe doesn't fully represent our kind, at least not the way you saw him last."

She wanted to believe that but wasn't sure if he was just feeding her a line. The things they said and did suggested they'd protect her from harm before doing it themselves. As much as she wanted to distrust their actions, they took away her doubt. Everything they'd done so far suggested they meant her no harm.

Slight movement caught her attention, and her physician's eyes recognized it for what it was. "You're shivering." She looked around for the others, spotting Morris, Rowan and Knox in a huddle. Morris cast a glance at her and smiled when their gazes connected. Rowan noticed, and whatever they were discussing ground to a halt. Knox looked troubled, his spine stiff, hands balled into tight fists on his hips. Now what exactly could they be talking about?

The other men had taken the boy back to the city to have his hand looked at by a specialist. She ignored the trio to focus on Brick. "Let me give you your shirt back. At least I have mine to wear. I'll just keep it closed with my hands."

"Not letting anyone look at you like that, Doctor. Every one of us here is single and you're a woman who's damned easy on the eyes. You're safe, but I don't know how much flirting you want to put up with."

"Protecting my honor? How very—"

"Chivalrous?"

"Old-fashioned. Very, *very* old-fashioned."

Brick grunted.

It made her smile and after a moment's pause, she leaned closer to him. The brute would never admit to needing the warmth, and she wasn't about to let him suffer from the elements because of his antiquated values. Besides, it was cute. He was cute.

He stiffened when she scooted over once again, this time pressing herself

into his side. Kim kept her eyes forward, as if she wasn't affected by the proximities of their bodies when nothing could be further from the truth. Her pulse had jumped appreciably and she wondered, if only for a brief second, what might happen if she turned her face toward him. Would the delicious scent coming from his shirt be as strong coming straight from the man?

The quiet stretched on as Brick's body relaxed a fraction at a time. At any moment, their peace would be interrupted, and she'd be thrust back into the present where monsters were being hunted. Where he took orders from a man who'd ordered her kidnapped. For right now though, she eased into the comfort of being next to a man she found attractive.

"You sure you know what you're doing here with me?" he asked, his voice rough.

A thousand thoughts assailed her. "Not even a little bit."

"You're killing me, you know."

"Oh?"

"Don't tell me you don't feel it."

"It?"

"This thing between us. I feel it. I can taste it... I want to taste *you*."

Her cheeks lit up, aflame. This wasn't smart, it wasn't smart at all, but for the first time in her life, she actually wanted not to be smart. "Would it be wrong?" she asked in a tremulous voice.

"Doesn't stop me from wanting to kiss you until you can't think."

Didn't stop her from wanting the same. "Are you always this blunt?"

"No. But with you, I don't want to waste time. The urge to kiss you is impossible. It's telling me not to waste a single second, not even one."

Her heart thumped faster, but Kim chose to ignore it and the way her belly warmed at his raw honesty. She closed her eyes and thought about her next steps. Whether or not it would be prudent to act on the impulse running through her. She didn't know this man. He could be as dangerous as a caged animal, but the urge to find out more whispered into her ear, using a seductive voice.

"I don't know you," she murmured.

"But I know you," he said. "I feel like... It makes no sense, but I feel like I know you."

She turned to look at him, confused and heart pounding. "From the minute I saw you, I don't know... There's something about you that I can't explain."

“Tell me about your family. Where you’re from. Your people.”

Heat licked her cheeks, and she wanted to keep her answers to herself. What would he think and what would he say when he discovered her disgraced past? “You know I’m not from around here. I moved here from California.”

“Big-city girl?”

“You know it. Coffee-swilling, Porsche-driving, technology-addicted city girl. I wouldn’t have had it any other way.”

The inevitable question came from him next. “Why move here?”

“I needed a change.” What else could she tell him? That she couldn’t secure another position in any other big city? Or how she’d been on dozens of interviews, always to be turned down before a job offer was extended? Anyone with access to Google knew who she was and what she’d done.

During their brief conversation, she found that she’d shifted even closer to Brick. At some point his arm rested atop her shoulder, the tips of his fingers grazing her skin. It sent small sparks through her, a thrill she didn’t try very hard to ignore.

“Change can be good. It takes a lot of guts sometimes.”

“I take it you’re a fan of change then?”

He snorted. “Not even a little bit. I like things the way they are, no upheaval or chaos throwing things off kilter.”

“The way a new relationship could?” It was a loaded question, she knew, but fair. The heated way he watched her, the way his voice grew husky when they spoke, just the way he threw off sexual hunger, inspired her to know.

“Listen, Doctor—Kim—I’m intensely attracted to you, but you don’t know me, and a couple of hours of craziness isn’t good enough to build a relationship on. There might be an animal inside me, part of my nature, but right now the man is the one looking at you. If the man acts on these urges, it’s physical and nothing more. Do you understand that?”

“I hear you.” She understood even better, but she wasn’t going to shy away. There was nothing wrong with a healthy woman and a willing man to get together based on nothing more than physical attraction. If something more happened because of it, great. If not, at least her battery-operated boyfriend would get a rest for a week or two. “There’s a woman looking at you right now and she’s liking what she sees.”

Life was too damn short to beat around the bush, to play coy, when she

knew exactly what she wanted.

“Things are going to get rougher around here before they get better, too. Knox is dragging you into our business, and you won’t get to step away. You get that? Do you really understand how immersed in our lives you’re going to be?”

Kim flashed back to the image of Abe lying on her clinic table, blood dribbling from his mouth and plummeting to the floor in big, fat droplets. She mentally shook it off, but the chill seeping into her bones wouldn’t be so easily displaced. “If this is your way of trying to scare me off, you’re doing a good job.”

“Then I’m doing it wrong. I want you, I want to kiss you. I want to do a lot more than that, a few things that might even be illegal in some parts of the U.S. But I also want you to know that from the moment I kiss you to the moment we go our separate ways, it’ll be about us. When you’re the doctor working with my pack, it’s all about them. I’ll protect you from anything and everything that comes at you, but pack comes first. Always. Does that make sense? Can you be okay with that?”

Without hesitation, she nodded. She’d already lost everything. The ground couldn’t get any lower, so the only place to go, even with the warnings Brick gave her, was up. To allow herself this one small thing put her back on the road to normalcy. Far from desperate, but open to every possibility.

Kim thought she understood, maybe not all of it, but enough to make a solid decision. But then she felt the gentle touch of his fingers beneath her chin, tilting her head up. For the first time, she noticed an eye shine that made his eyes appear almost luminescent. She’d been drawn in by the unusual color from the first time she’d seen him, but had somehow failed to notice the shimmer she saw now.

“Your eyes...”

“Later,” he whispered.

Kim would have studied the natural phenomenon often seen in nocturnal animals but Brick’s lips parted and for a breath-held moment, she could focus on nothing else. She watched them lower toward her face and just before his lips descended on her mouth, she closed her own eyes.

* * *

Both the wolf and the beast were quiet at the touch of Brick's mouth on Kim's. His heart roared with approval, while his mind splintered into a million pieces. She was responsive, opening beneath his assault, allowing his tongue to sweep across hers.

A low sound, a moan of encouragement, reached his ears, and any hesitancy he felt toward the physician melted away. He'd been sure she'd rebuke his advance and had almost been waiting for her to push him away.

But instead, she gave him sweet entrance, and it took everything within him not to coerce for more.

She was achingly soft. Delicate and feminine, and he celebrated it. The scent of her healer's magic wrapped around him, and it sent images of beautiful things swimming through Brick. This was nature's call coming from a human and he couldn't explain it and it didn't matter and it was the best taste of heaven and torturous purgatory twisted together until he was lost. Utterly, completely and madly lost by an intimate touch with the woman he didn't know.

"Wow," she whispered, lips brushing his.

Brick's heart punched his ribs, blood rushing so hard through his ears that he should have been deaf to the one-word reaction. But his gaze remained locked on her moist lips and he read the word more than heard it. He knew the word too because it echoed from his soul. Wow.

The wolf grinned at him, tongue lolling out of its open mouth. Its eyes flashing with mischief. Encouraging, if ever he saw it.

He lowered his face toward hers again, capturing anything else she might have said. The magic rushed back in, inciting his passion and hunger. His teeth gently nipped at the plump fullness of her lips, a moan her reply. Kim twisted toward him, putting her hand against his head and bringing them closer.

He tasted the night and the moon and her magic. Like nothing before he'd ever experienced.

"God." A gasp for air.

He dove in again, addicted. Soon he'd have to touch her too. Despite every promise to himself to be a gentleman, to take things slow with his shy doctor, she kindled a fire within him. The wolf felt it too, the dangerous headiness of it.

He had to have her.

The kiss left the comfort of her lush mouth, finding the delicate skin of her chin and neck. She made a soft sound as he tasted the flesh there, tested her responses. The urge to move over every inch of her body, no matter how long it took, to find the areas that made her moan with pleasure or sigh with delight, burned bright within him.

If he didn't draw back now, he'd roll them onto the grass and slip his hand beneath her clothing to touch her. The pink bra—God, that wonderfully feminine pink bra—would be exposed to his viewing pleasure.

If he didn't stop now.

Kim's eyes were wide. "Where on earth did you learn to kiss like that, mister?" She brought a trembling hand to her flushed cheek. "That was..."

Amazing. Incredible. Hot.

"Unusual."

Brick frowned at her word choice. "That wasn't what I thought you were going to say." He forced himself to press both shoulder blades to the tire. Otherwise he might go for a third round of taking her.

"Oh, no. I mean that in a very good way." She seemed to hasten to add, "There's definitely some chemistry there. It's never been that intense with someone I just met is all."

Brick wanted to howl his approval. "There's something there," he said instead. "I guess you're in the habit of kissing men you've just met?"

"Every chance I get. As soon as he makes another appearance, I'm locking lips with Knox next."

Chuckling, Brick shot her a daring look.

Kim again touched her fingers to her lips, as if taking a few seconds to relive the memory of their kiss. He studied her motion, the half-lidded daze, and wanted to sink her finger into his mouth. But if he did that, he wouldn't stop there, taking the time to taste her palm, her wrist, the delicate skin in the crook of her arm.

God only knew why the compulsion surged so strongly with him with a woman he didn't know at all, but he ached for her. His cock had thickened every time he touched her, the response not surprising. The scent of her hair, the soft texture of her shirt, the fullness of her lips all conspired against him. Images and thoughts of being inside her bombarded him while they'd kissed, and already he had a good idea of what she'd sound like while being thoroughly pleased. Every low moan of hers a wicked and tempting

foreplay.

He shifted, using his shoulder to block her view of him, because the last thing he wanted to do was scare away the good doctor with the glaring evidence of his arousal. It was all he could do not to reach down and do a little readjustment in his pants.

Brick slid his gaze toward their right, marking Morris's approach. Brick struggled with a rush of feelings, knowing one of his pack brothers had seen him close to a loss of control. It put both of them in such a bad place. Had he been Morris, he would have taken the situation to Knox for evaluation. Hell, for all he knew, the man had done just that. He should have.

Brick waited until Morris was standing right in front of them before alerting Kim to his presence. Her hand stroked along his thigh, a subconscious act he doubted she recognized she'd committed. "We have company," he said in a low voice. Morris's sensitive ears would undoubtedly hear the words, but Brick wanted to give her the chance to put some distance between their bodies for the sake of propriety. He left that choice with her, indeed ready for the others to smell his presence on her. "Morris's coming."

She didn't stop touching him, something that sent another small thrill through him, but sat up straighter. "How do you know?"

He pointed. "From that direction. There."

On cue, Morris added a heavy tread to the steps. The wolf was so innate to all of them, they moved with the animal's stealth. Humans often commented on it.

Brick studied Morris's face, looking for any sign of betrayal or duty. He said to her, "Brought you something, Doctor." He held out an apple.

"Thank you." Kim jumped to her feet with an enthusiasm that demonstrated her hunger. Brick had to bite back the touch of anger he felt at having neglected her basic needs.

Anger or jealousy? Both?

Brick tamped down his anger—the emotion gave itself a name—and addressed Morris. "Are we good?"

"Mitchell's safe. Doesn't look like he's gonna need surgery after all. Within the hour, he should be heading back home and getting back to his own bed. It will be a good lesson for him on safety going forward."

Kim said between bites, "Glad to hear it. He got off easy this time."

She had no idea what Brick had been asking, but the way Morris locked

gazes with him, Brick knew the question hadn't been accidentally misinterpreted. Morris said, "Yeah, we'll need to get more information on what happened to make certain it doesn't happen again."

Brick knew it couldn't happen again, not in front of Morris or any other. One more loss of control, and Knox would have to be told.

"Doc, why don't I give you a ride home? I know Knox wants to talk with you in the morning, and I'm sure tonight has been stressful enough for you."

Brick rose to his feet, turning to assist her, when the beast, who'd been silent all evening, began to pummel against the barriers with its fists. He jerked upright, unable to stifle his surprise.

Although Kim took his hand, her brow furrowed. "You okay?"

"Back twinge." A slow agitation began to build within him, and the understanding that rage drove the beast dawned on him. "I need to go talk to Knox," he lied, "but I'll see you in the morning. Morris or Rowan'll get you home safe."

"What about your shirt?"

"I'll retrieve it soon. Don't you worry."

He saw the confusion in her eyes, the question about their kiss sitting on the edge of her lips. But he was barely holding on as it was. By the time they left the area, he swayed on his feet. Pain ricocheted through his bones and muscles, the beast once again attempting to break free.

Brick dropped to his knees, falling forward on his hands. He curled his fingers into the cool earth, needing the tether against the onslaught. Teeth gritted to keep from crying out, he shuddered as he fought for control of his body. The thing that made him stronger and more dangerous than other men, on the verge of escaping.

If he'd thought for one second that being with Kim had cooled the beast's rabid urges, he'd been dead wrong.

Chapter Seven

Kim dreamed of Brick all night long.

She recounted the feel of his lips on hers. The way he smelled and the way his hand gripped her waist. She tasted his mouth on hers and felt the delicate sweep of his tongue. Her heart beat just as loudly in her dreams as it had when he'd been kissing her.

She knew this because when she woke, her heart continued to race. Her panties were damp with the evidence of her impassioned state. The scent of his skin lingered around her, the phantom aroma making her almost believe he'd been in the room too, and hadn't been just a memory.

As if reliving his kiss through vivid dreams hadn't been enough, she spent the time she went through ablutions reliving every detail as well. "You've got it bad, girl," she muttered to herself as she styled her hair.

She couldn't very well afford to have Wi-Fi at both the office and her small cabin, so she made the decision to return to the clinic early, repair what damage had been done to the building as well as check her email for any updates on job hunts. When she opened the front door, however, she remembered her car.

"Fuck." She stared at the empty driveway where her car would've been parked on any other morning.

"That's quite a mouth you've got there this early in the morning, Doctor."

Kim whirled on her feet, a shriek echoing into the sky as she faced Rowan. He held up his hands in surrender. "Whoa, sorry. Didn't mean to startle you."

"What the hell you doing here at this time of day?" Whatever soothing thoughts she'd had up to now had been obliterated by fear. A deep breath helped to dampen some of that emotion. Barely.

He tilted his head, a very wolf-like movement, then held up a bag. "Brought you breakfast. Figured you might want a ride back to your clinic."

As the smell of greasy food drifted to her, a rebellious stomach rumbled in appreciation. Whatever was in there was guaranteed to be better than the box of dry cereal waiting for her in her office. She noticed he didn't address why

he'd brought the food or why he planned on giving her a ride in, but she had her suspicions. "Brick with you?"

"Nope. Would you feel better if he was?"

As the back of her neck heated, she shook her head. Was it really that obvious? Yes, she did want him here, and yes, she would probably feel better by his presence. No way in hell was she going to share that, however.

A smile tipped Rowan's lips as if he knew her thoughts. "This way. You can eat during the drive. I heard we should have fed you proper last night and hope this makes up for it a little. I didn't know what you'd like, so there's a selection."

"As good as it smells, the only way you could make this any better was if you brought coffee." Most mornings she started off with at least two cups. On a day like today, three was not out of the realm of impossibility. Medical school taught her the beauty of being in bed and fast asleep by nine. Having stayed up past midnight last night, it would take a small miracle to see her through the end of the day without a nap.

"Waiting for you in the car." That devastating smile again.

Neither spoke as Kim embarrassed herself by swallowing down too-hot coffee and doughnuts so sinful they melted on her tongue. The breakfast sandwich might have had cheese on it, but as fast as she inhaled it, she couldn't be certain. By the time she wolfed down the third doughnut, the coffee was almost gone and she felt near human.

"So what can you tell me about you guys?" she asked in between licking the last of the glaze from her fingertips.

"Brick's been a friend of mine for a very long time."

That wasn't quite what she had in mind. "No, I meant people like Abe... and you, I guess. I want to know more about the people like that."

Rowan switched topics without missing a beat. "The people *like that* come from our pack. We've been in Fire Creek for generations and we mostly keep to ourselves. We don't want no trouble, and we don't need anyone from the outside trying to look in. You feel me?"

Kim suspected he warned her away from toeing the line of insulting him and the people he held dearly by means of her curiosity. "I'm not looking to turn you over to men in black suits in the name of science." She'd never admit aloud that the thought *had* crossed her mind. "I simply need to know what it is I'm dealing with. If I'm expected to help you and your kind, I need

something to go on.”

He seemed to consider that for a moment before giving her a brief nod. Eyes on the road, he said, “There are a lot of theories and superstitions behind how we came to be. I don’t know that any of them have it right, but I know which ones I’ve cobbled together and make the most sense to me.”

Although the sun had risen, it remained hidden behind trees. The light cast an eerie glow on the road, as if it tried to squeeze between the miniscule spaces the forest offered. This might have been Kim’s third week driving to the clinic, and the otherworldly beauty of the trail soothed her every single time. The natural cadence of Rowan’s soothing voice added to her serenity.

Like Brick, Rowan moved with effortless grace. Tall, lean and lightly bearded, he brought to mind the perfect image of a refined mountain man. Cowboy boots, blue jeans and a form-fitting cotton T-shirt helped the image. The crinkles at the corners of his eyes spoke to a mischievousness she found in all of the men so far. More of that wolfish behavior, she supposed.

“Tell me what you believe then.”

“I should tell you the story that my grandmother told me.”

Small-town charm. She loved it. “Please.”

“Long time ago, before there were cities and cars and all the things we know today, there was the earth and the moon and the sun. Each one wanted to reign, to be the biggest and most powerful. But when the sun came out, the moon found that he couldn’t stand its presence, making it angry. The earth, the peacekeeper, suggested that when the sun went in for rest, the moon should come out to play.

“Well, although this arrangement worked at first, after a while both the sun and the moon felt slighted. They realized the earth always got to stay around, while only one of them could play. By all appearances, the earth remained the most powerful. So one day, again the peacekeeper, the earth suggested they create one being to represent all of them and be as physically present as the earth could. The being would reside on earth, but could be the envoy for the sun and the moon whenever they wished for one. Maybe even a spy, although none of them would ever say that out loud.

“So they thought and they created and they worked their magic, and our kind was born. The wolf, strong and cunning, represented the sun. The man, innocent and vulnerable, represented the earth.”

She didn’t know why, but Kim grew enraptured by the story. Although her

mind raced to come up with what represented the moon, she couldn't come up with anything. "Go on."

"The third creature, the beast, is what you met last night. He represents the moon. And at first the truce lasted. The man did his thing while the wolf roamed freely, but the beast...the beast, they eventually discovered, could not be contained. He ravaged and killed and made the moon feel ashamed.

"Both the sun and the earth felt sorry for the moon. After all, they'd only been trying to solve the dispute. Was it its fault that its creation couldn't be controlled?" Rowan pulled into the parking lot of the clinic.

So caught up in the story, Kim hadn't realized how much time had flown by.

Rowan continued, "They came up with one more plan. If this succeeded, it would hopefully bring back the original intent of the truce. I won't bore you with the details, but they eventually trapped the beast. The sun, the moon and the earth, together once more, pooled their magics. And they created our kind, the lycanthrope. We are the man, the wolf and the beast all in one. Because the earth is the peacekeeper of the trio, man—arguably the most reasonable—was allowed to run freely. The wolf guides his conscience and sometimes his actions, serving as a friend and advisor. The beast provides uncanny strength and accelerated healing.

"Although it would be tempting to keep the beast contained, never to roam free, everyone saw the unfairness of this. So once a month, on the full moon, the beast is allowed his time."

Her mind raced. All of the stories and movies she'd ever seen about werewolves... Who knew such a thing existed?

It both frightened and fascinated her.

Rowan turned his eyes on Kim, and she shivered at the intensity she saw in them. "On the night of the full moon, Doctor, while you live in Fire Creek, stay indoors and never, *ever* confront a beast."

* * *

Brick jumped to his feet when he saw Rowan's car pull up. He'd been waiting for a little while now, alternating between cursing himself for acting like a teen on prom night with Kim and being eager for another chance with her.

The wolf let out a low whine and paced, his agitation as clear as Brick's, while the vehicle parked. Neither knew what kind of reaction to expect from her. Did she wrestle with the same regrets this morning? He waited for the door to the car to open, for Kim and Rowan to step out, but the two remained in the car.

He ambled a little closer, not wanting to appear too overeager, but he could admit to being curious. From his position he could see Kim's hair, the profile of her face as she listened intently to whatever Rowan was telling her. His brother focused on the doctor, his lips moving. Brick had no idea what they were discussing, but he had to bite back a small knot of jealousy at seeing how Rowan held her captivated.

He'd spent the night shifting his semi-hard dick, caught between the compulsion to relieve the tension built inside him from their kiss or to honor the doctor by waiting for the real thing. He didn't like thinking of her as wanker fodder, knowing she deserved to be more than just a fantasy object. He might have managed a solid two hours of sleep in between waffling.

Why were they still in the car?

The wolf's pacing turned into a trot. Brick found himself cracking a knuckle of each finger. As he stood there, like a lovesick fool, the loud popping gave him a place to focus.

While the beast had fought him for hours after leaving Kim, the undercurrent of agitation remained. He didn't need that same turbulence spilling over to the man or to the wolf. It left him feeling as if his insides cycled on a motor. It brought out a strong pressure to release the wolf and run through the woods at top speed. Maybe hunt down a small rabbit for the thrill of the chase. Most likely he'd give in to the urge before sunset.

At last the passenger door pushed open, and Kim stepped out. He drank in the sight of her, quenching the thirst of a man in the Sahara, a moment later to be annoyed with this irrational hunger for her. Even more annoyed with the beyond irrational surge of competition directed at Rowan. He couldn't tell who fueled the jealousy—the beast or the man.

She'd kissed him last night. They'd kissed.

He clung to those thoughts to help push away the rage he felt.

"Hey, there he is..."

Brick ignored Rowan's greeting, a current of emotions drowning him. He'd been standing closer to the clinic door waiting for her but when she

turned and spotted him too, instinct took over. He ran toward them at top speed, forcing himself to slow to a loping jog by the time he reached the car.

Her still-damp hair met his fingertips. It didn't stop him from taking a fistful of hair in each hand and using it to tilt her face up.

The scent of soap, clean and crisp, coming from her soft skin. He lowered his nose to her, inhaling deep.

And she tasted like sugar and coffee, his lips and tongue pushing into her mouth. Her soft, luscious mouth.

"Brick."

The wolf growled when someone curled a firm grip into Brick's shoulder. He registered the presence. Ignored it. His woman, in his arms and kissing him back, mattered more.

"Goddammit, Brick."

The beast pounded against the barrier, a storm of furious and awesome passion flowing into Brick. The excitement, the rush at seeing his woman—their woman—and making her know how much they wanted her. How *badly*.

He'd drawn back just enough to ensure the reciprocity, to see if she'd been just as affected by their separation. Too long. It had been too fucking long without her.

He looked down and saw...fear. It virtually punched him, forcing Brick to take a step back and then another.

"The fuck is wrong with you, man?" Rowan shouted. "You okay, Doc?"

Kim stared at him, the confusion on her face almost too much for him to bear. Eyes wide, her lips parted, she stood frozen in his arms. Lipstick smeared her mouth, and revulsion filled him the moment he saw it.

"Sorry," he muttered. What had he done?

Rowan shoved Brick but using the care he would with a china doll, took his time with her and extracted Kim from Brick's grasp. His friend watched her for any sign of injury, if she'd been hurt by his careless actions. Although Kim murmured she was fine, Brick noticed the way her hands trembled, the way her gaze darted to and away from him.

"You," Rowan said, stabbing a finger in Brick's direction. "We're going to talk about this and what I heard about last night, for that matter. Don't go anywhere." With a delicate touch, Rowan led Kim toward the clinic, speaking in a low voice to her the entire time. She made hand gestures as if to ward off his mother hen routine, but Brick was grateful for it. Grateful that his friend

tried to soothe away whatever hurt Brick might have visited upon her.

What the fuck was wrong with him indeed?

Brick paced, the urge to shift, to let the animal run away from the disaster the man had created, a strong impulse he barely could ignore. He wanted to howl at the sun, he wanted to rush inside and apologize to Kim and he wanted to crawl into a hole.

By the time Rowan returned, he'd flagellated himself mentally a thousand times over. He didn't flinch or react otherwise when Rowan shoved him again as soon as they were close enough to do so. "You want to tell me what's going on? Last night your beast was free on a regular moon night. And now, you attacked the doctor like a raging lunatic. And you know how much I hate that term."

"Yeah, I know," he muttered.

"Full moon's not for a few nights yet, so what's going on?"

If he had an answer for that question, a whole lot of problems would be solved. Brick shook his head. "I don't know."

Rowan's shoes kicked up dirt as he stomped closer. "You're gonna have to do better than that. Are you going feral?"

Brick stilled, intense fear of that exact conclusion making it difficult to speak. No matter how he tried to twist or turn his behaviors and struggles over the last few weeks, all the evidence pointed in this singular direction. "I don't know," he whispered, his voice strangling on the words.

"Aw, fuck." It became Rowan's turn to pace. "How long has this been going on? How close are you?"

"Christ, I wish I knew. I wish... Nothing makes sense to me. It was just a bad feeling, like my guts rumbling. And my beast was pushing boundaries, you know? And then I met her and the beast went wild, too wild for me to contain completely. Not without feeling like I wanted to rip off my skin. And then we kissed and it was better, so much better. I thought everything had calmed down and gone back to normal and maybe I was being paranoid about losing control. Then we kissed." He knew he rambled on, his words incoherent and fevered, but for the first time, he had someone to share the burden with. It could possibly mean a death sentence for him, but he no longer trusted his own body. He'd come too close to doing something he'd forever regret to Kim. If he'd hurt her, *Christ...*

"What happened after you kissed?"

“I swear it was like the second she left my sight, the beast was impossible. It felt like he was pulverizing my bones, one by one, trying to get out and get at her. He wanted out, and nothing I said or did was going to stop him.”

A long silence stretched and without looking at Rowan, Brick knew his thoughts. He’d had a million similar ones during the night. When the beast had finally tired, relinquishing control to Brick once again, he’d thought he’d won. Seeing her this morning with Rowan, her interest with another man, the beast had taken control in a spectacular fashion and with such guile, Brick hadn’t seen it coming.

“So she’s both your salvation and your destroyer.”

A shudder ran through Brick. “I won’t hurt her again.”

“I don’t think you hurt her the first time. Might have shook her up a little bit, but that’s all.”

“I saw you in the car. Long time together. Is there... I won’t get between you two.” He hated to say it, but his pack brother needed to know. If Rowan wanted a chance with her, he owed them both that opportunity. It tore at his insides to think that way, but that was the way of the pack. “If I’m a danger to her, she should be with someone who isn’t.”

“*Whoa*. Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Rowan held his hands up, surrender style. “Nothing like that going on between me and the good doctor. Just gave her a ride back to the clinic as Knox asked me to. You got it bad for her, and I’m not going to get in the way of that. Can’t say that I understand it, how strong it seems to be, but I’m always your friend.”

Pack mentality.

“Thanks.” Brick directed his attention toward the front of the clinic, wondering what awaited him inside. “Then I guess now I need to go see if I ruined any chance of moving forward with her.”

Rowan stopped him. “What are we going to do about your beast?”

They should go to their Alpha and let him know. That was also pack mentality. “You do what you have to. I understand and don’t fault you. For now, I think I can get a handle on this. The second I believe I can’t, I’ll walk away from her. But I have to try. I have to.”

Chapter Eight

With her fingers pressed to her lips, still throbbing from the force of Brick's impassioned kiss, Kim mindlessly made her way to the scene of yesterday's fiasco. Along the way she tried to sort through the rush of emotions and feelings bombarding her, but she was unable to order any of them. She'd been elated to find Brick at the clinic waiting on her, but his greeting had left her disoriented. While she appreciated his enthusiasm, at the same time she had a feeling he'd gone farther than he'd meant to. At the time, she thought she'd glimpsed something animal inside him, on the verge of breaking free. It shook her to her core to know that she wouldn't be able to escape, not with unrestrained savagery staring her in the face.

Forcing herself to calm, she'd given in to his eagerness, accepting it for what it was. The flicker of whatever she'd seen not enough to linger over, not when he'd been careful with her prior to now. Despite the rough treatment, she'd responded to him with the same frenzy they'd shared last night. Although as hard as she'd tried to quell the concern over his behavior, a voice inside her had warned her of danger, demanding she remember the thing bleeding out on her exam table the day before.

Her fear had swelled.

Now, looking back, she struggled with conflicting thoughts and feelings. This was stupid to have such a magnetic attraction to a man—was he really a man?—she didn't know. Yet he'd done no harm to her and, if anything, had protected her yesterday to the best of his ability. Still, it wouldn't hurt to take things a little slower than they had been.

A gasp startled out of her, redirecting her thoughts, when she stepped inside the exam room. She didn't remember leaving it looking like this. A biohazard disaster where blood had dried on the metal table, soiled bandages littered the floor and used instruments were cast about the room, dirty and forgotten. She'd never before seen a room left in such a state, not even when she'd done a short rotation through Trauma.

Battling the temptation to cry in frustration, she snapped on a pair of gloves and got to work. For the first time since opening this clinic, second

thoughts about whether or not she'd gotten in over her head swarmed her.

A few minutes into it, and she felt his presence before actually seeing the man. From the corner of her eye, while she stooped down to collect trash, she recognized the Timberlands. A huge silence filled the room, the tension of fighting lovers, almost more than she could bear. She kept her eyes down and on task though. Her feelings about him were too jumbled to confront now.

"I'm sorry," he said in a low voice.

"It was chaos in here yesterday," she said as she dropped another soiled gauze square into a red bin. "If I'd thought about it, I would've asked the girls to come in a little bit earlier today. On Fridays it's a short day because I do house calls."

"No, that's not what I meant." Brick walked over and held out a hand. Kim looked at it, not sure what she should do, but after a pause shoved the gloves off and accepted it. He helped her to standing, not releasing her once they faced each other. "I meant that I'm sorry for what happened out there. I was rough and, truthfully, not in my right mind when I kissed you."

"Yeah, well, we both seem to be a little bit impetuous around each other." She smiled, butterflies taking up residence in her belly. Maybe she'd crossed the line when she'd scarfed down that third doughnut. Or maybe it was the gorgeous man looking at her through brilliantly blue eyes.

The smile faded as she scrutinized the tension in the lines of his face. He looked too serious, almost afraid. "What's going on, Brick? I have this feeling that there's something left unsaid between us, right?" He didn't respond, the sensation in her belly solidifying as the silence swelled. "What else are you planning on landing on me, because honestly, I don't know how much more I can take. I mean, look at this place. Look at it." She threw her free hand out, indicating the state of the room. Her anger built, frustration at the impossibility of everything she'd experienced in the past twenty-four hours. "I came here to start over, a fresh, clean start. And I'm not here a month before my little clinic is broken into, I'm asked to patch up a dying *creature*, I met an incredibly hot man and am chased down by a werewolf. A fucking *werewolf*. That disappears. Did I mention that part to you? Because I stayed up for hours thinking about it. A creature chased me down and you caught me instead and I kissed you. Kissed you like we'd spent weeks of getting to know each other and dating and taking it slow, because that's my style. But no...no, because everything else has been completely fucked up

and crazy, I kiss a complete stranger and he kisses me so good I can't think straight. I don't think of how dangerous this is, how crazy this is, how bad this is. I don't think at all. I don't think except to know I want more, because I must be as crazy as everything else happening around me."

As if the end of her speech signaled the end of her energy, Kim's legs threatened to give out. Sensing the need for borrowed strength, Brick held on to her, pulling her close to him. She clung to his sturdiness, digging her fingers into his shirt, using it to keep her tethered to what remained of her sanity.

She'd told him the truth. Fire Creek was supposed to be the start of something new. A way to wipe the slate clean and be the physician she should have been instead of the one she'd become. She'd been unprepared for what met her here though. She'd been unequipped for what awaited her. One hundred percent certain she was losing her mind with every minute she stayed here.

"I'm struggling with my beast and keeping it contained," Brick said. "But I swear on my life that while as a man, while I have even a shred of control, I would never hurt you. You've got a lot to deal with, and I don't want my problems to be one of them. All I ask is that you give me the chance to prove it to you. You're not crazy, and what's happening here between us isn't bad. I refuse to believe that."

"Let me go," she muttered. Embarrassed. Confused.

Brick sighed. His fingers swept beneath her chin and tilted her face up. Looking into her eyes, he said, "We made the mess, we should clean it up. Go back to whatever work we'd interrupted yesterday. I'll get some of the others in here."

He hadn't released her from his hold, and in truth, she liked being there. Too much though. She wanted with her next breath for him to lean in closer and press his lips to hers. Not the kiss from a few minutes ago, but a repeat of last night, when she'd been able to lose herself and her troubles because of him.

"Let me go." Because if he didn't, she'd stand on her tiptoes and pull him down to her.

"Brick," Knox's voice whipped out. "I thought I heard Dr. Sharpe ask you twice to let her go."

Startled, they both turned to find the men's leader standing in the entrance.

She hadn't heard him approach, but what she knew of the men so far, this wasn't a surprise.

Brick released her as if he'd been singed by her touch. The expression on his face that of a wounded animal, instead of the strong man she'd begun to like.

"I didn't expect to see you here today. You and your guys did more than enough yesterday," Kim said to Knox. She couldn't keep the emotion out of her voice, her irritation at the reminder of how things had begun to spin out of her control.

Knox narrowed his eyes at her, and she expected returned animosity. "Please allow us to clean up the mess we made. It's obvious we gave you a pretty bad impression of us and I'll do whatever it takes to make up for it. Men are on their way, and they'll set things to rights before you open for the day."

Oh. She hadn't expected that from him. "Thank you," she said, pulling back some of her previous irritation.

"Also, I understand you'll be making community calls today?" At her nod, he said, "I'd prefer if you had an escort."

Kim glanced at Brick, but his expression was unreadable. "What kind of an escort?" She had three house calls to make and didn't understand the rationale behind Knox's request.

"Just want to ensure your safety."

"Safety from what? I understood that Fire Creek is a very safe place to live, at least it had been until yesterday. That's what the real estate agent sold me on."

"Nothing about that's changed. However, we want to make certain you always feel safe here. Don't forget that we do have a serial killer assaulting our family."

This wasn't about her safety—she wasn't naïve enough to believe that. She'd stumbled upon a secret Knox wanted to keep safe. He could pretty it up by calling it a security escort, but she knew better. "And how long do you think I'll need this escort?"

He leveled his gaze at her. "As long as it takes."

"Why do I have a feeling I don't have a say in the matter?"

"You won't even notice my man there. His instructions will be to stay out of sight, helping only if you ask for it."

Kim glanced again at Brick, noting the tightened line of his jaw. “Are you going to be sending me somebody other than him?”

Knox’s gaze drifted to Brick as well. “After what I just saw, I think that would be for the best.”

She waited for Brick to protest, to make any indication that he disagreed. He kept his silence, however. And for a split second, she wondered if everything that had happened between them had been just her imagination. Maybe she’d made up the intensity of their feelings.

The same kind of thought got her in trouble in the first place. If she’d learned to play by the rules, instead of doing things her own way, she’d still be driving a Porsche, drinking Starbucks by the gallon and weekendending in Aspen. Runaway limits and free-for-all thinking lost all of that.

Then she noticed the clenched fists at his sides, the rigidity of his posture. He was a hair breadth away from grinding his teeth to powder and, if anything, his silence spoke louder than words could have. He didn’t like the idea of what Knox was doing any more than she did, but whatever structure their organization had, he would abide by it.

For the moment, so would she. “Just keep your men out of my way,” she muttered as she stormed out of the room.

* * *

Brick visually followed Kim’s exit. The tension in the room thickened, and while he waited for his Alpha’s censure, the wolf in him yipped at the idea of leaving Kim in someone else’s care.

“Do you want tell me what’s going on?”

He had no idea whether or not Rowan or Morris had already gone to Knox with what Morris had seen and what Rowan suspected. “Don’t know what you mean, Alpha.”

He skirted the line of insubordination, but could live with it for now. The beast coming out and creating havoc? Maybe. It was becoming hard to tell anymore.

“I’ve never seen you treat a woman with anything but utter and total respect. That woman, that *doctor*, had to ask you twice to release her. I know you heard her the first time, so why didn’t you let her go then?” Knox shook his head. “I’ve seen more indecision and complicated behavior from you in

the last couple of days than our entire lives together. So I'll ask you again, do you want to tell me what's going on?"

"Have you talked to Rowan or Morris recently?"

"About anything in particular? I did speak with Rowan about picking up Dr. Sharpe this morning."

Brick didn't want to look Knox in the eye. He said, "Nothing's going on."

"Are you sure that's how you want to play it?" He paused as if giving Brick a chance to interject, but he kept his silence. Knox then sighed.

"Incidentally, you should know that Rowan will be escorting Dr. Sharpe while she does house calls. I don't want her out of sight until we're certain she won't go to others about the pack."

The change in topic grounded Brick. Folding his arms across his chest, he said, "Don't think that's a concern, honestly. Despite everything we've thrown at her, she's taking it all pretty well."

Knox snorted. "You know she ran last night, don't you?"

"Yeah, but I think I'd be more concerned if she hadn't tried to run. We came at her full force. Not a lot of people would have stuck around. I really think she's handling it. And I'm going to ask you to consider me in place of Rowan as her escort." He needed this, because the beast raged at the idea that another man would be near her for the rest of the day. The wolf didn't seem to like it much either. Sure as hell, Brick didn't like it at all. The accumulation of resentment made it hard to think straight.

He wanted to trust in his Alpha, but he struggled hard with Knox's decision. This quiet request, loaded with as much respect as he could muster, kept him from doing some foolish. If Knox could see deep inside him, the anxiety over allowing Kim to be in another man's custody, Brick knew he'd raise more concerns and questions. He couldn't dare question his Alpha. Didn't dare.

For a split second, he thought about confiding in his friend. He didn't know how to handle this consumption of his mind and spirit. Surely, someone else had once gone through something similar? If he talked to anyone else who'd gone through a similar struggle, maybe they'd have an answer on how to rein in the tumult.

"I'll take it under advisement, but I think I prefer having you work on trying to sort who's going after the adolescents and why. I'm sending Locke to meet with one of the vampires. Maybe a person on the outside will have a

better idea of what's going on. The killings aren't news to their community. Most likely someone within it with a grudge for werewolves."

Shit. Just like that, he knew they had more pressing concerns. If Knox was thinking about aligning with the vampires, things were really bad. Werewolves and vampires did not get along, a generations-old feud not likely to end anytime soon. Brick would sooner give up his left arm than ask a vampire for any kind of help. It would be one hell of a day if he ever considered it.

"And we have nothing to go on?" He already knew the answer, but going to the vampires was too unthinkable. "What's Kim's background? Any forensics in there at all?"

"What are you thinking?"

"Maybe she can help us look for similarities among the victims. An objective view, you know?"

"Good idea. But it still means that I want you working on tracking the killer and less on getting your dick wet."

Brick's beast roared to life. "Alpha..." The words teetered on the edge of his tongue, the confession of everything that had gone on in the past few weeks. The night before when Morris had watched his beast emerge, when Kim's kiss at first calmed and then enraged the same creature, all of it wrestled for freedom. "My attraction to her is..."

Painful. Enigmatic. Glorious.

Knox smiled. "I'm glad for you."

He had to laugh. "A few minutes ago, you were pissed at the way you thought I was treating her, but now you're glad?"

His Alpha became more serious, although a hint of the amusement curved his lips. "I don't know what the world would be like without my wolf and my beast. I suspect if you asked a human, he'd wonder how I could possibly get through a week with these other personalities inside me, sometimes driving my thoughts and enriching my emotions and experiences. He might ask me why I'd want to lose myself in an animal and a savage thing, even if just temporarily, instead of maintaining my faculties at all times, in all things. He couldn't understand a day or even an hour being part of three, much less a lifetime."

"I'm not following."

"You know what it's like, but I don't think we appreciate the balance

we're forced to strike day by day, hour by hour. We're fortunate the wolf is wild, yet needs community. The beast needs more coaxing, more finesse. But don't forget they're all dominant personalities. Would it be a surprise if either wolf or beast tested boundaries, if either nudged, just to see if you should be in control instead of one of them? There are bound to be times when the man gets tired and considers letting one of them take over for longer than natural. For more than a full moon's night or for a few hours' run." Knox had fourteen years over Brick and while some days the difference was invisible, on others it seemed like a century bridged the gap. "I know you're struggling with your beast."

The world fell from beneath Brick's feet while the blood drained from his face. He stared at Knox, unable to choke out a denial. "S-sir?" he sputtered.

"Morris came to me last night."

Brick should have done it first. He should have been the one to go to Knox with the problem. But it wasn't a problem yet, right? So he didn't have to. He could have and didn't have to, and what would happen now? Would he be forced from the pack? The only home he'd ever known. His *family*.

He gulped down air as he stared at his friend. His mentor.

The beast inside him chose that moment to run a claw along the barrier, like nails on a chalkboard, and a billion chill bumps rose in unison along his flesh. "Do you want—should—do I have to leave?"

Knox moved closer before laying a heavy hand on Brick's shoulder. He looked into Brick's eyes, and the weight behind his gaze made Brick's stomach drop, but not before twisting into a snake ball. "The wolf and the beast are part of us. They're a friend and they're also a burden. Your thoughts are never your own and your feelings, the things you do, are sometimes what you want, sometimes the wolf and sometimes the beast. What makes the lycanthrope survive, what keeps our pack strong, is our ability to be principle in our own bodies. No one who isn't a shifter can understand this."

They were kind words meant to put him at ease. He knew this, yet unease grew steadily, snaking through him. His Alpha wasn't done. He knew this too.

Knox said, "But when we lose control, it's not just a loss of peace. It's the loss of responsibility and control. It's a reversion back to something too primitive for the twenty-first century. We cannot allow this clash where survival is mired in death and destruction. The beast cannot be allowed to

roam untethered, not in a populated, thriving town. It was like this centuries ago, and the old rules still apply today.” If the speech was supposed to make him feel better, it had the opposite effect. Only respect for his Alpha kept Brick from bolting or raging at the understanding that he was being forced out. A shifter not in control of his beast couldn’t be trusted in civilization. On the rare instance it happened, he or she was driven out, typically sent to a remote locale. On the rarer instance that the feral beast found its way back home again, it was put down.

A feral beast in a populace could kill dozens before caught.

“Knox... Alpha... This is my home.” Brick felt a knot at the base of his throat, the wolf inside quiet. For the first time since he could remember, the beast remained still as well. “You are my family—”

“That will never change,” Knox said, interrupting Brick. “Only your family can understand what it is you’re going through. And your family will do whatever it takes to help you through it. But you know who we are and what we have to do when a beast goes rogue. I love you, brother, but you have to get a handle on this. Don’t make me have to go through a very tough choice. At the end of the day, it won’t be a choice. Not for either of us. Get your beast under control.”

Chapter Nine

Kim laughed, holding her stomach and barely able to see out of watery eyes. She couldn't remember the last time she'd heard such a funny story.

"I swear to you it smelled like two asses up in there," Rowan said. His smile made his face light up.

"What did he eat?" she asked in between gulping for air.

"Whatever he ate died, that's all I know." He glanced toward the drive.

Kim made a face. "If you're telling me that any of you eat living things, I'm out right now. Even my steaks are cooked to a crisp, *beyond* well done. You hear?"

"My wolf is rolling over in horror, just so you know. Our food should have been breathing five minutes ago." This time he turned, placing himself between Kim and the driveway. The smile melted from his face, a new sternness settling in its place.

"Something wrong?"

"Not yet." He motioned toward the clinic driveway with his chin. Kim followed the motion, not surprised to see a car eventually roll in not more than a minute later. These shifters and their sensitive hearing still impressed the hell out of her. Rowan had indicated that he needed to see Knox before they left. The day had brightened into a gorgeous one, a healthy breeze sliding through once in a while to entice them to linger. If she wasn't here with him, she might have turned her face at the sun, soaking in a few rays.

Her anticipation settled when she recognized the blue Honda coming toward them. "That's Jules, my office manager and nurse. She's a little bit early, but nothing dangerous headed our way."

"Good," Rowan said. However, Kim noticed that he didn't lose his protective stance, continuing to keep himself in between Kim and Julie's car.

"Seriously, she's fine."

Rowan made a noncommittal noise, still keeping his attention on the Honda. Kim wanted to roll her eyes, but at the same time she found his protectiveness awesome.

Julie was still far away enough that Kim felt comfortable dropping her

voice to just below a whisper to ask, “Does she know about you...and the others?”

“Can’t say for sure. Don’t know what Dr. Casper told the staff, although they never hung around when he tended to us.” His voice matched Kim’s, low enough to stay out of Julie’s range.

That would explain maybe why her friend hadn’t warned her about the dangers of living in Fire Creek. About the arrangements Dr. Casper had with the family of shifters and what it could mean for Kim.

“I told Brick I wouldn’t tell anyone and I meant it, but I really think you should let others know. If I’m not around or if I need help, Julie would normally be at my side. She should know in advance what’s going on.”

“That’s not my call. You want to bring people into the fold, you take it up with Knox.”

Kim would’ve said more, arguing the idiocy of keeping their secrets from medical staff. There were two people in this world you didn’t lie to, and that was your doctor and your priest. Julie was too close to say anything more about it though, and Kim made a mental note to take it up with Knox later as Rowan suggested.

Julie parked and then exited the car. A stereotypical bombshell, she was tall, blonde and stacked. If she wasn’t such a nice person and a hell of a good employee, Kim might have felt a twinge of jealousy every time she saw the woman. Instead, she relished their blossoming friendship.

Today Jules wore a pretty blue-and-white blouse and a pair of jeans. Atypical for her, she also wore heeled boots that put a definite sway in her step. From the corner of her eye, Kim watched Rowan’s assessment to see if he had the same reaction most men did one in her presence.

She had to blink in surprise. Rowan had no more noticed the attractive woman than most men would the difference between cream and ivory. His eyes didn’t drop below her neck, his stance and posture still rigid.

“Hey Dr. Sharpe,” Julie called. “Rowan.”

“Julie,” he returned.

Kim had to blink in surprise. “You two know each other?”

Roman looked down at her. “Small town. Most everybody knows everybody else. You’ll get used to it after living here long enough.”

“Thought you’d already be on your way,” Julie said, “but there’s a lot of activity going on, it seems like.”

“What d’you mean?”

As if everyone in Fire Creek had a sixth sense, two more vehicles rolled down the drive. She couldn’t see inside the second vehicle, but she recognized Morris and Danny in the front seats of the lead car. As he’d said he would, Knox had called in the reinforcements. At least now, she wouldn’t have to explain the state of the exam room to Jules. “Yeah, these guys are here to do a little bit of fixing in one of the back rooms. Do me a favor and stay out of their way. There’s some broken glass in the back, and I don’t want you to get hurt.” At least it wasn’t a complete lie.

“No problem. Do you want me to get anything ready for the house calls today before you go? Any supply refills ordered?”

For a brief moment, Kim considered canceling the house calls. She was exhausted and there were so many things going on right now. Between the men and Brick, she almost didn’t want to deal with patient issues. She considered it a small favor from the universe that she only had a few patients to contend with at all.

Then again, if she alienated what few patients she did have, her meager bank accounts would go negative in no time. “No, I’ve got it. Still waiting on someone to give us an estimate on fixing that stupid fireplace.” Why the clinic had a fireplace—that didn’t work—when Florida winters reached sixty during a “freeze,” she didn’t know. They had to keep the gas line closed or risk asphyxiating the few patients she had. “And along the same lines, could you get some of those long-necked lighters in here for me? Personal use, but I don’t know when I’ll get to the store next. And batteries for the otoscope. I think that’ll do for now.”

“Sure thing, Kim. Catch you around, Rowan.”

He lifted his chin toward her, acknowledging the goodbye. They both watched her go inside, and even Kim’s gaze dropped to the movement of Julie’s hips. She did another side eye check, disappointed to find Rowan unaffected. She didn’t know why it mattered, but his lack of response stoked her curiosity.

“Are you seeing someone, Rowan?”

He dragged his gaze to her before turning it back on Julie. “No.”

“Huh.” She pointedly followed his gaze, still lingering on her office manager in the most clinical detachment she’d ever witnessed.

She jerked out of musing when he said, “Company.”

At first she thought he was talking about the men also heading toward them, but when her heart kicked, she recognized the subconscious excitement.

Brick kept his attention solely focused on her as he approached. He had this unnatural ability to make her forget the rest of the world and become hypnotized beneath his blue-eyed gaze. It took everything in her to not tangle with her hair or smooth out her clothing. While she could reiterate to herself that so far there hadn't been a bad-looking man among the group, Brick's ruggedness held her captive like none other.

She knew it was imprudent let the others see how much just his presence affected her, but she found it impossible to behave differently. It was such a bad idea on so many levels, another symptom of her history of impetuous behavior, but this time she had to be right. This time her guts weren't leading her down a path that could ruin her career. With him, the only thing that might be in danger was her heart. If she were careful, she could have a physical relationship with him, scratch the itch and still come out intact. Lust and nothing more. Lust.

"I'm not going to get any peace out of the two of you, am I?" Knox asked.

Kim hadn't realized he stood right behind Brick, not until he'd spoken. "Sorry?"

"Bunch of lovesick puppies," he muttered. "Rowan, why don't you stay here and help organize the cleanup? Shouldn't take long. Hour tops. I think the community might be better served if Brick served as escort to the doctor. Don't think he'll let anyone get close to her."

Kim blushed, but a pulse of pride shot through her as she conceded the truth of what he said. Even though she was certain she wasn't in any kind of danger, one look at Brick, and anyone with the wrong idea would about-face on the double. "Are you trying to imply something?" she asked, teasing him.

"Love beams are being fired between the two of you. If I don't want to get hit by one, we have to stay out of the line of fire."

She'd hardly call it love, but she didn't mind that he did. *Lust*. Nothing more.

She strolled over to Brick, hooked her arm in his and said, "Looks like it's you and me, kid."

"You sure you can handle it?" Brick asked in a voice meant only for her.

She shivered, not sure at all.

* * *

The first two calls weren't bad. Close to the clinic, both patients were homebound. One was an elderly woman with a sprained ankle who couldn't secure transportation to get in for her checkup. Brick made a mental note to talk to Knox about finding a way to help people like her. They made Fire Creek their home and even if the humans weren't pack, they could take care of them in the same way. They couldn't segregate themselves from the human world indefinitely.

The second patient, a reclusive man, asked for Kim's credentials every time she tried to perform the simplest of tasks for him. *Blood pressure check*. He demanded her full name, including middle and maiden names. *Stick out your tongue and say ahh*. He'd wanted to know what school she'd graduated from.

It took every ounce of willpower and a small amount of prayer from Brick to keep from busting a gut with laughter. The second they were seated in the car with the doors closed, however, all bets were off. Brick took one look at the cantankerous man glaring at them from his dilapidated patio, turned his face away from the window and let it all out.

Kim sat in the driver's seat and side-eyed him as she maneuvered the car over the gravel driveway. "I'm glad you found that amusing."

That only made him laugh harder.

"No, really. I'm here all week. Don't forget to tip your waitress." Her tone couldn't have been any more deadpan if she'd studied for it.

"C'mon, Doc, show a sense of humor," he said after finally taking a breath that didn't result in a brand new eruption.

"If I'd been a man, he wouldn't have put me through my paces."

"No, sweetheart," he said with a smile, "he did that because you're not from the South."

"It can't possibly be as antiquated a reason as that!"

"Of course it could. Next time add more syllables to your words and dress the part a little more."

Kim took her attention away from the road long enough to glance down at her shirt. "What's wrong with what I'm wearing?"

She'd put on a white lab coat for each visit with her patients, but *shit*, what

she wore underneath would make a dead man sit up and take notice. The pale yellow shirt buttoned down the front, but Brick had never in his life seen a garment fit a woman with such precision. Not unless he was looking at a skin flick. The thing that stymied him was that it wasn't lurid, but it left nothing—not one damned thing—to the imagination. Beneath it, she wore a lacy bra, and he would have given up his left nut to see up close which parts the lace covered and which parts might be bare skin.

The gray skirt might have reached her calves, but on one side, a slit revealed an elegant line of leg. No hose to get in the way of his touch. He'd spent most of her home visit following her skin, watching the line of her leg go all the way up. If the panties she wore were anything like the bra, full of lace and prettiness, there went to his right nut to get a glimpse of that too.

"Hell, doctor," he grumbled. "You're killing me here."

"What do you mean?"

"Pull over."

Kim glanced at him and in that momentary look, he saw the question in her gaze. But for whatever reason, she must have decided it wouldn't hurt and did as he requested.

The moment she turned off the engine, Brick reached over and withdrew the key. As he balled the metal into a fist and pushed open the car door, he debated whether or not this was a good idea. The beast had left them alone for the first time in what felt like years and he suspected his next moves would probably awaken it.

But as Kim rounded the car, that clingy yellow shirt outlining full breasts and a slender waist, he decided the wrestle might be worth it.

Her low-heeled boots sank into the dirt and gravel, but despite the expensive material, she didn't appear to notice the potential damage being done. She was class and expense, while he was a knuckle dragger counting himself lucky to be in her presence.

It was why the old codger wouldn't give her the time of day. She wasn't country, no twang to her accent. Their differences went beyond the fact that she was human while he would forever be a shifter. He worked with his hands, drove a ten-year-old truck and his hippest clothes might be the Timberlands he'd bought a couple of years ago.

"You're too good for me," he murmured. But he couldn't keep his gaze off her. It didn't stop him from wanting to touch every inch of her skin.

“Did I just hear you correctly?” she asked. A spark flashed in her eyes, and Brick knew he’d said the wrong thing.

It didn’t stop him from believing his observation, though. He moved in closer, willing to face her wrath from inches away. When it came to Kim, his common sense took a nosedive. “Who are you?” he asked. “I don’t get why you’re even here in this place. You dress like a model, talk like a boarding-school brat and some of the things you’ve said make me think there’s a lot more to you than you’re letting on.”

“Yeah, I’ve had a good upbringing, but it’s not like how you think.”

“So tell me.” He wanted to watch her lips move. He wanted even more to dive in and kiss them.

Her eyes narrowed. “You really don’t know who I am?”

“Should I?”

“I thought everyone in the free world knew about me by now.” She dropped her gaze, but not before Brick caught sight of the raw pain in it.

“I’m not everyone,” he said to her as she moved away from his hold. “Tell me what you think I need to know, or keep it to yourself. It won’t make much difference in how much I want you.”

“It will,” she whispered. “And I’m not ready for that yet. I like being a nobody in your eyes.”

“Hardly a nobody.” He couldn’t put a name on what she inspired in him, but he knew fierce protectiveness when it came to this woman. He knew he looked forward to seeing her face and most especially her smile. The weight of her past sparked concern, but not enough to turn his back on the burgeoning feelings.

Kim closed the issue when she crouched down and rifled through the brittle leaves on the ground. Her fingers brushed aside debris and twigs, revealing a delicate blue flower on a fragile-looking stem. “Here, I’m just a simple country doctor. No demands or aspirations for more. I get to go to my job, see a dozen uncomplicated cases, go back home to my small rental and do it all over again the next day.” She peered up at him. “Now you’re here interrupting that, and truth be told, I don’t mind as much as I should. Probably the adrenaline junkie in me. I’m not running scared from a man who is a predator in every sense of the word because I like it. Maybe too much, but I like it. But I don’t think I can handle going beyond that now. I don’t mind staying on the outside and helping your family with figuring out

who's hurting them, but not much more than that, Brick. I can't go back to who I was before I came here. As much as I miss my old life, it's no longer my life for a reason."

A dozen questions fired in his mind, her somber tone adding fuel. But with everything they'd thrown at her over the past two days, she'd handled it all better than he could have hoped.

Today, he could deal with not knowing much about her other than to know that maybe she desired him with the same intensity he wanted her. There would come a time when that wasn't enough though. Would she be willing to share about herself then? If not, could he accept that?

He doubted it.

Kim rose to standing while dusting her hands on her skirt. She kept her gaze averted when she strolled past Brick and headed toward the car. "It's my condition for moving forward," she said over her shoulder. "You don't have to decide now, but you will have to decide if it's enough for you. When it comes to you and me, please allow my past to stay in the past. You'll find out what you need to know soon enough. Allow me to enjoy what we have while it lasts."

He'd had every intention of kissing her senseless during their pit stop. With the change in mood, taking a kiss to something more lurid deflated along with his dick.

One thing he knew for certain, when he and Kim finally connected, there would be no turning back.

Chapter Ten

Thankful the steering wheel gave her a place to rest her trembling hands, Kim didn't dare chance a look at Brick. All this time she'd thought he knew at least a little something about her. She'd thought he knew the history weighing her down and making her a pariah in the medical community and a social outcast.

While before the air had been thick with sexual tension and the urge to touch Brick all over, to explore the hard lines and musculature, now she could choke on a different type of tension. It wasn't like she wasn't used to it. Being responsible for the death of America's sweetheart made it an all-too-frequent occurrence.

The worst part being she hadn't learned her lesson, even a little bit. The same reckless behaviors that had driven her medical decisions before now encouraged this insane whirlwind romance *thing* they had going. Would she ever learn?

"Tell me about the serial killings and how you expect me to help." The powerful topic would help give them a place to focus other than on themselves, she hoped.

Brick blew out a breath. "I don't know for sure. Maybe help us figure out what the adolescents have in common that we're not seeing. An unbiased outsider looking in might have enough distance to spot the similarities."

"Have you gone to the police?"

"With pack business?" He grunted again. "The Sheriff's office leaves us alone because we don't cause any trouble and we take care of our own issues in house."

"Even a serial killer?"

"Especially a serial killer."

"Okay, I have a question to ask and I hope you won't get mad."

"Shoot."

She searched for a delicate way to phrase her question, came up with none and blurted, "How do you know the killer isn't a beast?"

"Oh, that's easy enough. The use of tools. A beast, even an exceptionally

clever one, isn't prone to stabbing someone with a knife, not when it's used to using claws for tearing or shredding. Beasts kill for food and for defense. Not for the thrill of it. That's something unique to man."

They would arrive at her patient's home in a few minutes, but Kim lifted her foot from the accelerator to give them more time to talk. "Fair enough. Tell me about the victims, then. I can't say that I'll be of any help, but I can try."

In a low voice, Brick told her of the seven victims—five young men and two young women. All adolescents who hadn't transitioned to a shifter as yet. He explained that the first several years of life were spent as outwardly human, the beast dormant while the wolf grew alongside.

Transition was a difficult time, favoring boys over girls. The young women who emerged from the other side were especially cherished. Until transition, not even parents knew if their child would have the ability to shift. Most did, but not all.

"And that's why we cannot figure out how they're being targeted. How could someone else predict what nature will decide?"

"There must be a scientific rationale for the changes you undergo. Have any of you ever been—" *Studied*. She paused, afraid of how he would react to the unsaid word. She'd been brought up in science, however. If the pack, cloaked in secrecy from what she could tell, would allow themselves to undergo even the most basic of bloodline testing, she expected a few unknowns to be revealed. "I mean, I guess I could see how bringing in an outside view could be helpful, but in my case, I think we should consider more than superficial methods."

"What do you mean?"

The car rolled to a stop, giving her the opportunity to put a temporary hold on a difficult conversation until later. "Let me think about it and get back to you. I'm not certain what I mean. For now, let me tell you about the little girl inside. My understanding is that there was a difficult birth and she was injured as a result. Seven years old, but through a lot of medical procedures and tests. If you think Mr. Cranky was a difficult patient, you haven't seen anything yet. She's whip smart. Smarter than I was at her age and possibly smarter than the both of us combined."

"At least I don't expect the girl to insist on seeing your medical degree." Brick chuckled as he pushed open the door.

Together they walked toward the small farmhouse, where a brown Lab trotted over to Kim. She crouched before it, scratching behind floppy ears. The dog's tail wagged furiously, the back half of its body a big, happy, unstoppable hind end.

"Now that is one friendly dog."

Kim grinned up at him. "Could teach you and yours a few lessons probably."

"*Hey*. We're not dogs." There was an underlying growl beneath his words, but she didn't detect heat in them.

She had to bite her lip on that one. Her legs groaned as she rose to leave the dog behind. He trotted beside her before heading to a lumpy pillow on the corner of the patio. His eyes were alert, tracking her and Brick as they went to the door. Before and after each visit, she stopped to rub on that beautiful fur of his. Prior to her medical session for strength and afterward, for forgiveness. It seemed to take, so she wouldn't stop the tradition. Kim loved her patient, but the little girl kept Kim on her toes the entire time.

"Hey, Dr. Sharpe," a woman's voice called through the screen door. "Come on in. Jess's waiting on you."

Here we go. "Hi there, Michelle," she said, as she passed over the threshold. "I brought along an assistant today."

"Chris. Nice meeting you."

The girl's mother swept her gaze over the full length of the six-foot-something man, much the same way Kim had the very first time she'd met him. She'd like to think that the twinge of emotion that shuttled through her as Michelle observed them wasn't jealousy, but Kim couldn't figure out what else it might be. She had the strong urge to run over to him and kiss him full on the lips.

Because *that* would be the epitome of professionalism.

"So...where's the spitfire?" she asked Michelle instead.

"I heard that!" a petulant voice called.

"How old did you say she is again?" Brick asked in a low voice.

"Seven going on seventy," Michelle answered. "I'm looking forward to the teen years."

Kim sighed deep before putting a smile on her face. "Let's get this over with."

They made their way into the living room, where Brick pulled up short.

He'd probably been expecting dollhouses and pink frilly things. Maybe a stuffed teddy bear, an eye button dangling by a thread keeping her company on the family couch. Instead he walked into a mad scientist's dream, at least that was what Kim had thought of the first time she'd been here.

LEGOs made elaborate buildings and bridges, wiring weaving in between providing lampposts with illumination. A lot of the decor wasn't perfect, but recognizable enough. Square trees, too-bright flowers and flatlands of "grass" were overshadowed by the more impressive builds. The bulldozer at the base of the construction site jerked on an imperfect wheel base, but the fucker was moving. It bumped past another vehicle she'd seen only in movies.

"That copter got twin rotors?" he asked Michelle.

"Yeah, but the motor's giving me hell," a girl's voice said.

"Language, young lady."

The split-second exchange occurred before Kim located Jess. She was seated behind a small table, glasses perched on the end of a button nose, her fingers fumbling over a box with wires extending out of it. Pale, but not unusual for her. Kim looked for any other signs of physical deterioration.

"Hi, Jess," Kim said, walking toward her.

Brick followed the physician's lead, his attention so focused on the gadgetry spread across the table that he must not have noticed the wheelchair until he'd accidentally kicked one of its wheels. "Sorry," he mumbled.

"Are you her boyfriend?" Jess asked without missing a beat or looking up.

"*Jess.*"

Kim bit the inside of her lip to keep Jess from noticing the rise she'd gotten with the question. Trust her to jump to the right—or close enough—conclusion almost immediately. She might have been born with physical ailments, but Jess was sharper than a razor blade. She had personality and probably gave her mother, to use the young girl's word, *hell* on a daily basis. Her acerbic wit made her hard not to like. No one ever expected it out of the frail body.

"Just helping out today. This is Mr. Chris." Kim waited by the desk, arms folded across her chest. "Do you think you can put that motor down long enough for me to take a look at you? The sooner we do it, the sooner it's over with and you can get back to tinkering."

"No shots?" she asked, looking at Kim with her head cocked, petite mouth scrunched.

“Not on the docket.”

Seven going on seventy. Kim wanted to laugh.

Heaving a man-sized sigh, she groaned, “Fine.”

Not more than five minutes later, after putting up with a cursory physical exam, Jess let out a blood-curdling scream.

Moments like this, Kim wished for her old life more than anything. Jess’s face was scrunched up, cheeks fire-engine-red. If her mother hadn’t stood behind her blocking her exit, the girl would’ve wheeled herself away from Kim as fast as possible.

Kim felt Brick’s presence behind her, and the poor man must’ve wondered what kind of medieval torture device Kim had chosen to use on the child. “I have to check your liver levels. Your medication can cause damage, and the only way to know for certain if it has is to get a little blood from you.”

“You said no shots.”

Her hand tightened on the syringe. “I’m not going to be putting anything inside you, no medicine.”

Jess’s eyes narrowed. “You’re going to take my blood? Like a vampire?”

The sudden fascination with the topic almost made Kim say yes. With everything else the girl knew and understood, surely she knew vampires didn’t exist?

Then again, a few days ago, Kim knew werewolves didn’t exist either.

“I promise it’s just a tiny amount.” Kim held up the tube where she’d collect what she needed. Ten milliliters, which was minuscule compared to what the human body held. How had Dr. Casper gotten the required blood tests on her previously? She hoped the close-to-retirement-age physician hadn’t been skipping them for some reason.

Jess began to make a keening sound, pressing herself against the back of her chair as if trying to sink into it and come out the other side. This type of confrontation hadn’t been in Kim’s plans when she’d gone into community medicine. She’d just assumed that a pediatrician would handle the children. Imagine her surprise.

“I might have a piece of candy in my purse if you sit through the blood draw with no fuss.”

The girl’s lips tightened, as if the meager offering offended her. “No.”

“How about a dollar?”

“Make it a hundred.”

Kim looked to Michelle for help, but the expression on her face suggested that paying the hush money might be worth the cost. “Highway robbery. How about five?”

“It doesn’t hurt, you know,” Brick’s masculine voice interjected.

Jess twisted to peer at him. “How do you know?”

“Get my blood drawn all the time.”

Kim sensed that was a lie, but she was willing to let him run with it if it meant getting the girl to cooperate.

Jess appeared intrigued, her gaze roving over Brick. She sized him up, testing whether or not he would be the type of person to lie to her. “Where?”

He pointed to the crook of his arm. “Right here. See that big vein?” Jess nodded, her eyes wide. “A little pinprick right there, so fast you barely notice, and it’s all over and done with.”

She folded her arms across her chest, sinking deeper into the chair, which should’ve been impossible. “I don’t believe you.”

“Wanna watch me have it done then? I’ll go first and when you see that it doesn’t hurt, you go after me, okay?”

She considered this. “But I still get the candy and the five, right?”

Caught off guard by her response, Kim had to choke back laughter. This little girl was too much.

“How about we make a bet instead?”

“What kind?”

“We’ll have a contest to see who’s stronger.”

Kim stilled. The werewolf must have weighed an easy two hundred pounds, one hundred and eighty of them all muscle.

The girl in the wheelchair looked like she’d been put together with skin and twigs. It didn’t appear to daunt her though. “How?”

Brick settled himself into the chair next to her. The contrast in his vitality to the girl’s frailty took Kim’s breath away. He said, “When it’s my turn, I get to squeeze your hand as hard as I can until you say ‘uncle.’ And then when it’s your turn, you do the same. Whoever makes the other say it first is the winner of a piece of candy.”

“But you’ll win. You’re bigger than me.”

His face remained neutral. “Maybe, maybe not. There’s only one way to tell.”

“And if I win, I get the candy, right?”

“Definitely. But if I win, *I* get the candy.”

Jess side-eyed her mother, but Michelle wasn’t going to get her out of the arrangement. “A deal’s a deal, sweetheart. You don’t have to take it if you think you’re going to lose.”

“Yeah,” Brick added, “I’d get it if you don’t want to bet. I wouldn’t want to lose a piece of candy if I were you, either.”

A nagging voice in the back of Kim’s head admonished her for bribing a child, but she was still tired and cranky from her early start, and if this got them that much closer to finishing, so be it. At the next visit she’d just have to figure out a different way of convincing the girl to go along with the exam. Next time.

Chin jutted out, nose scrunched and tiny mouth screwed into a line of determination, Jess said, “Fine, but you go first.”

Not about to be told twice, Kim went to her leather doctor bag and withdrew the needed supplies. The syringe she withdrew last, trying to treat its appearance as nothing special. She wanted Jess’s focus on Brick, not the instrument that caused some linebackers to drop into a dead faint.

After prepping everything, she looked up to find her fears had been unfounded. Brick had pushed up his sleeve, and Jess leaned in close to stare horrified at the vasculature. “They’re like worms,” she said in a voice like a pallbearer’s.

“*Jess*. My God, I don’t know where I... I’m so sorry, Chris. She just has this mouth that’s impossible—” Michelle blushed a bright scarlet.

Brick held up a hand, waving off the apology. He curled his hand into a fist, using his chin to direct Jess’s attention to the bulge of his bicep. More *worms* squirmed into place, much to her fascination. She pushed her finger into the biggest one, almost the exact spot Kim would have chosen for the blood draw. “It’s squishy.”

“Alright you two,” Kim said. “I imagine this could go on all day and I think Mr. Chris has better things to do with his time. Ready to get started?”

Jess’s face paled, but she nodded. As soon as Kim wrapped the tourniquet around his burly arm, Brick said, “On the count of three, I’m going to squeeze your hand as hard as I can. Ready? One...two...*three!*”

Kim worked quickly, praying for the safety of Jess’s tiny hand. She chanced a quick glance at Jess’s face to find her mouth open in an exaggerated expression of pain, her eyes wide. Obviously Brick used some

amount of pressure, not enough to do the damage he could, but sufficient to make everyone know he didn't intend to lose the bet. Jess didn't want to lose either, though.

Just as Kim was ready to withdraw the needle, she glimpsed Brick's hand flex. Jess yelped. "Uncle!"

By the time it was Jess's turn, the girl was out for blood. She paid Kim no mind as she put all of her might into squeezing Brick's hand. He squirmed in his chair, eyes rolling back in his head and small grunting noises indicating his level of distress. An excellent performance. Kim would have rated it a six point five.

She withdrew the needle and stuck a Band Aid on the wound at the same time Brick called *uncle*.

"Who won?" Jess asked Michelle, her cheeks flushed.

"It was a tie," Brick declared.

"No way! I think I won..."

Ten minutes of arguing later, they left Jess eating a snack-sized candy bar Kim found at the bottom of her purse. Once at the car, Kim deposited two vials of blood into her bag. The first had Brick's initials penciled on the side, while the more important of the two held Jess's initials. Kim would use it to determine if the girl's medication needed to be adjusted up or down to battle her syndrome, which wreaked havoc on the liver on an ordinary day. With time, she hoped Jess would grow used to the necessary, but demanding, exams and at least appreciate them.

As they walked to the car, she stepped close enough to Brick for a quick and gentle jab with her elbow. "Thanks for doing that. I would've gotten it eventually, but your way certainly saves me an hour of wanting to pull my hair out."

"She's a cute kid. I don't say that a lot, but the girl has spunk. I figured she was more interested in someone else being a pin cushion instead of just her."

"Very perceptive. Like I said before, she's been doing this for very long time but according to her mother, anything needle related is a cause to break out an Emmy."

"Was that the last visit for the day?"

"Yes. Got some place to be?"

"No, but I want to take you someplace. We kind of got interrupted earlier and now that we're not expected anywhere, maybe we can take our time."

She used setting the bag into the car and fastening the seatbelt as a distraction, to keep her from wondering for too long what he had in mind. When they had been interrupted before, she'd been certain they'd end up necking like teenagers in the front seat, windows fogged and all.

Brick fastened his seatbelt. "And Kim, I hate that I have to ask this of you, but when we get back to the clinic, I need to watch you dispose of that tube."

It took her a second to catch up and then she realized he meant his blood sample. "I don't need it for anything."

"I know. But Knox would expect it of me. We hold to ourselves and we want to be able to keep it that way."

She started up the car, then backed out of the driveway. Her hands tightened on the wheel, a million thoughts assaulting her. Until he'd mentioned it, she hadn't considered the potential treasure in the blood sample Brick had volunteered.

What kind of information could she glean from it? Would it be as mundane as any human blood, or would she discover more about the people who wanted to remain reclusive?

How much was it worth to the right person?

"What do you do for checkups? Surely Dr. Casper used to keep records on the patients he treated, including members from your pack?"

Brick scratched his head. "No offense, Doctor, but we knew him for a very long time. It didn't happen overnight, but we eventually trusted him. I don't think you can appreciate the gravity of the information we're giving to you." She actually felt a twinge of guilt because she heard the indecision in his voice. "There are things that the human world isn't ready for and on the same hand, things our pack isn't ready to do yet. In time you'll gain our trust too, the way your predecessor did."

"Are you saying you don't trust me?" If she weren't driving, she would have used the question to study his face and weigh his response. "I'm a doctor and I took an oath for my patients."

"I know. We know. But give us some time."

Although there were more things to say, more debating that should happen, Kim held her peace. From time to time her mind drifted back to that simple vial of blood, wondering what secrets it held.

Debating whether or not she could discard its crucial clue into the lives of Brick and his people. When the time came, could she throw the tube away?

Chapter Eleven

“Turn left here.”

The minutes in the car had been silent, Kim having gone into a pensive mood since they'd left the little girl's home. The echo of the girl's tight grip left a tingling sensation in his hand, but it had been his pleasure to participate in distracting her. Watching Kim in action, her ease at handling the mild tantrum thrown her way. She worked with smooth efficiency with all of her patients, now that he thought about it. The competent, professional demeanor attracted him a fierce way.

“You were good back there,” she said in a soft voice.

“You were better.”

This being the fifth time he'd seen her in action, he appreciated the healer magic interwoven with her education. When she was working, her voice became soothing and melodic. He noticed her breathing slowed and whether she realized it or not, she instilled a sense of calm into the patients beneath her care.

His wolf chose that moment to howl. Brick replied, *“Let's you and I get through this day and tonight you'll run free, my friend. But stay away from the doctor. I like her, you like her, but she's still timid. A little more time, okay?”*

Lovesick hound. The beast stood before the crack in the barrier, studying it. Brick couldn't tell if it was cunning enough to understand the significance of the flaw, but its attention to it didn't fill him with good feelings. Had the beast directly caused the fracture and could it help the barrier shatter?

He wished he knew and understood what motivated the beast, why it reacted so strongly to Kim and why it sought release.

“Where are we headed?”

“Someplace only the locals know about. With any luck, there won't be any kids skipping school to ruin the ambience, but they usually don't get here until after dark.”

He scanned the vista, trying to see it through a fresh pair of eyes. The canopy of trees, some hundreds of years old, created a tunnel-like effect. The

lights of Kim's Rio illuminated as soon as they'd gone in about ten feet. In the fall, leaves drifted to the forest floor, littering it with a kaleidoscope of reds, browns and oranges. During this time of year, however, the greenery surrounded them on all sides.

"This is beautiful," Kim murmured. She'd slowed the car to a crawl.

"Most people around here refer to it as Lover's Lane. The fact that it doesn't take you anyplace useful other than a lookout point makes the name stick."

She dragged her gaze away from the drive to glance at him. "You taking me someplace to neck?"

Oh, hell yeah. "I'm giving you the tour of the town."

"Uh-huh." Although her tone suggested minor irritation, her willingness to cruise to the end of the lane at a tourist's pace belied it.

"There are a few lookouts, but this is the only Lover's Lane. If you get a call to come up here, you'll know where to head. It wouldn't be the first time. Hormonal teenagers, lack of supervision and a hell of a cliff drop make for perfect circumstances for an ambulance call. Casper wouldn't make the trip up here, claiming fragility and old bones." Brick fell silent, a sudden punch to the gut when he remembered the old man was gone. He didn't know the physician well, but his care and attention to the pack made them almost like family.

"You miss him." A question.

"That's the wrong word." Wanting a change in topic, thankful they'd reached a good place, he pointed to a suitable spot. "You can park over there."

She did as directed but after cutting off the engine, stayed inside the car. "I hope if you're planning my end, it won't be by pushing me off a cliff."

"Not hardly. Like you mentioned, the kids come up here to neck."

It must've been good enough for Kim, for she opened the door. After Brick opened his side, the strong floral scent on the breeze drifted toward him. His wolf stretched in appreciation and he made another silent vow to his friends for a run soon. His wolf had been cooped up for too long.

He extended his hand, and Kim took it without comment. Together they walked to the bluff where at least a few teenagers had lost their virginity. Pack and town folk alike tried to patrol the area on a regular basis, but the most determined couple would find a way to be alone up here.

“My God,” Kim said. “This is practically nature’s version of Motel 6.”

With its jagged edges, some raised waist high, all of it covered in long, spindly grass, the area was a lover’s dream. After releasing her hand, Brick walked over to one of the farther outcroppings away from the path and leaned against the ledge. Not speaking, he crooked a finger at her.

Kim smiled, a slow, sweet curving of her lips, and moved toward him. He watched the pulse in her neck jump appreciably the closer to him she came. The skin there looked soft and inviting, and he loved the way the color of her shirt teased with the hint of more. Perfect for marking. Perfect for his mark.

“I’d be lying if I said I brought you here for conversation, Doc.”

“I thought you were getting me familiar with Fire Creek.” Her voice became husky, inviting. The wind whipped her hair, soft strands clinging to her lips.

Slow, as to not startle her, he reached over and brushed the strands away. But when she leaned into his hand, allowing him to cup her face, he let his touch become more firm. More suggestive.

A small voice begged both the wolf and the beast to allow this moment to happen, because he wanted her like his next breath.

“Brick,” she whispered, “if you’re going to kiss me, do it now before I die from anticipation.”

Both surprised and glad for her confession, he didn’t need to be told twice. Brick pulled her toward him, his mouth covering hers with hungry desire. He groaned into her lips, her taste exploding on his tongue. He nibbled the plump lips, forcing himself to go slow when his racing heart urged him to match his rising ardor.

He could smell the clean scent of her shampoo, the gentle fragrance of her skin and the subtle, lingering taste of coffee. The combination would forever be printed in his mind as belonging to her, a taste he wanted more of.

She seemed hesitant at first, her hands resting on his arms. More of a receiver than a participant. But as he swept his tongue over her plump lower lip, teasing inside before retreating just as quickly, Kim hummed a soft sound. She went on tiptoes, using him for leverage, a suggestive indication that she wanted more from him.

He promised himself to not take more than she offered. Not one kiss or touch more. But he knew now it would be a difficult vow to hold.

His hands went to the lapel of her shirt, finding the first button near her

throat. Within moments, two buttons yielded to his manipulation.

He left the lush comfort of her mouth and tasted the skin of her jaw and neck. His kisses roamed over the delicate bone at her collar and went farther down. The sounds of her breathing increased, her racing heart as loud to him as a drum.

Pulling away to watch her, to see the desire spelled across her face, took the strength of titans. Somehow he managed and became enraptured with the view. Kim's eyes were heavy lidded, her lips kiss-swollen. The skin across her cheeks had reddened and she looked back at him with anticipation. It was a drugging combination.

"Will there be consequences for doing this?" she asked.

Brick didn't understand the question. Taking her hand in his, he led them to a different outcropping where he could lean comfortably. Her long skirt was the perfect excuse for pulling her between his legs, her weight an enticement for his growing erection. "What do you mean?" Diving in for another kiss followed his question.

"You're like Abe, right?"

The flash of fear and indecision in her eyes told him more than he needed to know. "Not in the way you think. I'm a man first. You feel that?"

She nodded, a hot blush streaking her face as he rubbed the evidence of his arousal against her stomach. "But what about the other side of you? I saw what you are—what Abe was. If we do this, what... I mean, how..."

The answers she sought were of such minor consequence, he could have ground his teeth in frustration. He tried hard to look at it from her point of view, but all the blood in his brain had drained south for the last fifteen minutes or so. If she wanted intelligent conversation and plausible explanations, it would have to wait.

Right now, his actions would have to speak as loudly as his words.

* * *

Kim's heart thumped in fear and panic and lust and a multitude of emotions she couldn't identify in response to being here with Brick. She knew next to nothing about him, except the screaming-loud, terrifying secret of his pack. And although a small part of her knew he was safe—she was safe with him—her instinct for survival demanded she slow down and think this through.

But the lust. God, the lust she felt for him. The *craving*...

When Brick spun her around, lifting her onto the ledge of grass jutting from the earth, thinking was the last thing she was capable of. His hands made short work of unbuttoning her blouse. "Lovely," he murmured before his head dipped at the same time he pushed up her breast from her bra. His hot mouth seared a kiss on the very tip of her nipple, causing it to tighten into a sensitized bud and, if anything, that made it easier for the next torture he inflicted on her.

Brick's tongue laved over her nipple, the shock of it intensely electrifying. Her hand thrust into his hair, holding him closer. She moaned a protest as that wicked tongue teased her, her pussy squeezing in response.

As if he sensed her reaction, his hand slid over her trembling belly and grasped the material of her skirt. It scorched her skin where it slid up and up, making it easy for Brick to put his bare hand against her overheated flesh.

She could scarcely think, could scarcely form a word, but she pushed out a real fear for him to hear. "We're in the open." It came out on a gasp. "Someone could see."

He continued to blaze a path of decadent destruction from her breast and down her stomach. The skirt rose higher, and soon the breeze touched the damp area of her panties. "I have really good hearing. No one will get close enough, I promise you."

The reminder that inside him resided a wolf drove her arousal higher. She chanced a quick look around them, spotting nothing but trees, hills and greenery as far as she could see. If not for the gravel path marking the way they'd come, she couldn't be certain of the car's direction.

They were alone out here. Secluded in a very good way. It gave her the trust in Brick she needed to truly enjoy this experience.

She didn't expect him to drop to his knees.

Looking down on him, a wave of euphoria caught her breath. Her breasts spilled from the cups of her bra, the nipples dusky and engorged. At her feet kneeled a gorgeous man who clutched her skirt in one hand, bunched at her waist. The white-knuckled grip made it seem like he held on to his own sanity by a thread. She liked to think the plain, frill-less panties in front of him inspired that.

He leaned forward, and all thought fled the moment his mouth made contact.

Through the soft cotton, Brick unerringly found her swollen clit. He kissed the bundle of nerves before pulling on it with his lips. His teeth lightly nipped in between each flick of his tongue, and she wanted to weep from the rightness of it.

Her hands flew to the grassy ledge, propping herself on weak arms. Her legs threatened to give way too, but she knew Brick would catch her if she fell. When she fell.

With a patience she would have thought impossible for him, Brick pushed aside the gusset of her panties. The barrier gone from his path, now he kissed her pussy as if content to spend the rest of the day there.

The muscle of her thighs quivered uncontrollably, a broken sob spilling out of her. Brick's tongue explored, his mouth moving at a glacial pace over her. She shuddered through the pleasure, her fingers digging into the dirt and grass for leverage. She cried out as the feelings became more intense, more consuming.

The sounds must have encouraged Brick, because he focused his attention on her clit, the long licks becoming shorter and faster, little flicks that pushed her higher and higher toward bliss.

"Do it, Kim," he whispered, the words almost muffled.

She looked down and froze at the erotic tableau. At some point, Brick had unfastened his pants and he stroked himself in one hand while feasting on her. She couldn't see his cock, but the up-down motion of his hand working furiously over the erection she'd only felt pushed her to her limits.

Kim threw her head back as an orgasm pulled her under, and her reaction spurred Brick. He sucked her clit into his mouth, sensation exploding outward at the unexpected pressure. She shuddered as her heart raced, her breaths coming in choppy bursts. "*God.*"

Her breath caught when he released the erotic hold, pressing his face against her thigh as a low growl vibrated out of him. His breath panted out, his back taut. He cursed low, a tortured, satisfactory sound signaling his own release.

Brick swiftly rose, his eyes gone a silvery-blue as they looked into hers. When he leaned forward and pressed his mouth against hers, she clung to him to experience the sweetest kiss she'd ever received. Slow, soft, sensual. His lips touched hers lightly, a thousand emotions expressed in the stroke of his mouth and tongue.

It wasn't until she felt him bring the edges of her shirt closed that she realized he'd released her skirt as well. He gave her one more tender kiss before pulling back just enough that when she opened her eyes, she was gifted with his beautiful smile.

"Further than I meant to go," he said gently.

Kim smiled, heat still making her cheeks feel like they were glowing. "Not far enough if you ask me."

He said nothing for a minute, a new seriousness etching into his expression. "Not out here. Not like this. The first time we come together, it'll be proper."

"It's beautiful out here." She didn't regret what they'd done. Not for one instant.

"But still not good enough." He tucked himself into his pants. Although tempted to watch, she found the act too intimate and forced her gaze away. She'd just let the man put his mouth on her sex, but watching him was somehow too much.

Lust...lust...

"I was supposed to be trying to get to know you, and you, me. I wanted to learn about what makes you tick."

In an instant, he managed to wipe away the lazy contentment he'd built inside her. She knew his ignorance wouldn't last forever, but was it so wrong to want to put it off for a while longer?

How did she tell him that she was near destitute, the small clinic bought with a loan only given to her because of her medical degree? The banker must have looked the other way when inquiring into her financial history and how she'd drained more money over the course of a few years than most people saw in a lifetime. Sure, her credit score hovered just above *fair*, but one wouldn't have to search hard to find the irregularities.

"What would you like to know?" she asked, her insides trembling.

"Why a physician?"

"The right answer is that I want to help people."

"Then you could have become a fireman or a librarian. Don't give me the answer you gave the College Board. Tell me the real reason."

Nervous fingers fidgeted with her clothing, still askance from their encounter. Straightening herself, tucking and positioning everything back into place, helped her sort her thoughts. What things she could reveal and

what things sent her mind into a near panic.

She hated that she couldn't tell him everything, but she deserved the chance to start over clean. What he didn't know couldn't hurt him. "I was fascinated with the idea of manipulating the human body. It's such a complex machine, a computer that no amount of technology could ever rival and, with the right schooling, I could help the body heal. That's an amazing power and gift. It's not one everyone should have, and I had this...*compulsion* to be a part of it."

"I asked you once who your people are, and there was a reason."

"Yeah?"

"You have in you a healer's innate magic, something that isn't found in just anyone. It would have been inherited from someone like us. A natural craft and inclination for medicine."

"Someone like you?" Kim frowned. "I'd think I would know about it."

"Maybe. Maybe not, but it would cause you to have an affinity to this place. To others. Becoming a physician is in your blood. You would have never found peace not helping people heal, and you'll find even more peace by being in this place. You were called here."

As if his words summoned the god of technology, the phone in her pocket chimed. A second and then third chime followed quickly on its heels. Text messages.

Her heart didn't just drum. It thundered.

She didn't have to look at the screen to know someone was responding to her last hope for a better life. She was seconds away from finding out if her connections had come through. If she had another option beyond the clinic's meager salary, if she could begin a slow climb back to affluence. "Excuse me for a sec."

The phone fumbled as she withdrew it from the pocket. Although she could feel the heavy weight of Brick's gaze on her, she couldn't acknowledge him now. Doing so might mean facing the idea that leaving Fire Creek also meant leaving him behind. The feelings she had for him didn't run deep, but there was a spark there.

Kim pushed those thoughts aside and read the screen. U of Georgia med doesn't feel you'd be a good fit. Wish I had better news. Good luck.

She wouldn't cry. She wouldn't snifle. Not with Brick standing there, watching her. It would mean telling him she didn't want to stay here and

explaining how much she wanted her old life back.

One mistake. The biggest mistake of her career left her with no options.

None.

Chapter Twelve

Brick didn't know what changed. Before the phone beeped, she'd been drifting on a sexual high, her words lazy and sensual. Now...now she stood stiff, eyes liquid and bright with emotion. Kim's expression had fallen, the flushed cheeks no longer healthy and robust. The pinched mouth hard, spine inflexible.

He'd like to think the anger wasn't directed at him for going way beyond what he'd originally intended when he'd brought her here. But the more they'd kissed, the more mesmerized he'd become by her taste. If she had any regrets about it now, any at all, he had to know. "Bad news?"

She sighed. "Expected news, but disappointing none the same."

"Need to talk about it?"

She shook her head almost immediately. That didn't feel right though.

Brick went to her and curled her into his arms. "Hey—I'm here for you, if you want me. Whatever you need."

Kim looked up at him as if she didn't trust his words, but he'd meant them. Once she lowered her face again, he thought he'd lost whatever hope was beginning to form. Hope that maybe he could be what she needed. But when she stayed in his hold, a little at a time her muscles relaxing, he waited.

"Being here in this town was never plan A," Kim said against his chest. "It wasn't even plan B or C. It probably wasn't plan Q, either. And the thing is, I still had hopes for plan P. A long shot, sure, but it was still a shot."

A thousand questions bombarded Brick, and he ignored every instinct to interrupt her to find out more.

She continued, "That text was letting me know to stop banking on it. Whether I like it or not, this place is my new home."

Brick stayed still. A barrage of questions made his muscles feel like they jumped beneath his skin. On an intellectual level he understood that small-town living wasn't for everyone, but he'd never expected to hear the announcement from Kim.

"I like it here, don't get me wrong," she continued. "But I'm from Los Angeles, and you couldn't have picked a place more opposite to Fire Creek

than that big city. There, I lived and worked on the cutting edge of wonder.

“I like it here and I like you, but this place isn’t home to me and never will be. I miss being in the thick of things, being among beautiful people and things. It’s shallow and wrong, but it’s how I feel. It’s only been a month, but I swear I’ve been sentenced to the other side of the world for being dumb and young.”

“I don’t understand. Why *are* you here?”

At last, she slipped away from his grasp. She kept her gaze cast down, as if the grass at their feet deserved her attention more than he did. “Have you ever heard of the actress Shelly Pierce?”

Of course he had. Everyone in America had, and possibly a large number from other countries had too. Shelly grew up in the public eye, an adorable kid who’d been forever typecast as the good girl on a record-breaking sitcom before graduating to the movies. There, she’d continued with the clean-cut, Bambi-eyed roles that made her lovable. Everyone’s kid sister and the kind of woman made for taking home to Mom. Although she was reportedly a wicked smart woman, something about her vulnerable look spoke to a man’s masculinity, urging him to protect her from the world. Even from himself.

“What does she have to do with anything?” he asked.

Kim looked up, her eyes drowning in sorrow. “She died while under my care.”

“*Oh, shit.*”

“Yeah,” she whispered.

He stood torn. Unable to decide if he should ask the obvious question, *what happened?*, or wait for her to come to him. Apparently the reluctance he’d sensed from her all this time didn’t have much to do with him—a relief—but had to do with her history.

America’s sweetheart had died under the care of the physician he lusted after. Didn’t that just beat all?

Brick moved closer, waiting until she acknowledged his presence before speaking. “I won’t push you to talk about it when you don’t want to.” Kim looked as if he’d just given her permission to breathe. Relief and gratitude a potent mixture on her face. “But if what’s happening between us goes the way I want it, you’ll want to tell me about it sometime. Doesn’t have to be soon, but sometime. Will that work for you?”

She nodded, quick jerks of her head.

“Things bad for you?” he asked quietly.

“Worse,” she said in the same hushed tone.

It didn’t make any difference to him. He’d still court her and do things right. With any luck, they’d fall in love someday. By then, maybe the storm would have passed. Everything inside him said she’d be worth the wait.

“Let’s walk and talk. I have a few ideas about the adolescents we can work out together.” The change in topic would give her a new place to anchor. He wouldn’t allow the text message or the death of a patient to be what she remembered about this day. If he had anything to do with it, she would remember this bluff for the first time he’d made her come, as a place where it was them against the world.

As they made their way toward the line of trees, Brick checked on his wolf and found him content. The big baby lay on his back, paws in the air. His sides moved in and out in a slow, rhythmic pattern as he slumbered. They’d gone through a rough few weeks, and Brick’s sexual release must have been the perfect sedative. He’d not disturb him for a while yet, knowing he owed the wolf a run later.

He was tempted to ignore the beast for a moment. Doing so might come with consequences though. It was the entity who’d given him so much trouble of late, a necessary part of him, but the tiresome part. The one who made him regret for an infinitesimal moment who he was, his very lineage. The beast put him in jeopardy with his Alpha and for that, forgiveness would be a long time coming. He needed to check on the traitorous part of himself, if only for peace of mind for a little while.

Brick glanced at the woman beside him before turning his attention inward. His heart thudded, each kick feeling more ominous as the seconds crawled by. He couldn’t understand why this new sensation emanated, but something was off.

Wrong.

Behind the metaphysical barrier, the beast crouched. As if waiting for Brick’s attention, it slowly rose to its hind legs the moment their gazes connected. Everything about it in that moment screamed of danger and warned of incredible rebellious rage.

His heart thumped harder and faster. Sweat formed.

Something Brick had done angered the most potent and wild part of himself. Worse, the beast was not about to let him forget it. Brick sent

soothing thoughts and placating pleas its way, but they bounced off the beast as if he'd flung droplets of water in its direction.

Wild—oh, so wild—and uninhibited.

Brick nudged the wolf awake, looking for help he knew the metaphysical barrier prevented. Maybe the wolf, arguably the most cunning of the three, would help Brick see whatever issue eluded him. *C'mon boy.*

The wolf leaped to its feet and analyzed the situation within seconds. It sent Brick a response, one he'd already considered.

Alarm setting off a wave of goose bumps on his arms, Brick turned to Kim and said, "Here. Take the keys. Don't ask questions and don't look back." He was scared for her, scared it wouldn't be enough. "Kim...*run.*"

* * *

Kim stood there for a moment, the seconds it took for her brain to process what he'd said and reconcile it with his actions. He'd thrust the keys toward her, and on instinct, she'd taken them before fully comprehending his actions.

What was the matter? What had changed in the last several minutes to cause such alarm on his face, near panic in his voice? Were they in danger, and from whom? Why wasn't he running *with* her?

A multitude of questions, microseconds to form and discard.

Another second to do as bidden.

She grabbed the keys, curling them into a fist. After a final glance at Brick's anguished face, she saw the warning there and took off running in the direction of the car.

Her breathing began slow and steady, but before long, grew ragged. Time to get back on the treadmill...except she didn't own one anymore. Sure as hell couldn't afford a membership at a gym, even if she could find one within an hour's drive.

How much farther?

Kim picked up her pace as soon as she realized she'd slowed. She wanted to look behind her, to see if Brick watched her progress—or lack thereof—or if he'd moved on to tackle the unknown danger. He should have told her why she had to leave under such circumstances. He should have done more...she didn't know what, but this lack of information couldn't be good for her or him.

The snap of something brittle, a branch falling from a tree maybe, made her turn anyway. As she struggled to regulate her breaths, she searched the woods. Brick hadn't pushed her away without reason, and she was kicking herself now for not finding out more. What had him spooked?

He'd left the spot where they'd made out like teenagers, but even knowing such a place existed sent her blood pounding, heat suffusing her. No time for memories though. She took off at another trot, cheeks flushed and memories dying a slow, drawn-out death.

"*Shit.*" A stitch zipped down her side, and she gasped. Yeah. Definitely more time on a treadmill or, at least, walking the great outdoors. Two years of downtime had her out of shape.

Her pace slowed to a fast walk. Then a lumber. Her fingers massaged across her aching ribs, working out the lingering pain.

This was stupid. She ought to turn back around, march up to Brick Preston and make him open his mouth. She couldn't very well be effective in helping out the pack if they kept secrets from her. If they wanted her help, they'd have to give her something to work with. Even with the brutalized adolescents, they hadn't really told her much yet. Not enough to help formulate even a single—

What was that?

She glanced in the direction of the car, still unable to see its sheen, and then back where something had made leaves crunch. Something heavy.

Okay, so maybe knowing *everything* about the pack wasn't necessary. Perhaps the monsters of the night should stay that way, and dumb doctors with even dumber luck should stick to what little they knew.

Kim picked up her steps, the stitch quickly losing importance. It hurt to breathe, but her skin crawled. She heard more rustling, more movement.

The sun hung high in the sky, but Rowan's story came rushing back to her. The one about the sun, the moon and the earth battling for dominance. How she should never confront a beast on the night of the full moon. In the middle of the day, she should be safe, right? Any noises haunting her probably meant some hungry wild boar, maybe even a bear, looking for its next meal. With any luck, it would find something tasty and leave her alone.

The next snap came way too close to her.

Trees surrounded her on all sides, the dirt path easy to discern only because she traversed it. If she veered too far to the right or the left, there'd

be no telling if she could find her way back to it again. But she swore something was on her heels and if she stayed on the obvious trail, it would catch her faster than if she ducked behind cover.

She shifted the keys in her hand, moving the longest one between her knuckles. Might go down, but at least she'd shank her attacker once.

Her pace picked up again, because every Spidey sense tingled in full effect. After a few feet, she released a relieved breath. The car, sitting by itself in all of its white glory, waited like a knight in shining Armor All. She'd never been so happy to see a vehicle in her life.

By the time she slid the key into the lock, she was almost giddy. All that drama over nothing. A rabbit or possum rooting around for a nibble.

When something large slammed into her back, she had no chance of seeing it coming.

She was shoved forward, collided with metal. The breath whooshed out of her, making it impossible to scream. The thing—the body, she realized—had her pressed against the car door, the keys stabbed her in the stomach. Pain rippled outward, tears springing to her eyes.

The way she'd been pushed, her forearms were trapped between her body and the car. Even if the dizziness making her head swim from the punch she'd taken subsided, she'd never find the leverage she needed to fight back. It hurt so much to inhale.

Breathe. *Breathe*. Stay conscious.

"Please," she gasped. *Please*.

Every fine hair on her body stood on end as a low rumbling, like a freight train, bowled over her. The sound, so close to her ear, felt like it started inside her head, bouncing around her skull for full effect. The beast behind her growled low again, and she swore it dribbled spittle down the back of her neck.

It sniffed in her hair, rapid-fire huffs of its breath that should have been warm, but made her blood run cold instead. Even if she'd never seen a beast before, she would have known it for the claws curled into the car's paint. The hair covering overlarge arms she'd seen on Abe.

Kim's breath shuddered out of her, each heartbeat harder and more forceful than the last. Brick had wanted her to get away, to get to safety, because he'd known something. Did he know this would happen?

She stayed glued to the spot, unable to come up with any viable options for

survival. The thing had her trapped with no way out.

Rowan had told her the beast came out on a full moon. This beast apparently didn't know the rules.

She couldn't help but think about Brick. Where was he? Why had he sent her away? If he'd had any suspicion about what would happen, she would have expected him to stay by her side and help her deal with a raging beast from his pack. He'd been tasked as her protection, yet now that she needed it, he'd fled.

"Please," she whispered again, because she didn't know what else to say.

The beast huffed again, the blast of its hot breath sending her hair flitting away from her head.

Any minute the beast would probably attack, although she had no idea what she'd done to rile it. Although terror kept her rooted to the spot, waiting for its assault wasn't an option either.

"I can't breathe." A lie, but if it got the thing to move, all the better. She had no idea if it could understand her, but maybe her pleading would sway it somewhat.

It eased away from her a fraction. Hope blossomed.

"I can't hurt you," she said. "Please don't hurt me." Begging for her life, but no other options before her. It seemed the only option to her. Whatever it took to survive. Whatever it took.

She waited for the first slice of pain, maybe powerful jaws crunching down on her shoulder or neck. Maybe it would drag her away, flipping her until it could get at her soft spots. The easiest way to her insides.

Kim's stomach revolted, bile rising quickly.

What did it want? Whatdiditwant?

She sniffled as more tears threatened to erupt. Waiting for it to move, to kill her, to do *anything*, was worse than knowing it had hunted her down like prey.

Those claw-like hands scraped over metal, no longer keeping her hemmed in. But they moved away from her to where she couldn't see, but only anticipate what might happen next. The growling hadn't subsided, the sound still low and menacing. A warning against trying to do anything stupid. The beast didn't have to worry though; she didn't think her legs could move beyond collapsing from sheer terror.

When the weight of its body lifted away from her, Kim waited for the

attack. Her last moment alive on this earth.

Chapter Thirteen

Her vision shimmered, tears making it almost impossible to see, but Kim swore she saw movement in the distance. She stood tensed, hating the waiting, and then a flash of color snagged her attention. Her gaze searched the spot again as she blinked hard, clearing the water from her eyes.

When Rowan's face peered out from behind a tree, she wanted to shout.

Her legs had turned to jelly, and the beast's release allowed her to grasp the car's metal for support. Every instinct demanded she lift her arms and wave toward Rowan, to get him to help her, but she fought them.

Undoubtedly he saw her predicament and wouldn't leave her alone.

The thought had scarcely finished when he stepped out into a clearing, in full view of Kim and the beast. He made a quick gesture with his hand, pointed from Kim to the car.

With the key still in the door, she would have no trouble following his directive. The moment the opportunity arose, she would dive for safety.

"To me, brother," Rowan called. His look hardened as he stared down the beast. He sounded so confident and sure of himself that Kim remained in place, stunned by his brazen behavior.

The beast moved with a swiftness that belied its bulk. By the time Kim thought to look behind her to be certain, it loped over the hood of the car headed toward Rowan.

"Kim—*go!*"

She nodded, looked down and tried the keys. Pain flared from her abdomen, but she didn't spot blood during a quick perusal.

Her hand slipped on the key once. Twice.

The beast moved to Rowan on all fours, going so fast she wanted to shout at the man to get away.

The key turned, the click of the lock like winning the Powerball.

She dropped inside the car, then slammed a fist on the lock button. A different, but just as satisfying click later, she felt safe enough to study Rowan's progress. She searched the trees for him, at the same time cranking up the engine. While throwing the car in reverse, she spotted him.

He waited until the lump that was Kim's heart shot into her throat before doing anything.

If she'd blinked, she would have missed it. The stiffening of Rowan's body. The grimace of pain stretched across his face. The way his back arched before his eyes did something terrible. Unnatural. And then a wolf stood in the same place Rowan had a scant second before.

"What the..." Kim's mouth fell open as she leaned forward, searching for Rowan. Because there was no way that the wolf... No way.

Throat dry, heart hammering double-time, she watched the gray-and-white wolf stalk in between trees, ears perched forward. Its fangs were bared, and although she couldn't hear it, Kim imagined it growled as it moved.

The wolf whipped around and then charged forward. It was a thing of beauty to watch until she realized the wolf focused on the beast that had been attempting to sneak up on it. Once the beast realized it'd been caught, the beast raced to meet the wolf head on. Moving at an impossible speed, she caught only fleeting glimpses of the horrifying monster.

Kim's hands gripped the steering wheel as she leaned forward, terrified for the wolf that must've been Rowan. She couldn't see who did more damage, bristling of fur coming from both beast and wolf. The smaller of the two held its own, hitting the ground only long enough to bounce back up and attack the beast with its teeth again. The beast used the trees for cover time and again, clever, clever thing.

Her stomach rolled and she searched her mind for something—anything—to do to help Rowan. As if he heard her thoughts, this time when the wolf landed, he turned his face toward her. Only then did she realize that Rowan did this to give her time to get away. She was wasting it and putting him in danger.

Although torn between fleeing and leaving the wolf at the beast's mercy, she backed the car away at top speed. Rowan knew what he was doing when handling the beast, while she was out of her element.

She finally managed to find a space between the trees where she could turn the car around. Once forward facing, she hit the accelerator and refused to look back. After she returned to town, she'd find Knox or any other man from the pack and let them know what had happened.

Along those lines, where the hell was Brick? Was this the type of man she'd been falling for? It made her sick to her stomach to believe he'd left her

to defend herself, but he'd left her with little choice.

Although tempted to continue driving in a reckless speed, she slowed down to something more reasonable. One thing she'd learned so far in her short stint in this town was that animals liked to pop out at the most inconvenient times. Last thing she needed to do was hit a deer, which was capable of rendering the car undrivable. Stuck out here a second time, she couldn't depend on Rowan to save her again.

Worry ate at her stomach, but she prayed the man knew the beast. He'd referred to it as "brother," so there must have been at least a fleeting form of familiarity there. Maybe that small mercy would keep them from posing lethal danger to each other.

Kim checked the rearview, found nothing behind her. When she returned her gaze to the front, however, she slammed on the brakes.

Skidding to a halt, the car stopped several feet away from the white-and-gray wolf standing in the road. With careless nonchalance, it trotted up to the car, headed directly for the passenger side. She couldn't say why she waited, but a moment later when she leaned over to see what it would do next, she instead came to face-to-face with a man's lower abdomen. "Whoa."

He jiggled the handle. "Open up."

Kim hit the lock, confused and relieved all at once. "Are you okay?"

A naked Rowan lowered himself into the car. "A few scratches, nothing that won't heal shortly. Did it get a chance to visit any hurt on you?" His gaze searched her face, then arms. "You're like a cat, doctor. Nine lives."

She began to drive again. With Rowan inside the car, the beast could be anywhere. "How did you know where to find us..." Her voice trailed off as she realized there was no us. Only her. "Me."

"Knox wanted you two protected. It wasn't an idle request, despite your misgivings."

She had a million questions, but his nudity distracted her. She'd seen hundreds of patients without their clothes, but this was her first opportunity with someone who was more than human. Except that wasn't completely true. "Did you happen to see Brick out there? We got separated early on, before the beast came after me."

"I don't understand why it targeted you at all, especially if you didn't antagonize at first." He lifted a hand to run it through his hair. He muttered, "None of this makes any sense to me."

“Will it come after us again?”

“Probably not. I caught up to the car mostly on luck. I know the woods well, but so would a beast.”

They drove in silence for a few minutes before she circled back to the unanswered question. “Why do you think he left me?” she whispered.

“Shit, doctor. Is that that what you think? That’s not how Brick operates, plus I think he’s got it bad for you.”

“He left me. Don’t try to stick up for your boy when that fact is true. He tucked tail and ran.” That angered her more than she thought possible, but the more she dwelled on it, the more she realized she didn’t know his character as well as she’d thought she had. Granted, they were still strangers, but she’d trusted her gut to guide her actions with him.

“Listen, I don’t think he left you to fend for yourself. I think he tried to get you out of there when he realized the danger.”

They reached the end of the path, forcing her to make a left onto the two-lane highway, and her tension began to unfurl. Out here they were more likely to run into civilization. To happen across others from the pack or from town.

Wait a minute...

“Just how long were you out there? What did you see?” She glared at him from the corner of her eyes, because Kim thought she already knew the answer.

Rowan chuckled. “I saw when it was time for me to make myself scarce. Whatever private moment you shared with Brick stayed between the two of you. That’s why I almost got there too late. I’m sorry the beast got that close to you at all.”

Relieved, Kim said, “I’m just glad you were there.” A punch of anger to the chest. “Unlike somebody else we both know.”

“You really don’t get it, do you? He didn’t leave you. The beast back there, unless I’m seriously wrong and I don’t think so, *was* Brick.”

“Fuck.” Kim slammed her hand against the steering wheel. “Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuckity *fuck*.” When she fell for the bad boy, she *really* fell for the bad boy.

“He didn’t abandon you. He tried to get you out of there before it was too late.”

Deep down she knew this about him, knew it could happen, yet she’d

chosen to ignore it. Brick was pack. That meant he could do everything the pack could do. He could change into a wolf, and he could change into the beast. On the night of the full moon, he'd be a danger to her always. Always.

"I don't understand." A tremor shook her words. "You told me, you said the beast came out on the night of the full moon. It's not even evening yet and no moon in sight, much less a full one."

"We'll talk, but I need to report in. You got a phone? Mine's back there with my clothes."

"Reception's spotty on it. I think it's in the back. Side pocket."

Her head hurt, although her heart hurt more. She wanted to like him. She *did* like him. He could hurt or possibly kill her.

But he hadn't.

He'd tried to send her away, and only her chronic flaw of having to know more, having to push boundaries, kept her from doing as instructed right away. She'd lingered, and could have lost her life. Apropos, seeing how her most important client had lost her life under the same circumstances.

She kept her eyes on the road, anything to keep from ogling the naked ass next to her head. Just as she was about to resort to driving with her eyes closed, Rowan settled himself back into the seat. A moment later, she heard, "Alpha, we have a problem. Brick's gone feral... Yeah, the doc's fine, with me, but we had to get out of there... I don't know... I don't know that either... Yeah."

The conversation couldn't have lasted twenty seconds, but it seemed almost as soon as it started, Rowan dropped the phone into the cup holder.

"What now?" she asked.

"You head to your shop. We go looking for Brick. Knox wants me with you while that happens."

She frowned. "You think he'll come after me?"

He didn't say anything. Her breath locked into her chest.

"He will, won't he?"

"Can't say for sure."

"Can't say you make a good liar, either." What options did that leave her? If she headed back to the clinic... "Wait a minute. This is just like the adolescents, isn't it? Shifting into a beast before time."

"Maybe. Hard to say. When an adult does this, without the moon's influence, we usually say he's gone feral. Sometimes they can come back

from it, sometimes not.”

She pulled into the clinic’s parking lot, her thoughts suddenly going back to the vials of blood still sitting in her bag. “But has anyone ever tried to study an adult and figure out what’s gone wrong? You want to know how someone’s figured out how to target the adolescents, you have to know what it is you’re looking for.”

“That means someone’s done it already. Somebody’s discovered a pattern that’s eluding the rest of us.”

“That’s the only thing that makes sense. What d’you think Knox would say to me asking to do an analysis of the adolescents in the pack? It’s hellacious, invasive, and I’m not certain you could get the parents to agree to it, but it might help.”

“Could you keep the analysis here, in your clinic? We have to be certain of absolute confidentiality. The samples could never leave Fire Creek. Ever.”

The pulse in her neck jumped as she looked at Rowan and wondered if he could see the guilt on her face. Could he somehow detect the deception she perpetrated? Brick’s blood held so many clues to his people and helping her understand them more. She had to find out what could be gleaned from it. If nothing, she’d throw the stored sample away. Already she knew it wouldn’t be nothing, though.

“The adolescents would remain protected. I’d personally guarantee that.” She wouldn’t expose the underaged and maybe she could leave Brick’s name, per se, out of it too. “But I wouldn’t be able to run all the lab tests inside the clinic. I’m simply not equipped for that.”

Rowan shook his head. “I don’t know that Knox will go for it, but the decision is his to make, of course. It’s getting harder and harder to remain anonymous in the age of technology. We’re trying to catch up, but we’re not trying to expose ourselves either. It’s a fine line to walk.”

“Well, let’s get inside where I feel at least a little safer.”

“I don’t think he would’ve hurt you. Not Brick. Not even feral would he have hurt you.”

Kim pushed open the door, but before exiting said, “I’d like to believe you, but I don’t know yet if I can.”

She went inside, heading straight for the coffeepot. She frowned at the way her hands trembled while she filled the carafe, the shaking making scooping up coffee grounds almost laughable.

It wasn't until the maker released a series of rude noises that she realized she'd been staring at the dark liquid as it filled the glass. A good five minutes of living inside her head where it felt much safer than out here, where beasts and wolves had battled less than fifty feet away.

At least her hands didn't shake as badly now. Taking a sip of the bitter coffee and then exhaling loudly helped her find her center. Alone in the clinic, she was safe.

By the time she drained the cup, most of the emotional remnants from the morning's harrowing events had dissipated.

She spent the rest of the afternoon working on the hematology and chemistry panels on Jess. The routine labs were easily done, no elaborate equipment needed. Brick's blood, on the other hand, needed a specialist. While she could have run the same tests as she had for Jess, she didn't want to waste his blood on the mundane. God only knew when or if she'd get a second chance at it.

Movement at the window snagged her attention, and she whirled to find Rowan standing there, his back to her, still guarding the perimeter.

They'd managed to locate a pair of scrubs that fit his athletic body. Once dressed, he'd gone and stayed outside, which made it easier to prep Brick's blood for shipping. It also helped her make a much-needed phone call to a friend she hadn't seen since before her fall. While a lot of her classmates during undergrad had majored in the sciences with the intent of moving forward to medical school, a few made Science their religion. Rebecka Gilbreth had a much-sought-after mind for hematology, chemistry, and Kim needed her now.

"Becka, hey, it's Kim Sharpe. I need a favor."

"Whoa, Kim. Haven't heard from you in a while. All that stuff on the news...are you okay?"

"Yeah, we need to catch up, but I have to talk quickly right now." Anything to avoid going into details. The media had done a bang-up job of that already. Nothing she said now would ever sway the court of public opinion. "Can you run genealogical DNA and genetic mutation testing on a sample I send you? Some other tests too, but those would be the most important."

"Um, yeah, sure...are we looking for anything in particular?"

Without going into specifics, which had to be cagey as hell to a post-doc

study buddy, she told the scientific genius about her suspicions and needs. She also emphasized the need for absolute discretion. When Becka asked why Kim couldn't go through a regular lab, she made up an excuse about wait times. "And lastly, hon, if you can't run the tests for any reason—any reason at all—preserve the blood. There's a limited amount available. I'll owe you big for this one, Beck."

After a promise to have dinner with her and catch up the next time she drove through Atlanta, they disconnected. It took only a few minutes more to make two slides of blood for storage in her cooler. Her guarantee the blood wouldn't be lost to accidental mishandling by the lab.

Once she showed Knox how much information she could give him and help out his people, he'd be certain to overlook her indiscretion. Her belief in this way of convincing him was absolute.

"How much longer, Doc?" Rowan called from the front.

Jesus. She hadn't heard the door chime, but his timing couldn't have been more perfect. She sealed the envelope and headed to the lab, did one final visual sweep for evidence of her doings. "I think I'm ready to head home," she replied. He might not have noticed the tremor in her voice, but she did. If she didn't get it together, she *would* be found out.

Kim grabbed her lab coat to take home for a wash, did a final, *final* look, just in case, and flipped the light switch. She made her way down the hall, reflecting on just how different things had been little more than forty-eight hours ago. She'd been fearful of her life then; now she had a werewolf guard. Of all the things she could have never imagined...

A familiar crash sounded from the back room.

She stilled. "Rowan, are you okay?"

He'd told her to scream if she heard anything amiss. He'd said he would hear her if somehow he'd missed Brick's return.

Did she scream and alert him to the possible presence of a man who'd done her no harm, despite what they'd told her about beasts...or did she give Brick a chance and see if the man she'd started to become friendly with, could easily find herself falling for, had a way to explain everything in his own words?

She owed him that much.

Didn't she?

Chapter Fourteen

The look on Kim's face—God, the awful, fear-filled look on her face—struck Brick like a fist. He stood just inside the clinic, in the little room where most of this adventure had begun, and didn't know what to say to her or how to apologize or if he should reassure her or any of a million things jumbling around his brain right now.

"I'm sorry," he said gently. It was the best thing to say, the *right* thing. The look on her face said she knew more than he'd been able to share with her. He'd been a coward in keeping the truth from her, but self-preservation required it. They'd thrust her into their world, and she handled the news well, but a human woman could only be expected to understand so much.

"What are you doing here?" Indignation replaced fear.

"I wouldn't have hurt you, believe that."

"I do."

But she stayed in place, her body language suggesting she'd bolt at the first opportunity. If not run, she remained poised to scream. Brick held no doubts that Rowan would come to her aid. He also held no doubts that Knox wanted him to turn himself in.

"Regardless of what you saw from the outside, it's still *me* inside the beast. I don't have full sway, but I can influence him the same way he influences me in my day to day."

"How do I believe that? How do I believe you?"

"Let me explain as best I can. For the past few weeks, I've been struggling with my beast and keeping it contained. There's a flaw in the barrier keeping it contained, and I don't know how to fix it. It's a dangerous thing to be broken like this, something that my pack will not tolerate. If I can't fix it, there'll be dire consequences."

"How dire?"

"Bad."

When he didn't elaborate, he sensed a mounting frustration coming from her. No doubt she wondered what she was getting herself into by being with him. He had to ask himself if she *really* wanted to know, because more than

likely it would be more than she cared to deal with.

That realization hurt his pride more than he'd like to admit. To distract himself from the thought, he continued, "Ask me anything. Whether or not I want to tell you the real answer, what I tell you will be the truth. My life on it."

She seemed to weigh his statements. After a hesitation, she said, "I thought I saw Rowan turn into a wolf."

Brick nodded. "You did." If he kept her talking, it might go a long way in helping her remember that he stood before her as a man. The monster from her nightmares wasn't what she should focus on. "That wasn't an illusion or your imagination."

"I know we've talked about it and intellectually, I understand the pack can do that, but to actually see it in person..." She shook her head, at a loss for words. "And you can do that too, if you want? Not just the beast, but also a wolf?"

"Yes. That's part of what makes us pack. I wish with everything in me you'd not seen the beast before you saw my wolf. I think you'd like him. He's clever and playful. Loves to steal socks."

Kim smiled, and he thought he saw a hairline fracture emerge in her mistrust of him. If he'd dared, if there was any chance of keeping Rowan away a little while longer, he would have spent hours warming her up to the idea. He would have coaxed her to his side, inch by inch. But he knew his pack and knew what would happen if they were discovered. He couldn't spare the time. He didn't dare to. "And the beast?"

"A part of me too. It's wild and untamable, but I couldn't imagine a universe without it there too."

The smile disappeared. "What do you want from me? I haven't figured your game yet."

"My game? I don't have one. I like your company and you're sexy as hell. I just want to spend some time with you. That's all. If what I'm going through is more than you want to take on, I get it. I'm not okay with it, but I do understand."

She glanced over her shoulder, putting him on alert. If Rowan walked through the front door, Brick would have to leave. Whatever thoughts and feelings he had about Kim, set aside. Maybe to be addressed later on—most likely not. Time wasn't on their side.

She was an extraordinary woman, and he had nothing to offer her except problems with the pack. No smart woman would want anything to do with it, so when she lifted those pretty brown eyes, the sadness telling him exactly what he needed to know, Brick took action.

He rushed forward. Not fast enough to startle her, but with his intent spelled clearly on his face. He made sure she could stop him if she didn't want it, with a single look or sound. But if this was to be the last time he ever saw her, he wanted to send her away with his memory. One that would not easily be extinguished.

Kim held her ground when he reached her, her hands coming to his shoulders when he swept her into his arms. Brick tensed, expecting to feel her push him away. When she tugged, a nonverbal command to move in closer, he groaned as he happily gave in.

Brick slanted his mouth over Kim's, the willingness to lose himself in their kiss overtaking any other sense. He savored her taste, the way she clung to him. Sweeping his tongue over her lips, peace unfurled in him when she allowed him entrance. Her hands curled into his hair, holding him in place as if she didn't want the kiss to end. It was his pleasure to pull her to him, to feel her breasts press into his chest.

He breathed her in because this would be the last time. When they separated, it would be permanent. She'd walk away, and he wouldn't look back because she needed better. Deserved better.

But he couldn't get his fingers to release her. His lips moved over hers, taking and taking. He was an addict, and she was the drug. If there was rehabilitation in his future, he didn't want it. He wanted Kim. And when all of this was over, when he'd settled this tumultuous situation with the pack, he would come after her and claim her.

She looked up at him, breathless, a dazed patina to her eyes. "I don't know what it is about you, mister, but when you kiss a woman, you make certain you kiss the hell out of her."

Brick chuckled, wanting with everything in him just to spend a few minutes more with her. What he wouldn't do to send Rowan away and make certain their time together wouldn't be interrupted.

"Before you go, let me ask you something. What does this mean for us? I can tell by the way you keep glancing over my shoulder, how stiff you are, you're expecting Rowan to break through at any moment. Why do I think I

don't want to be here when that happens?"

Brick nodded, a curt dip of his chin. "You're right. I'm basically a wanted man at this point. When the pack finds me, I'll be put under twenty-four-hour protection."

Kim grimaced. She knew from experience what kind of protection the pack would offer him. For the first time, he was glad she did.

He continued, "If it ever becomes apparent that I can't turn myself back from the beast, if the man can't resume the lead role, then they'll give me two options. I'll either be forced to move to a remote location, sometimes as close as Alaska. Other times, it's to a place you've probably never heard of."

He swore he heard her heartbeat speed up as she looked intently at him. Understanding, a mask of horror on her face. "And the other option?"

"If I can't turn back from being the beast, there's nothing else to be done. I'll be unstoppable with superhuman strength and a raging mind that can't be tamed."

"Answer the question, Brick. What is the other option?"

"It's what you do when you can't control an animal and it's a danger to others." A hollow pit formed in his stomach, his own heart issuing a thunderous *boom-boom* response. "You put it down."

* * *

What did she do? If Kim called for Rowan, she would be sentencing Brick to death. Maybe not today, but based on his somber expression, it was an eventuality. As a physician, she'd dedicated her life to helping others. If she turned her back on him now, would she be able to live with herself later?

"There must be some way to beat this. You must know someone else who's gone through something similar but managed to walk out okay." She only now realized he held on to her. She found comfort in his arms.

"It's not permanent, I don't think. I might be able to find a way back if the beast escapes again, but I don't know if the pack will give me time to try."

Brick stiffened against her. Kim tensed too, an unknown noise cranking up the already rising tension. They clung to a razor's edge together, getting sliced to ribbons for their efforts.

"If you had the time, could you do it?" she asked. Her voice sounded hurried, even to herself.

“I don’t know. I can’t make that promise. If I could...”

“*Chris*, tell me you can do it with enough time. A little more time.”

His eyes hardened. “I’ll try. I will do any and everything in my power to keep from losing myself to the beast. I can’t go feral. Not now.”

She thought about the vial of blood. If Brick became feral, using it wouldn’t be able to hurt him anymore. If she didn’t save him, maybe she could prevent this from happening to someone else in his pack. They said it didn’t happen often, but even once was one time too many.

The loud, compassionate part of herself knew she could help. Knew based on the way he looked at her now, with such tenacity and hunger, she might help him find salvation. Maybe through science. Maybe something else.

If he was willing to try, so was she.

“Meet me at my rental in about an hour.” She gave him the house number and location. It might be simultaneously the dumbest and bravest thing she’d ever done in her life. “I’ll see if I can get Knox to lose interest in me for a little while. Besides, I really want to do some research on the pack. If they’re focused on finding you, they won’t have time for me. I said I’d help with the adolescents’ problem, and I meant it.”

Brick held her by the shoulders before dropping a smoldering-hot kiss on her mouth. So hot, hard and fast, her mind was spinning by the time he pulled away. “Thank you,” he said. “If I don’t make it, thank you for the last two days.”

A protest poised on the tip of her tongue, but the distinct sound of the door opening carried to her. She turned, prepared to step in between Rowan and Brick. It proved unnecessary when he shoved past her, going into one of the side rooms before Rowan turned the corner.

“You ready to close up shop, Doc?” he asked. “It’s pretty quiet outside.”

“Sure.” She wanted to turn back and see if Brick watched. She wanted one more reassuring smile from him or a slight nod of his head indicating everything would be okay. Instead, she strolled past Rowan as if nothing left behind in the clinic needed her attention. She did want to verify one thing more in Brick’s hearing though. “You’re not planning on staying with me forever, right?” Light laughter after the question was supposed to lessen the impact of the very important question.

“I don’t think so. Just get you home, make sure everything’s okay. Brick’s never been there before, right?”

She shook her head. “Nothing but me, some rabbit and deer out there.”

“Yeah, you should be good. Like I said, I know he’s not a danger to you, not even as a beast. But you being new out here and all...a few extra precautions can’t hurt.”

“I’ll have to be sure to thank Knox. All of this oversight isn’t necessary, but I guess it’s a little comforting.” Not fully a lie, because at some level having the pack look out for her *did* make her feel like part of a community. She hadn’t been here long enough to get to know too many people, but if this kind of treatment could be expected out of everyone, she could see herself calling Fire Creek home—and meaning it—very soon. She never expected to like it here, and maybe it was too soon to call, but the sense of community tugged at her insides in a good way.

“Let’s go.”

She couldn’t help herself. Once they reached the door, and she turned to put the key in the lock, she searched the hall for some sign of Brick.

Nothing but the empty clinic. No sign of him. To her it felt ominous so she tried to shake it off. Still, she couldn’t help the feeling.

* * *

By the time Rowan dropped her off, she’d managed to lift her mood. The quiet ride gave her time to formulate a game plan. She strolled into her bedroom to exchange the business clothes for something more comfortable. A soft cotton tee and even softer pajama pants. The neon-yellow fuzzy socks had seen better days, thread pills accumulated everywhere, but she couldn’t find the heart to throw them away. She loved the darned things.

There was a soft knock at the bedroom window, and she whirled, startled. The sheer curtains hid whatever waited on the other side. When a large shape moved though, she had a feeling.

“Why don’t any of you like doors?” she asked Brick when she lifted the pane. “There’s a back door to the kitchen. Head to your right, and you’ll run into it.”

She was about to lower the window, but when he didn’t move, she paused. He gripped the windowsill as if it kept him anchored to the world.

He said, “You don’t have to do this. It isn’t your problem. I don’t know why I’m dragging you into this other than selfishness. It’s okay to say no. I

would understand.”

“Kitchen door,” she said softly. “I’ll be there in a sec.”

Her heart fluttered by the time she reached for the knob. Opening the door signified so many things, but none of them felt wrong. Brick’s beast hadn’t hurt her when the opportunity had presented itself, so at least a sudden, uncontrolled shift seemed the least of her concerns. There might be consequences to face later, especially from Knox, but she’d accept them.

“Welcome to my humble abode,” she announced as she allowed him entrance.

“This is...functional.”

Her gaze swept the kitchen and little hallway, trying to appreciate the view through a fresh set of eyes, such as Brick’s. In Los Angeles, her kitchen had been top-of-the-line, stainless steel appliances and polished, burnished wood. Gas stove, walk-in pantry the size of some small countries and every type of gadgetry a chef could ever hope for. None of them ever used by her.

In her rental, she had only a two-top portable burner. The Formica-covered cabinets held canned goods, two practical pots and a small dinnerware set. She’d given the place a homey feel by cutting out landscapes from magazines and shoving them into frames she’d found at a dollar store. They didn’t add the ambience she aimed for, but at least the place wasn’t so stark.

When they moved further inside, Brick would find the rest of her home similarly outfitted. A threadbare futon doubled as a couch and her bed. A small table she’d found at a thrift store. A few reference books, now outdated, stored in crates were the only real decor.

Brick seemed to take up most of the space by virtue of breathing as he moved further inside, and her embarrassment grew.

“It’s temporary,” she said, an edge to her voice.

“I know. You said it’s a rental and as far as rentals go, this will do. My place isn’t much bigger, but I’ve had more time to make it my own. I hope I get to show it to you someday soon.”

At that, all of Kim’s defenses crumbled. At home, her friends would be looking at her with pity or resentment, not understanding how she could’ve fallen so far from grace. Here, this man she barely knew accepted her at face value, not needing her or wanting her to live up to a status.

“It might not be much to look at, but I make a mean scrambled egg here. Are you hungry?”

He nodded and went to the small dining room chair. They both seemed to hold their breaths after he pulled it out and gingerly sat on it. She'd reinforced the screws herself using a handheld Phillips, but the legs were spindly, suggestive of an understood weight limit. The makers probably didn't intend a burly werewolf to make himself comfortable in one of them. A minor miracle kept the wood from collapsing in on itself and taking him to the ground.

Not one to believe in signs from heaven, Kim nonetheless took it as a good sign.

Chapter Fifteen

Although there might be a minor risk by sitting outside, after eating cheese toast and eggs as an early supper, they went to the makeshift patio to cool off in the evening air. Brick had carried the fragile chairs outside, making a note to himself to provide her with a proper rocker or reclining chairs. If she'd let him, the inside could use some cabinetry and other better furniture as well.

The wilds surrounding her rental had been kept in order, none of the foliage creeping too close to the little bungalow. He'd be able to spot anyone who tried to approach before they were near enough to do damage. He'd listen out for any cars, but really banked on the pack thinking he was ignorant of the house's location. It wasn't impenetrable, however they needed shelter where they could regroup and think of a strategy.

"So," she said once settled, "let's do a little assessment of what's going on with you both before and after the beast takes over. Maybe there's something happening in the process that would help us discover what's being triggered. From what I understand, none of you have really documented each step."

"Do you really think that's going to help? It would seem by now if there were commonalities, someone would have pointed them out. I don't want to waste your time by starting with the simple stuff."

"We have to start somewhere, and this is just as good a place as any." Kim reached for the pad and pen she'd brought. Implement in hand, she took on a different air. Brick couldn't pinpoint the difference, but for some reason she seemed more serious, more studious. The change in demeanor from soft femininity to objective scholar kind of turned him on. She said, "Now, do your best to explain to me your state of emotions before turning into a wolf, before turning into the beast, and then compare them to what it's like when you're a man."

Kim took copious notes while Brick explained to her the nuances of having three entities in one physical body. He found it difficult to rationalize in a coherent manner why he and others in the pack figured they were ahead of the rest of the human race. Even getting her to understand the beautiful pain of transitioning from beast to man, wolf to man and vice versa eluded him.

A split second of sweet agony combined with momentary ecstasy, followed by ultimate freedom each time. He told her about the need to make sure everyone's emotional states found fulfillment. The wolf needed to run and explore, to play and to hunt as part of its nature. The beast, on the other hand, had needs much more basic: food, shelter, safety.

Hours passed, and if Kim could glean anything from what he told her, she was a better physician than he'd given her credit for. As far as he was concerned, she asked him for the details of being alive. Although he would never call a shifter's existence anything less than special, at the same time it couldn't have been any more ordinary.

"So what I want to know from you is if you have any specific thoughts or commands in the seconds before shifting. How do you tell your body to allow the next entity to take over?"

Brick shrugged. "You're asking me to explain to you how I tell my body to wiggle my fingers or blink several times in a row. There isn't conscious thought involved."

She sighed, and he could sense her growing frustration. "All right, let's look at this a different way. Do you happen to notice if any of your autonomic functions change?"

"In English?"

"Sorry." She gave him a warm smile. "Does your breathing change, your heart rate speed up or slow down, or anything like that at all that you can discern?"

He closed his eyes and pulled down the memories of the last few shifts. Try though he might, nothing seemed different. "I don't know. I just *do* it."

"Think, Brick. We don't have much time on this. Either you come up with something, or you lose yourself to your pack's laws." She shuddered, although she tried to stifle it.

He studied her response, not sure whether it was meant for him the patient, or him...the man. A deep-seated hope inside him leaned toward the latter.

"I don't know, maybe..." He shook his head. There had to be something, but sorting through all that happened in the blink of an eye, on top of the additional pressure of *having* to find something, made it seem an impossible task. "Maybe my heart beats a little faster. I think. I don't know..."

"No, you're probably right. That's good. It's something to go on." A strange expression flickered across her face, her gaze cutting to him.

“What was that look?”

“I don’t want you to try to shift.” They’d already decided it would be a bad idea. The wolf might be vulnerable to the beast, and avoiding shifting for now seemed the best course of action. “But maybe you can think of something else shifting is like. If you’ve ever been a runner, is it maybe similar to a runner’s high?”

“Not a runner, but I don’t think it’s like that anyway. I understand runner’s high is more like euphoria.” Brick called up the sensations, the instant gratification-pleasure-implosion that occurred during shift. “If I had to say it was like anything, I’d have to choose coming.”

Kim’s face went pink, but she arched her brow in a knowing way. “God, you’re such a guy. Everything boils back down to sex.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.” He grinned, unable to help himself.

She rolled her eyes. “So it’s like having an orgasm. I guess physiologically then you’re saying that your heart rate does increase, probably along with your breathing speeding up, muscles contracting and hormones releasing.” The amusement slid away from her face. “That actually makes a lot of sense.”

“Where are you going with this?”

She shrugged. “Maybe you need to come. But—”

Brick shot to his feet, hand extended. It wasn’t like she had to tell him twice. A chance to finally connect with Kim all the way? Yes, please.

Her laughter rolled into the woods. “Wait, slow down! I just realized that maybe it isn’t a sound theory.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Because you orgasmed not long ago and you still shifted anyway, remember?”

Fuck. She was right, of course. “Right. Okay...so I orgasmed, but not in the usual sense. I mean, there has to be some kind of physiological difference from coming through sex versus coming at my own hand. What do you think? Am I right?”

Her hand lifted, rocking in a side-to-side motion. “Certainly there are *some* differences, but can it really be *enough* to make a difference? What’s missing would have to be so very subtle. I don’t know if it can account for why you felt compelled to shift, despite not wanting to. I mean, we’re talking an infinitesimal difference.”

“Is it worth the risk to try and find out what happens? We already know that I’ll lose control if I just try masturbating. What happens if we employ all of the other things that go along with sex? I mean, foreplay can’t only be for women. There’s that buildup and anticipation that makes the final release that much better.”

“It’s a big risk we’ll be taking.”

He reached for her hand. Inside his, it felt small and fragile. Once again, he marveled at her frailty and wondered how this universe brought her to him. She took on so much responsibility just by allowing him into her home. If he lost control of his beast, if she couldn’t get away... “I won’t risk your safety. I’m on a slow train to an inevitability, but I can’t guarantee what happens if you’re here when the beast is set free.”

“All right then, we take precautions. My car is right outside and at the first sign something’s going wrong, I run for it and get help.”

Brick shook his head, knowing it might not be enough. “No one else. Pack will come for me, but if I—” He was going to die. They would find him, be unable to subdue him and the hard choice would have to be made. He would die soon, and he had to come to grips with that. For her, he would hold out as long as he could, though. Search for an answer until the final, bitter end. “When I go feral, your only priority is to get away from me. I don’t want to meet my end knowing that I hurt you in any way.”

She squeezed. “You won’t.”

He held on, so very, very aware of her humanity. She could never be anything but the healer woven into her soul, which loaned her an uncommon trust in him. Brick leaned forward, making certain she saw the gravity of the situation in his eyes. “It’s rare. When there’s a connection between the man and family, whether it’s by blood or emotion, the beast rarely attacks. But it can happen. Whatever you think, whatever you see, make certain you understand that you’re dealing with a beast. It’s a creature of instincts and animals sensibilities. I can influence it, but I’m not it. Don’t forget that I can hurt you. The beast *can* hurt you.”

“If you think you’re going to scare me out of doing this, you’re wrong.” She made a halting motion when Brick moved to interrupt. “I get it. You’re scared to death for me, and I’m so flattered and honored by it. But if there’s one thing I’ve learned in this life is how to live with the consequences of my actions. So...you’re not going to scare me away, and I’m going into this with

both eyes open. We'll make love and we'll see what happens. And if someone upstairs is looking down on us the way I think He is, then we'll learn more about how to bring you back to humanity. We'll both walk away unscathed. Deal?"

* * *

Twenty minutes later, and it should have felt awkward waiting for him to emerge from the small bathroom and enter the bedroom where she sat on the futon-bed, wrapped only in a towel. In every other part of her life, Kim played fast and loose, going on gut feelings and manic thought. But this expectation of him defied that.

She waited for Brick after putting a pair of folded scrubs on the chair by the door. Her keys rested on top of her purse. The door lock hadn't been engaged, the car just as easily accessible. If she had to get out of there in a hurry, they'd tried to anticipate every possible barrier to her departure and ease the way.

For now, she crossed and uncrossed her arms across her chest, then tugged at the knot keeping the towel in place. She tried to conjure excitement at being with Brick, but when she thought too hard about it—and Lord knew she couldn't get her brain to shut up—she realized this was a scientific experiment and nothing more. Sure, there might be a feeling or two trying to spark into being, but the next few minutes were being driven by curiosity. Sadly, not lust, at least not like before. If more existed between them, it would have to be explored later. The most backward ways to do things, for sure.

A noise snagged her attention, and Kim glanced up just in time to see Brick stroll into the room, naked and built like a god.

All conscious thought skidded to a halt.

What had she been saying to herself about experimenting?

Brick stood magnificent. Water sluiced from his skull, dropping from his earlobe onto a broad shoulder. His glorious chest spoke to manual labor that suited him well. The final layering of hair swirled over deliciously masculine pecs before tapering down a sculpted abdomen. She could have used a model like him during med school, for she surely would have passed anatomy and physiology with flying colors. Even flaccid, the size of his penis was

impressive. It hung between muscled thighs, worthy of worship.

“Oh my God,” she whispered. This man managed to walk out of her greatest fantasies and into her reality. She didn’t know how or why, but gave a small mental prayer of thanks anyway.

When he moved, Kim startled, suddenly realizing she’d been mesmerized by his body. She brought her gaze up, her heart racing when she noticed his blue eyes reflected back at her, the wolf close to the surface. If she were a smarter woman, she might acknowledge a frisson of fear in seeing the wolf’s presence. Instead, she was a woman falling beneath the spell of a wonderful man, and any fear she might have held was smothered by her desire for him.

“You are so beautiful,” he said, his voice gravelly.

She thought the same of him and wondered how he’d read her thoughts. Kim stood, moving to him, impatient to touch the body she admired. But when she stopped before him, her bravado faltered. His face had grown somber, his eyes sad.

“I wish this were under better circumstances,” he said.

“I think this is perfect.” To prove she meant what she said, Kim reached for the knot, allowing her trembling fingers to unravel it.

“*You’re perfect.*” His gaze raked over her, her nipples tightening beneath his scrutiny. A hot flush covered her cheeks, her breathing quickening. She swallowed hard, at once realizing her desires were about to be realized. This might have started out as a scientific experiment, but she intended to enjoy this. She would enjoy him.

Kim reached up to him, her palm skimming over the rough stubble on his jaw. She tilted her face toward his, silently begging for a kiss. He obliged her, his mouth slanting over hers, their lips brushing. It was slow and sweet. Tender.

Brick brought his hands up to cup her breasts. They felt full beneath his attention. The warmth provided comfort, while gently stroking thumbs were erotic torture on her nipples.

Kim lifted onto tiptoe, pressing a firmer kiss against his mouth. It gave her a place to focus. Feeling the brush of his burgeoning erection against her stomach drowned her in a variety of prurient desires. But when Brick’s hand slid down her side, touching her ribs, gently curving to her back and then grasping her ass, it was to bring her belly closer to his. He made sure she knew the extent of his desire for her. The hot length of him and all of its

promises.

He growled low in his throat, and her pussy squeezed hard. Her body's instinctual response to the savage sound. She knew what she liked. Her body knew what it wanted.

Her hand went to his hot cock, skin like velvet, stroking over it with proprietary familiarity. When he stiffened, a shudder traveling through him, a sense of power over him enveloped Kim. She slid her hands up and down while Brick ravaged her mouth.

That sexy growling came from him, promising an endless night of wicked torments. One she would relish for a long time.

He walked them to the bed, his mouth claiming hers all the while. When her legs hit the mattress, he let her fall. God, she was falling...but Brick tumbled onto the bed with her.

She giggled as she came up for air. Giggled because this was so *right*. Being with him felt so right. He kissed her again, soft and gentle.

When she opened her eyes, his blazing blue ones were staring back at her. "Are you okay?" she whispered.

"Hanging on."

The beast hovered close to the surface. He didn't have to tell her. She saw the subtle difference on his face, beyond just the telltale eyes. His features had shifted, not enough to distort him, but enough for a woman who'd studied those features for the day to know the difference. The change was enough to make her go motionless momentarily, but beneath she still saw *him*.

She had to trust Brick, that he knew when he came too close to a loss of control. "We can stop at any time. If this is too much temptation, we can st —"

He captured her mouth, and she distracted herself from sinking too deeply under his spell by indulging her sense of touch. Her fingers traced over his abdomen, over his tight nipples. She ducked her head to lick the bare skin near his belly button.

When Kim looked up, the color in his eyes faded, but he smiled at her. "I can't believe we held out this long," he said. That beautiful smile continued to curve his lips.

"I'm only here for science."

"Science?"

“Oh, absolutely. To test the theory of—” Kim lost her words when Brick slipped a hand between her thighs. With slow, exquisite precision, he pushed a long, thick finger into her gathered moisture.

Her breath caught when he withdrew it to drag the slick digit on her swollen bundle of nerves. Sensation spread as he circled her clit, and she rolled her hips to chase the pleasure.

“So fucking beautiful,” he said in a low voice.

From beneath heavy lids, she tried to ignore the brilliant blue. Her mouth opened on a protest, to warn him about going too far, but Brick put his talented tongue to good use. While his finger played her clit, he suckled on her heavy breast.

“Oh my *God*,” she called as an orgasm rushed in and pulled her under. He held her captive beneath ecstasy while her body trembled, her pussy pulsing around his finger.

Before she could tell him that it was too much—she needed a momentary reprieve—his thick digit withdrew. It was a bittersweet loss, a second to catch her runaway breathing, before he used his tongue to make up for the loss.

Brick splayed her legs wide, exposing her fully to his view. Long licks explored her vaginal lips, his mouth feasting on her juices. He held on to her as she writhed and moaned. Kim pushed her hand into his hair, pulling him closer. Her cries echoed into the room, each flick of his tongue over her clit pushing her toward the edge of a cliff. Her thighs trembled, but Brick’s sure grip held her in place.

One long swipe of his tongue and then another. He groaned, a muffled sound, before pushing that wickedly talented tongue into her pussy. Short stabs of his tongue had Kim rolling her hips. She curled her toes as the pleasure sent her soaring higher and higher.

Brick doubled his efforts, his tongue fucking her into another orgasm. It swept over her in a tidal rush, stealing her breath and locking her limbs.

When she knew she would shatter beneath the torment, as her gasps for air became desperate cries and she knew she couldn’t take another moment of his worship, Brick eased away from her.

Kim’s entire body felt overly sensitized. Her skin flushed and warm all over. She’d been blessed with the gift of a giving lover, one who saw to her needs while testing the limits of his own. Kim might not survive the night

beneath him, but if she had to choose a way to reach the stars, she couldn't have chosen better.

He crawled over her, his eyes so brilliantly feral, the animal and the beast in him making him appear primal. When he took her, it would be rough and raw.

Exactly what she needed.

Chapter Sixteen

The beast was quiet, his wolf sated in the gorgeous woman lay spread in nude before him. Brick wanted to run his scent all over her, bite down on the fleshy part of her neck until the skin broke—not hard, not too hard—but he had to leave a mark. When he claimed her, there would be something for everyone in pack to see. One day...

He pushed forward, his cock unerringly finding the damp heat of her center. At once, everything in him tensed, the strain of not ravaging her almost overwhelming.

“Hey...we need a condom.”

Nuzzling against her slender neck, he whispered, “You can’t get me sick. Our kind is immune to your diseases.”

Kim slapped his arm. “That wasn’t exactly what I was saying, mister, but thanks for the vote of confidence.”

Brick bit down on that pouting bottom lip, enjoying her righteous indignation. “You’re not sick. You’ve always been safe, and you’re safe with me. I know this.”

“And I’m not getting pregnant either.”

So distracted by the sudden, wonderful image of Kim with a rounded belly, carrying his pup, she found enough wiggle room to reach the nightstand. Brick focused on her shoulder, soft and tender and perfect for biting, while she rummaged around the drawer. When she delayed, box in hand, he nudged. “We’re losing daylight.”

“Hush,” she said. “Gotta check the expiration date.”

“Whoa. That long since—”

“Don’t ask.”

A secret thrill rushed through Brick. Not only did she honor him with an unflinching trust in not losing himself to his beast, she offered her body for him to worship. There’s no way he’d take that lightly. Not with her.

A moment later she withdrew a foil packet and held it up to him.

Kim’s eyes seemed to glaze over as he unrolled the latex over his steel-hard cock.

Whatever she needed to feel safe with him, he'd provide. Besides, that look...that hungry, impatient, overstimulated look she gave him made the barrier worth it. One day when he'd earned her trust, when the idea of pregnancy wasn't anathema, they'd go without. He knew this too.

"Ready, sweetheart?" He positioned himself against her before she answered, but poised to go no further without her consent.

Her hand pressed against his lower abdomen. She looked into his eyes, nodding, but he saw the hesitation in them. It was killing him, but he would wait until she was ready. "Really, when was the last time?" he asked, nuzzling her.

"Is it sad that it's not worth remembering?"

If he ever met her ex, he'd thank him for not being very good. Whatever it took, he'd make certain this night she never forgot. "I'll go slow until you're used to me."

She nodded again, eyes wide and bright. They fluttered closed as his hips pushed forward and her cunt opened to receive him. She was wet, so wet and her tightness would drive him mad. The sound she made in her throat threatened to undo him, testing the limits of his self-control. When her fingers tightened on his biceps, Brick gritted his teeth. With agonizing and torturous slowness, he pushed through the wet grip while his heart threatened to kick out of his chest.

"Oh my God."

"Almost, baby, you feel so good... *Almost.*" His own hands gripped the sheets, the only way for him to hold on to his self-control. She made that noise again, the one that could break him, and he ravaged her mouth to silence her.

Her lips were cool, plump. Her tongue danced against his.

Then he was there. As deep as her body would allow him to go, as far as he could without hurting her. Kim moaned deep, a soul-borne sound that hummed into his own body. A sound of surrender and pleasure.

If he thought pushing into her had been a slow form of torture, withdrawing met the challenge of agony and made it a thousand times worse. Fuck. *"Fuck."*

She felt so good. So incredibly good. And she rolled her hips, small motions that cried for more. He answered because he had to. Brick rocked forward, needing to be deeper inside her. So deep she would carry his

imprint. Oh, but God, his body no longer heeded him. He plunged and withdrew, each thrust powered by primal instinct.

Her nails raked over his arms, his chest. The sparks of pain spurring him on.

He growled deep, answering her dulcet cries. He loved her softness, the delicate nature of her skin. Brick kissed her parted lips, tasting heaven on them. The scent of wild magic rose from her skin and it fueled his lust.

Twisting her lower body, Kim brought her thighs around his hips, and it was both maddening and wonderful. She hindered the depths of his thrusts, but she encouraged him. Wanted more.

This woman—*his woman*—met his passion and wanted more.

Brick went to his knees, one arm holding on to Kim and bringing her with him. The new position drove his cock deep inside her and the way her eyes rolled back, the hungry cry, meant she'd noticed too. "Ride me," he gasped.

Kim's hands went to his shoulders, and eyes squeezed shut, she nodded. Perspiration gave her face a sheen, but it made her more beautiful in that moment. She unwound her legs from his, found a new position that gave her leverage and lifted her hips.

Brick wanted to roar with pride when she set a new punishing pace over him. He thrust as far as the position would allow, but Kim directed their motions.

He took satisfaction in watching the concentration on her face, the spill of ecstasy there. The sway of her breasts, tipped with dusky nipples, made him harder than granite. Taking her by the wrist, he pulled her forward until he could clamp his mouth over one. The other he cupped in hand, his thumb flicking over the hardened nipple. Her cunt squeezed him impossibly harder when he gave her the attention she so obviously enjoyed. "That's it. Ride me," he murmured, his mouth brushing her skin.

Her inner muscles began to flutter, massaging his cock. After a quick swipe of his finger through her natural lubrication, he began to draw circles on her swollen clit. He loved her sexual freedom, the way she kept her body available to him without shyness or hesitation. It allowed him to explore and pleasure her thoroughly.

She lost her rhythm, falling forward as he lightly pinched her clit. He gripped her hip, forcing her to resume the erotic ride. "Come for me, Kim," he whispered.

His thrusting sped up and his balls tightened, signaling his own race to completion. Her cunt kept squeezing and massaging, making it difficult to think, much less focus on her. Brick opened his mouth over her chest and he suckled hard on her fleshy breast.

“Yes.” It was more gasp than sound. All encouragement.

Fuck, he had no idea if he would outlast her because she felt so good. Smelled so fucking good. And her taste, he would remember her taste for the rest of his life.

His stomach clenched, and if she didn’t come for him now... “Kim, come,” he said with a growl. His circling finger sped up, and her hips jerked forward, her thighs quivering.

“God.” Her head fell back and her cunt gripped him so hard that his vision went white.

She shuddered, her muscles so tense that he allowed himself to let go. All of his insides pulled up, combining into a pleasurable-pain that would have drowned him, but then found release through the end of his cock.

Brick roared as all of that pressure spurted out of him into latex, as he pushed as far into Kim as their bodies would allow. He’d left behind a reddened mark on her tit and he had to slam his eyes shut from the beauty of it.

The beast and the wolf in him smelled their woman and demanded her claiming. He dared a peek at the small hickey and made it do for now.

Kim fell forward, and he gladly held her trembling body in his arms, enjoying the feeling of her little aftershocks. He could have spent an eternity here and it was such a dangerous thought to have, but damn if he could find the strength to take it back.

He would do this again and again, each time taking it one step closer to forever marking her as his.

* * *

Thank God Brick had the strength to pick her up. Without him, she’d have been permanently attached to the gorgeous man. Instead, he gently held her as he removed himself and then tucked her beneath the comforter. She caught her breath while watching him wander into the bathroom, his glorious ass on display.

She'd just had sex with this man.

Mind-blowing sex.

So-good-she-couldn't-wait-for-the-next-round sex.

She'd become addicted to him after one hit; imagine what she'd be like after a full day of this. If there would even be a day. Face it, they'd done this as an experiment to see if he could handle his beast better. If he couldn't control the beast, what she wanted wouldn't matter.

Kim's gaze automatically went to him when he strolled into the bedroom again. The condom had been discarded, but his cock jutted ahead of him, declaring that perhaps another one should be readied. "Hi," she whispered with a smile because damn, she was happy. Sore and tired, but very happy.

"Hi, yourself," he said. The bed shifted as he slid between the covers next to her. The heat rolling off his body could have cooked a chicken, but she found comfort in it.

She propped herself on one arm to talk. As much as she wanted to fall asleep, she fought the urge. They couldn't forget the importance behind being together in the first place. "How are you doing?"

"I could eat something."

"That's not what I mean. Your eyes are clear again, but how's your beast?"

"Ignoring me. I'm going to take that as a good sign."

"That *is* a good sign, but is it too soon to know?"

Above the covers, Brick traced the outline of her body with his hand. Just knowing a thin layer of cotton separated their skin sent a riot of goose bumps all over Kim. She knew what those hands could do and she looked forward to the next time he put them to good use with her.

"So wait...how long has it been since you've had sex? How is it that you don't know already if this will work?"

"It's a small town. Slim pickings to start with. Add in that hardly anyone here knows about the pack, and it makes getting to know someone that much harder. So to answer your question, I'd say going on a year at least. I don't much pay attention to things like that."

Kim struggled to sitting, unable to fully comprehend what he was saying. She tucked the blanket beneath her armpits, ignoring the amused look on his face at her modesty. "I know I'm not one to talk, but you've got to get your priorities straight. I was busy running a thriving practice, and that made it difficult to meet people, but I paid attention to the drought. Believe that."

He shrugged. “That’s just it. Pack is family, built in. I’ll never have to worry about being alone or lonely. If I have an itch to scratch, there are plenty around to do it.”

Kim grunted.

Amusement colored his eyes. “What I’m saying is that my emotional bucket is pretty full. Is there room for one more? Sure. But is it going to make or break me if it doesn’t go all the way to the top? Probably not.”

And just like that, anything Kim might have wished or hoped for the future vanished in an instant. Disappointment swelled up inside her because somehow she’d imagined this might be the start of something wonderful between them. Instead, Brick had pretty much declared he didn’t care one way or the other.

How so very like her to have gotten caught up in a moment, regardless of how good a moment it might have been. She wanted to believe he needed her.

“Hey, look at me.”

At some point, she must have found a spot on the wall much more interesting than her companion. Kim directed her gaze back to him again but ignored the warmth that made her body tingle with awareness when she studied his handsomeness. She also kept her own face blank while she looked at him because she didn’t know what he would see if she didn’t fake neutrality.

“Kim, that isn’t to say that my life couldn’t be better if I had the right person in it. I’m saying that I wasn’t looking for it. Now that she’s here—now that *you’re* here—I’m looking forward to seeing where this goes between us.”

“You already got in my panties, you jerk. No need to suck up now.”

The sheet began a slow glide downward, assisted by a certain amorous werewolf. Kim grasped at the edge, tugging it back into place. “Stop,” she growled.

“Ooh, feisty. That’s sexy on you.” He didn’t stop tugging though.

“I mean it!”

He leaned forward, then whispered into her hair. “How many condoms do you have left?”

Kim did a quick mental count. She’d been optimistic when she’d purchased the twelve-pack. “At least ten.”

His lips moved from her hair to her ear, where he nipped at the lobe. “We’re going to need to buy more by Monday,” he said.

That startled a laugh out of her. Maybe she’d been too quick to get angry about not meaning a lot to him, because truth to be told, as much as she liked him, it wasn’t like they’d declared their undying love for each other or anything.

“Listen, as much as I relish the idea of humping like bunnies until neither of us can feel our legs, we started this to find out if it helps you control your shift. So, just for a minute, can you please concentrate? Afterward, when we’re sure, we can see about round two.”

“And three and four and five.”

She blushed furiously, realizing they might run out of condoms, indeed. “*Concentrate.*”

“Alright. But you move closer to the door first.”

It took a few seconds for her to realize he was serious.

At least he wasn’t being careless or reckless. She needed to slow down and think this through, follow his example. To remember the consequences if their plans went awry. Still... “I don’t think that’s—”

“Kim, I’m not doing this if there’s even the slightest chance you end up hurt. You went into this to help me. I will not repay that help by attacking you.”

Glancing at the pile of clothes waiting for her and the car keys ready for her to grab, she conceded with a nod. Although Brick stirred feelings in her, they both went into this understanding an element of danger existed. At least one of them was taking her safety seriously.

When she rose from the bed, so did he. For a moment, she forgot all about going anywhere as she admired his nude form once again. He let her, in obvious acceptance of his nudity, unashamed to have her practically drooling.

She almost suggested that they forget about the experiment and crawl back into the lumpy bed together. At least give themselves one more chance to be just a man and a woman with an intense attraction to one another. Before they allowed the outside world, the pack’s rules to intrude on them, why couldn’t they just ignore the danger and be together?

“We do this and we’re one step closer to solving the puzzle, right? The sooner you get dressed, the sooner I’ll get to undress you again.”

Her heart raced at his words, but she agreed. They had to do this. She

chose to take one more lusty glance at him before slipping into the scrubs. By the time her shoes were on her feet, she curled the keys into her hand.

“Hand on the knob,” he said. “You won’t have long if I lose control.”

“You won’t.” She did as directed anyway, her pulse picking up pace.
Please don’t shift. Please.

Brick moved to the other side of the room, farthest away from Kim. If the smile he gave her was supposed to be reassuring, it failed spectacularly. If anything, it turned her heart into a chunk of ice. She’d never known this level of fear before in her life. So much fear for him.

“I’ll be holding you again soon.”

“I know.” She wanted to believe it. Her heart drummed faster.

Brick watched her through those beautiful blue eyes and in an instant, they changed color. Not only was the blue brighter, but his irises became ringed with a white band that had a black border. His features became more angular, his chin and jaw much more severe.

It’s not working.

Her stomach seized, a hard ball of solid dread forming as she watched him. Frost formed in her veins, her lungs too frozen to take in air. She managed to push out a gasp.

She bid her feet to move. To get to him and offer help. They were as cold as every other part of her and refused to move, though.

Kim lifted an arm made of lead and managed to turn the knob. Sweat made it hard to grip the metal. Even as she stood there watching him transition, knowing he could lose complete control at any second, she still couldn’t get her brain or feet to cooperate.

“Please, Brick, please take it back.”

His hands curled in while his muscles bunched. The rhythm of his breathing increased, and agony spread across his face. So much pain.

Tears filled her eyes, and she knew she had to leave him. The longer she hesitated, the more she put her life in danger and broke her promise to Brick.

She didn’t want to leave him, not yet. Just in case... *In case what?* They both knew it would come to this. Still...

A twisting, churning sensation in her stomach urged her to get away.
She’d made a promise.

Seconds ticked past, and she took a step toward the door. Turned back. Hands fisted at her sides, Kim searched her mind for an answer. Something to

do other than run.

Nothing came to her.

“I’m so sorry, baby,” she whispered to him and left.

Chapter Seventeen

Brick watched Kim slip outside, and the sudden relief at knowing she'd removed herself from danger allowed him to focus. There was something wrong, something different about this shift. While he could channel his beast, its strength and cunning, it would not take. The beast refused to materialize.

The sweet agony, the ultimate release shifting provided, had been replaced with a sensation so ugly and terrifying, he couldn't be certain what it meant. If it had anything to do with the beast's sudden recalcitrance, it meant Kim might be in danger from him, but it was hard to tell. Before he called her back, he had to be sure.

The wolf yipped at him, excited. But the beast remained elusive to Brick, not heeding the call of the shift. If anything, he realized the beast shirked away from it. Like everything else that had been happening with his beast lately, Brick didn't have an explanation for it.

Although tempted to find Kim before she got too far, he did one more quick assessment of himself. Overall, he felt good.

He conjured up pleasant memories of Kim's thighs holding him tight, the way her greedy hands explored his chest, arms and back. He tasted her sweet lips and heard the breathy sounds she made as she came. He could practically feel the tips of her nipples brushing against his chest and see the dark triangle of hair above her slit.

Christ, he was getting hard again.

Whatever they'd done to sate the beast had worked. He didn't think his heart raced or his energy level rose to a particular high. Kim's theory about a chemical reaction or some type of automatic process didn't hold water, but at least they knew now that sex gave him some kind of stranglehold over the beast. They'd just have to figure out how long it would last and if it could be replicated.

Outside a car door slammed.

At last comfortable with leaving it behind, Brick thanked his beast for behaving and promised the wolf the run that had been a long time in coming. He did it to acknowledge their understanding that one was not whole without

the other two. They were his partners and friends; he appreciated them both, even when their goals did not align.

It didn't matter that he still hadn't donned any clothes. Brick ran outside at top speed, bursting through the door just as the sound of the engine turning over carried to him. The car began to reverse, but jerked to a halt.

Kim's eyes widened as she spotted him, and Brick's heart pounded when their gazes met. He threw his arms wide, an exaggerated show that he hadn't shifted. No evidence of the beast in sight.

She must have been stunned or confused because she sat there in the car, engine still humming. At least she hadn't taken off while burning rubber, which he'd fuss at her about later. Right now, he just wanted his woman to come to him without fear.

The ground beneath his feet was cool, the pebbles sharp reminders that he remained in the human's fragile body. He celebrated the pain. It meant whatever tentative theory Kim conjured had some basis in reality.

Kim watched him approach, a white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel by both hands. Still, she didn't move when he reached for the door handle.

He lifted the latch, but the expected click of the release didn't come. "Sweetheart, unlock the door."

Whatever kept her in a daze lost its grip. Kim fumbled for the lock switch and hit it. They both grappled with the latch again, and she would have fallen out of the car in her haste to get out if he hadn't been there.

"Whoa, slow down." He hauled her into his arms, pulling her close. Brick inhaled deep, the scent of her shampoo a balm to his weary soul.

"You did it?" she asked softly. "I didn't know if you'd be able to, but you did it. I was so scared and sure that I was wrong. And I'd left you behind, I'd run—"

"None of that." He rocked her in his arms because she trembled. Whatever fears she had in mind must have been a million times worse than the reality. "You did what you were supposed to. What you had to."

"You don't understand. I don't care what you said, I shouldn't have left you. I'm not just your lover, I'm your doctor and I shouldn't have left. I could have found a way to keep you from turning... I could have tried harder because that's what I'm supposed to do."

Brick frowned. The rapid tempo and rising panic in her voice wasn't because of today. Something from her past had a hold on Kim, so he

squeezed tighter. They'd managed to cross a huge barrier, and he wouldn't let anything take that from them. Not now.

She drew in several unsteady breaths but allowed herself to be comforted. It left them in a vulnerable position. If Rowan or any of the pack wanted to sneak up on them, they'd find Brick too distracted to be the defense she needed him to be. His Alpha might listen to reason about Brick's condition, but the other pack members might not give him the chance to explain himself.

If they wanted safety, they needed to get in touch with Rowan right away. Just because Kim said no one knew where she lived didn't make it so.

"How are you doing?" he murmured.

Her arms tightened around his waist at the same time she sniffled. His gut clenched at the realization that she'd been quietly crying. "I'm beyond relieved. I didn't think it would work. I was terrified it wouldn't work and the pack would have to come for you."

It floored him that his safety meant that much to her. "But it *did* work, and we'll try it again and again until we're sure it'll work every time."

"But what if..."

What if it was a fluke? Because so much rode on her unsound theory, he made himself believe it could be replicated. They'd go through the same safety precautions and be sure. But something in him said they were on the right track. "I guess you missed the part where I said we'd try it again and again."

"I heard you." She sniffled again.

"I'm just saying...we're killing daylight standing here. We could be in a warm bed, snuggled up to one another, doing things to put smiles on our faces."

She made a disgusted sound. "You're such a guy."

Brick let her withdraw, a sense of accomplishment filling him at having redirected her thoughts. "Can I help it that you've got me out here buck naked, talking about sex—"

"We weren't talking about sex."

"But we should have been."

Kim threw up her hands. She stomped away from him toward the house, muttering to herself.

He stifled a smile. Let her think what she wanted about his Neanderthal

ways. He never wanted to see her cry and if getting her flustered with him did the trick, he'd resort to it every time without missing a beat.

Now that he didn't have to worry about the beast breaking free and hurting her, he would spend the next several weeks courting her exactly as he'd intended all along. It would be a slower, sweet seduction of getting to know each other and building trust.

He did a visual sweep of the forest. Nothing appeared amiss for the moment. Maybe the seduction would start with spending the weekend locked in each other's arms as he'd suggested. If he could keep the pack away until they knew for certain he wouldn't be forced to shift, it meant a whole new world for them both.

Sometime this weekend, they'd work on telling each other more too. She had her secrets and didn't know much about him. That all changed now.

He stomped back into the house, his cock growing harder as he thought about what they'd done not long ago and what he wanted to do to her now. With the fear of hurting her no longer an issue, this next time would be all about exploring her body. The last time had been fast, furious and glorious, but now...

Kim turned around when he entered the room. She'd kicked off her shoes, the scrub bottoms now a pile of material on the floor. Dressed in only a scrub top, she ignited another erotic fantasy in Brick's brain.

"Hello, nurse," he said after a whistle of appreciation.

She lifted her chin, the uncertainty from before noticeably absent. "Nurse? Haven't you ever heard of playing 'doctor'? I thought it'd be something you'd find enlightening."

He grinned. "I can definitely get with that, Doctor, as long as we get to take turns."

* * *

Kim's eyes fluttered open and for a second, she had no idea what had hit her. Then she remembered.

How could she ever forget the hours of attention Brick paid to her? Even after she'd thought he'd been sated, he'd woken her again and again during the night. Always he started by kissing whatever exposed body part was closest to him. The first time had been a trail of scorching kisses down her

spine. From there, he'd unerringly found her pussy in the dark and kissed her there until her legs tingled. Despite that disconcerting sensation, she'd been soon distracted with other prurient pleasures that made it worth it.

The next time he'd found her shoulder and wasn't satisfied until he'd trailed his tongue down her arm, her hand, over every finger. They clasped hands when he'd entered her not long afterward, and she'd needed it to keep her tethered to the bed as the pleasure went on and on.

Insatiable and generous, he'd allowed her naps long enough to keep her from falling asleep in the middle of a kiss. Only once had she been able to awaken before him, just as the sun had been coming up.

She'd used the growing light to study his face. His forehead sloped down to dark eyebrows, thick and with a subtle arch. The color of his brow would have matched curling eyelashes until she realized more than one color made up the curls. She tried to peer closer at the stubble on his face, to see if the pattern carried over, but she felt conspicuous putting her face that close to his. What would he say if he found her hovering over him, an inch away from his face, and gawking?

But she couldn't stop herself from reaching out and putting a finger on his mouth. A gentle touch to trace the outline of his lips. It woke him, of course. His eyes opened, coming into focus from their sleepy haze in an instant. She recognized the wolf's wariness, an animal alertness that she might have missed upon first meeting members of his pack. Now, she could hardly see anything else.

This romance, this thing between them, moved at a breakneck speed, but she couldn't admit to wanting it any other way. You could take a city girl out of the fast-paced city, but the fast pace refused to be taken out of the city girl—even if she was in the middle of the wild country.

"Good morning," she said softly, smiling down at him.

"It is now." His voice held a measure of morning huskiness she found sensual in its own right. "Are you okay?"

Various parts of her body ached in the most delicious of ways, but nothing a warm bath wouldn't help. "I'll manage. What about you?"

They'd tested his beast twice more during the night, and twice Brick had held the barrier keeping him intact. She wanted to get back to the clinic today to use the computer. More research on the physical act of sex.

"How many condoms we got left?" he asked, an unrepentant grin on his

face.

She rolled her eyes even if she wanted to know the answer to the question herself. “Yeah, you’re fine.”

“Is that your professional opinion?”

Her face must have revealed the sudden gravity of what she felt about him and their situation. The grin slid away from his face and he reached for her hand. Their fingers laced together, the sight enough to make her heart pump harder.

Kim said, “There are a million things I want to know right now about you and about your pack. A million more that are about you, your wolf and your beast. How crazy is it that all I want to do is stay tucked away with you, hiding from the outside world, and pretend like none of it exists?”

Those thoughts had haunted her upon immediately awakening. She wanted to spend more time getting to know what made Brick tick. For starters, she wanted to know the meaning behind his name. With everything thrown at them, they’d barely had two minutes to make sense of anything yet. Kim wanted that time back.

“Here’s the thing about that though...we can do that. We can hide away and not let anyone in and just be the two of us, but if we do that, there’s no more hiding from me.”

She brought her head up. “What does that mean?”

“You tell me who you are, *really* are, and I lay out my soul to you the same. Is that something you’re willing to take on?”

Holding his gaze took a measure of strength. “Why would you ask that?”

“Look at this place. It’s cute and all, needs some work, but it’s not even close to where I’d expect a doctor to live. Not even a small-town doc being paid in produce. This dilapidated house screams history. All of the second-hand furniture screams history. You have a negative existence, and it doesn’t make sense.” He tugged on their hands, which startled her. Somehow during the last few minutes, she’d begun to squeeze his to the point he should be wincing. “I don’t expect you to throw everything at me at once, but I do want you to let me in a little.”

“I told you about Shelly.” And she hadn’t told many people about her famous client. She’d told no one but her lawyer the circumstances around the actress’s death. By the time she’d gone to trial, she’d come to realize her “friends” had vanished. There’d been no one else to tell, even if she’d wanted

to.

“No, you told me you had a patient who died under your care. That’s all.” He lifted their hands to his mouth, brushing his lips over her knuckles.

“Look, you don’t have to do it today, but I do want you to think about it. If we’re going to have a chance, we have to be able to confide in each other, right?”

“Sure.” Kim drew in a deep breath because he’d earned a little of her trust by now. He’d bared himself and his pack’s secrets. She could afford to do the same.

Brick bolted out of the bed, placing himself in between Kim and the door. Kim startled at his sudden movement, her brow furrowing, and she was about to snap at him for being overly dramatic.

When a sharp rapping came a moment later, however, her heart boomed. By the time she looked to Brick, he stood poised to tackle anyone who might charge through the door. She couldn’t say what frightened her more: Brick’s fierceness or the unknown on the other side.

Of course, it could simply be someone who wanted her help. Maybe her landlord stopping by with a basket of fruit or a loaf of freshly baked bread. Since coming to Fire Creek, she learned these types of intrusions seemed to be more common than not. At first she’d been suspicious of how nice everyone seemed. Then, as they’d worn down her defenses, grateful. Now, she found herself looking forward to returning the favor to others. Being part of a community.

Pushing aside her fear, she moved to Brick’s side, bringing the top sheet with her. She had to believe someone mundane awaited on the other side of the door. “Who is it?” she called.

Brick whirled, a firestorm brewing in his eyes. He jerked a finger to his mouth, the message to shut hers as subtle as a bright red barn. His steps were silent as he went to the window, ducking to peer through gaps in the closed slats.

“Dr. Sharpe, it’s Morris. From the other night.”

She met the worry in Brick’s eyes. The pack hadn’t known where she lived before now, and she hoped they didn’t need her for an emergency. Kim’s thoughts went to the murdered adolescents.

“Hey, Morris,” she called cheerily. “I’m sorry, but I’m not dressed yet. Is everything okay?” God, she hoped there hadn’t been another assault on an

adolescent while they'd been happily experimenting.

"Knox asked me to check in on you since we haven't found Brick yet. Had any trouble last night?"

"No, I'm good. I think I'm safe here. Tell Knox thanks, but no need to worry about me. It should be a quiet day." Kim kept her voice falsely upbeat and steady. She wanted Morris gone.

Brick's clothes draped across the edge of the bed, his pants spilling onto the floor. She gathered them up and took them to him by the window, where he waited with the tension practically vibrating from his body.

She expected him to slip on the clothing, prepared to run if necessary. She'd do what she could to slow Morris down.

"He knows I'm here," Brick said in a low voice.

A jolt of fear rocked Kim. He'd spoken loudly enough that the shifter on the other side of the door would hear him. If he believed Morris already knew he waited here, then he'd just sealed his fate by speaking.

"Okay, well, I'll see you later," she said. Maybe he'd leave anyway.

"Dr. Sharpe, send him out, please," Morris replied. His words were sing-song, as if he enjoyed catching her in a lie. "Brick, don't let her get in the middle of this."

"How?" she asked Brick. How could he have known when they'd done nothing to give themselves away? The doors were locked, the windows closed. Even with their heightened hearing, Morris would have to have X-ray vision to know Brick was inside. How far did these heightened senses of theirs go?

Brick smiled, his weariness showing through. He made a point of sniffing the air, his eyes going brilliant as he did.

"Damned wolves," she muttered. At the next opportunity, they *would* talk about the enhancements his wolf and his beast loaned him in greater detail.

The small cabin had two doors. One next to the kitchen, which led to a small storage shed. While usable in an emergency, they'd have to fight their way past an aluminum ladder, a garden hose and piles of ceramic planters. The front door where Morris stood waiting for them would lead them to Kim's car, the best means of a quick escape. For obvious reasons, they'd have to come up with something different.

What the hell did they do now?

Chapter Eighteen

Kim ran for her small wardrobe, pulling out a pair of jeans and a cheap T-shirt. She didn't bother with the niceties of underwear, not when Morris would be outside calling in the cavalry to take Brick away. "Where's your phone? We have to call Knox."

Brick jumped into his pants as well. "What do you think that'll do except bring more pack here? I'm not letting you get in the middle of this, Kim."

Infuriating man. She pushed past him to get to her purse. With only her wallet to get in the way, she grabbed the cell on her first try. Thrusting it at him, she said, "Call. I don't know the number."

Brick bared his teeth at her, a sight that made her shiver, but then stabbed the keypad. He paused a moment after dialing before pressing another button. The sound of ringing chimed into the air and after the third ring, Knox's voice came on. "Go."

"Knox, it's me, Kim."

"Doc? You alright?" There was genuine concern in his voice, and Kim focused on it. She needed to believe he wanted what was best for her and, hopefully, what was best for Brick as well.

"I'm here with Brick—"

"Has he hurt you? Morris should be on his way."

"He's here already, but I wanted you to know that Brick is doing just fine," she said. She made certain she enunciated all of her words, showing no fear or hesitation. Similarly, she didn't want Knox to feel as if she read from a script either. "In fact, he was fine all night. No issues with shifting or with his beast."

A dearth of silence greeted her, and she had to wonder what Knox was thinking. The last he knew, Brick had been a danger to himself and to the others around him.

Kim nodded at Brick, encouraging him to help put his leader's mind at ease. "I'm here, Alpha. The doc's been looking after me, and I think she's on to something."

"Kim...this isn't easy for us. Brick needs to return to pack for his own

good and for the safety of others around him. A feral werewolf is unstoppable and will hunt and kill without mercy. I know you and Brick have a thing going, but we need to get him better first. His safety, your safety and of those in Fire Creek are our priority.”

“You promise me that’s what you want. Promise me that you have Brick’s best interests in mind.”

Brick bolted to the back door. Kim turned just in time to see the doorknob jiggle ever so slightly. If he hadn’t drawn her attention in its direction, she probably would have missed it.

“Leave the door alone, Morris,” Brick said. “You come in here, and Kim’s likely to get hurt.”

She glared at him. How could he say something so threatening while they were trying to convince Knox that there wasn’t a problem?

“What?” he barked at her. “You’ve never seen two wolves fighting for the same space. In their fury, they tend to ignore everything around them. Even unintentionally you could end up with a bite or two. I’m not taking that chance. It’s too small in here for you to walk away unscathed.”

“Brick, you’re not helping. Knox, I want to make a deal with you, but that means you call off your man. Tell him to stop trying to get in here so you and I can talk.”

She waited while Knox must have covered the mouthpiece of the phone. His muffled voice carried over the speaker, but she had no idea what he said or to whom he might have been speaking. When he returned, he said, “You think this is easy for me to do, send his brothers in to collect him like a rabid animal? I want Brick alive and well as much as you do. But if he’s a threat to our community, it’s my responsibility to make certain he hurts no one. We have too many young men and women dead because I haven’t been able to help them. I can do something about this though.”

Any minute now, and more from the pack would be arriving to collect Brick. She couldn’t let that happen, not when they’d stumbled on something that seemed to have worked. Not when her pulse thrummed with excitement by looking at him. Or her lips tingled with the memory of his kiss.

They had to deescalate the situation now. “Knox, what can I do or say to convince you that we have this under control? I swear to you that I’ve been with Brick all night and even when he tried to shift, it didn’t work. I don’t know the mechanics of why we controlled it yet, but I know that it seemed to

hold.”

“Are you willing to put the lives of over a hundred people on the line under that reasoning? The logic of *I don’t know why it worked*? You’re asking a hell of a lot out of me, Doctor. A hell of a lot.”

Kim had a sudden flash of memory. Back to a day in the courtroom when it became obvious to even her that her lawyer no longer had anything with which to defend Kim’s actions. The prosecutor had ordered the replaying of the police tape where Kim had reviewed the timeline leading up to Shelly’s death. The original recording had happened less than an hour after Shelly had been declared dead, and she’d still been reeling in shock at her patient’s death. None of what happened had made sense. She’d been so certain of her actions, administering sedatives as her client had needed. As she’d given her what the coroner considered the final, lethal injection of a surgical anesthetic, Kim had been so sure about what was required of her. So sure she’d calculated the doses correctly.

She closed her eyes, steadied her breathing. How far did she take this for a man she didn’t know? Stirrings of something good happened whenever they were together, but could she risk the tatters of her career on him? The pressure seemed more than she could bear.

“Kim.” Brick’s calm voice carried to her. In the one word, she found support for whatever she decided to do or say next.

When she opened her eyes to locate him across the room and watching her, the doubt threatened to submerge her. If she made a mistake, this community might not recover from it.

How sure was she now? Losing Shelly had not just destroyed her professional pride, but had also rocked her confidence. Her intentions while treating Shelly in an unconventional way had been good. Good intentions didn’t matter though. Not to Shelly, and certainly not to the jury who’d almost convicted Kim.

She took another deep breath. “I know I’m right,” she said to Knox. “I don’t know how yet or why it works, but I know we’re right. So much so that I’m willing to risk you and your life. With more time, I can maybe piece it together why it works, but to do that, I need to get that time from you.” It cost her the world to say it out loud, to put her trust back in the science that had once failed her.

“You’re gambling with all of our lives.”

“I’m trying to help,” Kim interjected. “If—no, *when* I get Brick’s shift sorted, I can figure out the adolescents too. Right now, even you don’t know how the killer determines who to target. I know they’re linked together somehow, but if you take him away, I lose my chance at figuring out how.”

“Shit.” His heavy tone carried the weight of the world, and for the first time, Kim appreciated the responsibility Knox also carried on his shoulders.

Kim moved to Brick, needing his solid presence. He kept his head close to the door but didn’t hesitate to pull her next to him. Despite his fear about the danger of getting between him and Morris, she knew he’d find a way to keep her safe if it came down to that.

If she had anything to say about it, that wouldn’t happen.

“He’s my patient,” she said to Knox. “Under my care. If you take him, you do so against my best medical judgment.”

“Doc—”

“And you ruin your best chance at figuring out how the adolescents are being targeted. You’re his leader, and I respect that. But I’m his doctor and I know what’s best for him right now. On this one thing, don’t fight me. Let me do what I do best. Do we have a deal?”

* * *

There would be consequences for his defection, but as Brick watched Kim negotiate for his freedom, he knew he stood in the presence of an exceptional woman. His own family wanted him imprisoned, hauled off and out of the pack’s purview. He would submit to whatever sentence his alpha levied on him, but he couldn’t be sure he’d acquiesce without a fight. He had Kim now. Someone who accepted his flawed self and tried her best to help him through his trials with his beast. To simply walk away from that, from her, was unthinkable.

Kim’s gaze never left his. She knew what she wanted, and a determined look in her eyes assured Brick that she would get it. Knox might be his leader and his friend, but his woman refused to back down.

“All right,” Knox said with a sigh. “I’ll leave it to you alone for now, but someone will stay close by in case you’re wrong.”

Brick suddenly realized that later he might be ostracized from the pack based on his insubordination alone, but it meant he’d stay alive. “She’s on to

something,” he said. “I know you think this is all about our messy feelings for each other, but I swear on my life, Alpha, she’s on to something.”

“You’re putting your brothers and sisters in harm’s way. If I ever find out that you did this without a damned good reason that doesn’t start in your pants, then I will personally hunt you down.”

“I would expect no less.”

The air had grown thick with tension, the many-tentacled arms slowly strangling Brick and possibly Kim. Would there ever be recovery from the position in which he’d placed his leader? How would the other men and women of the pack view him now?

“Morris will stay to keep an eye on you, but I’ll instruct him not to interfere in any way. But this will be your only chance. The second Brick loses control, there will be no turning back. Are we clear on this?”

“Perfectly,” Kim said in a calm voice before disconnecting the call.

Brick saw so much courage and determination in the way she looked back at him, but his admiration of her would have to wait. He went to the window to push the slats aside. Scanning the outside world proved Morris had meandered back to his beat-up GMC. The scowl on his face deepened the longer he held a cell phone to his ear.

Kim’s warm hand slid onto his shoulder. “C’mon. Sit with me and let’s go over what you know about the slayings. If I don’t deliver something to Knox...” She didn’t have to complete the thought. They both knew the Alpha had been dead serious about no second chances.

She went to the small dinette, snagging a piece of paper towel and a pen along the way. When she sat, she began writing something on the fragile paper. A muttered curse after she’d shredded the paper towel accidentally.

“This all you have to work with?” Brick asked as he came over.

“Used up all of the paper on the pad yesterday.” Although Kim stopped short of rolling her eyes, he caught the deep breath she took. “My office is back at the clinic, and that includes the computer and any premium writing materials. This will have to do.”

Brick grabbed her hand. “No, it won’t. Let’s go.”

He paused long enough to allow her to grab her purse. Then they took a twenty-minute ride to his place, the cabin he’d built from the ground up over a long, hot summer several years ago. Everything she might need would be there while providing them with some creature comforts. Even Kim had to be

sick of eggs by now, as much as she seemed to like them.

Kim worked on making conversation for the first few minutes, but he supposed his constant vigilance had unnerved her enough to strangle her attempt. He'd been distracted, keeping an eye on the rearview mirror as they traveled, Morris's vehicle not far behind theirs. Most of the ride passed in companionable silence. He'd forgotten what this was like to share a car ride with a woman, a subtle sexual tension filling the space between them. Maybe it was the supernatural gift woven into her that made him emotionally vulnerable to Kim. He liked dating, loved women. But none had affected him as deeply or as quickly than the woman beside him now.

One day, he might look back and try to figure out what he'd done to deserve her in his life, but today was not that day.

When he turned into the drive, the quiet hum of the car turned into distinctive pings of gravel hitting metal. Although it meant certain damage to the car over time, he associated the sound with home. He couldn't remember the last time he'd brought a woman here.

"This is beautiful," Kim said in a soft voice.

The front of the log cabin appeared elevated on stilts, a short set of stairs leading to a wraparound deck. Tinted windows provided a flood of natural light while keeping anyone on the outside from seeing in. The opposite was true from the opposite view, however. He liked feeling a part of the wilds. There wasn't much landscaping to speak of, but tufts of wild grasses and herbs provided an inviting environment for birds and other animals.

Infused with pride, Brick lifted his foot off the gas. Her first approach to his place demanded a quiet respect, a moment to be savored. "You wanted to know what I did for a living and for fun. This is a shining example." Although he specialized in cabinet building, this project had stretched his creativity and skills to a level that thrilled him. "A lot of the guys helped me with this, but the design is mine. All of the fine details inside, especially in the cabinets and shelves, mine."

After he stopped the car, Kim jumped out and rushed to the front door. She kneeled by the garden of rosemary and snapped off a twig. Lifting the stalk to her nose, she inhaled deep and made a low moaning sound he'd become familiar with in the last twenty-four hours. "I love rosemary. Did you put this in yourself, too?"

Turning the key in the lock, he said, "The deer and a few birds like to

snack on it. I figure it's not only great for the wildlife but also for my meals. Come inside and let me show you the rest of the place. There are more plants out back, most of them edible."

He didn't think Kim managed to close her mouth during the entire time they toured his home. It wasn't big, just enough room for him, an office that doubled as a guest room and the usual family living space. He'd paid one of the townies to build a stone fireplace in one corner, and between it and the pot-bellied stove in the kitchen, cold but brief winters were tolerable.

The wolf stretched in lazy contentment every time he came home, another signal to him that he'd done good in building this place. Now, he sensed something new in the wolf. A different sensation at having brought Kim here. Their woman in their home.

"Brick, this is wonderful." She walked the perimeter, stopping to peer at some of the tchotchkes and pictures. "Are these your parents?"

His heart warmed. "That's them."

"Amazing. You look exactly like your father, like twins." Not the first time he'd gotten that comment. "And these wolves...are these..."

"Also my parents. The brown one is my mother, the gray one is my father."

She paled. "I get it. I've seen it happen, but it's still odd to hear you say it like that. Like it's no big deal that you can change into a wolf..." Her gaze left the photo to travel to him. "Or a beast."

"You're still afraid of me a little, aren't you?" he asked.

"Not you, not the man. The rest of it...it's so much to take it. You understand that, don't you? I can't forget what Abe looked like and what the other beast looked like too." He'd never told her it had been him she'd run into. That his beast had chased her down, gorging itself on the scent of fear coming from her.

"I can't change who I am, but how can I help you feel safe? Not just around me but around the rest of the pack, too. They need you as much as I do."

She looked taken aback. "You need me?"

His heart thudded because she said it with such passion and wonder. He replayed what he'd said, how he'd said it. She might be applying more meaning to it than he'd intended, but that thought didn't panic him the way he thought it could.

It had to be too early to have those types of feelings for Kim. They'd only shared a single passionate night together. Anything that emerged from being intimate wasn't enough to build something lasting on...was it?

"How do you feel about the great outdoors?" he asked.

She blinked at his one-eighty change of topics. "What?"

Going to the kitchen to grab a package of muffins instead of answering her helped him avoid talk about topics too close to the heart. She hadn't eaten, and he needed a distraction. Besides, the wolf began to perk at the conversation and change in her voice, nudging Brick into a little introspection.

Right now, he couldn't afford to explore his feelings too closely. As much as he wanted to bring her closer, even he recognized their too-fast ride of emotions. Too much, too fast and he could lose her. Later, he'd think about going a step farther, after they were sure about the beast being contained. He couldn't fathom the idea of claiming Kim only to lose her right away.

Kim caught the package he tossed in her direction and, brow furrowed, began to tear into the plastic. By the time he set the coffee pot to brew, she'd finished half. If she disliked his change in topics, quieting her rumbling stomach was worth the tradeoff. For now at least.

He knew how else to keep her distracted too.

Her spine went stiff, the remains of the muffin forgotten when Brick pulled off his shirt. By the time he unzipped his pants and shoved them over his hips, she'd found her voice. "Wh—what are you doing?"

"Not *that*. Not yet." It felt good to be free of the restrictive clothing. He strode to the front door, pulled it open and called out to Morris, "Let's run!"

Kim shrieked. "What is wrong with you? What are you doing?"

Looking forward to this more than he'd realized, he turned to her with a grin on his face. "Bring your coffee out here, but stay on the porch. I want you to see my wolf."

Chapter Nineteen

Kim went breathless at seeing Brick in the nude. Following him outside was just like a moth to a flame. Or a woman with a raging libido to a naked gorgeous man.

She couldn't keep her gaze off his ass, the perfect sculpt of it, especially as he moved. And she loved how he strolled outside as if communing with nature in his birthday suit was an everyday occurrence and didn't she do it every day, too?

"I don't understand." Kim backed into the kitchen to pour half a cup of coffee into the mug. Not wanting to miss a thing, she hurried to follow him.

"I've been promising him a run for days now and haven't had the chance. He's restless. I'm restless."

Her pulsed sped up as she watched Morris climb out of his car. A hot blush crept across her face when he stripped down, piling his clothing on the hood. Watching him didn't come close to being sexual, but damn if she could convince herself it was clinical either. "But inviting Morris?"

"This is what we do. We let our wolves out to play and run. They're pack—we're pack—and we want our brothers to enjoy the same things. You have no idea what it's like to go wild, literally wild."

She took a sip of the almost scalding-hot coffee, a moan of appreciation immediately on its heels. If she could mainline the stuff, she'd consider it. "But what about your beast? What if it tries something while you're shifted?"

"I feel fine. No sign of anything amiss. Shifting to the wolf is an entirely different process than shifting to the beast." Brick came back to the patio, slipped his hand into her hair and tilted her face up. His mouth brushed across hers in a warm caress. "Besides, my wolf needs this."

"Okay," she whispered.

He gazed into her eyes for a few beats longer, enough to make her wish they'd go back inside and find more sensual ways to pass the time. His hand touched her cheek in a wistful manner before he pulled away. She hoped she didn't imagine the reluctance in him. "Remember, don't leave the porch."

Kim nodded, but he'd already turned away. He approached Morris with an

outstretched arm, and the two shook hands once close enough to do so. The younger man smiled and then threw his head back. She might have imagined it, but there was a *pop*, maybe a flash, and then a wolf stood where Morris had been only a second before.

She gasped, on the verge of calling out to Brick. Before she could utter a sound, however, he shifted into a wolf as well. Her legs threatened to give out beneath her.

The creature, Brick, stood taller than her waist. Beautiful gray fur looked so soft, she imagined running her face through its velvety richness. Areas near his ears and on his face were tipped with black. As he walked toward Morris, who sported a tawny coat, he moved with such grace that Kim admired the strength in his animal form.

When the two wolves faced off, about a foot apart, Brick went down on his forearms, rump in the air. Morris stilled—Kim’s heart jumped into her throat—and then he charged Brick. Just before the two would have collided, Brick bounded and the two took off at top speed.

She’d been afraid that Morris meant Brick harm, but the happiness from frolicking couldn’t have been any more evident. Watching them caused her to grin at their antics, for a split second wondering what it would be like to play with the two wolves.

Picking up her neglected coffee, she sipped the cooling contents, content to watch them chase each other. She understood now what he’d meant by his wolf needing this, and she did envy their freedom. She’d thought she knew what it meant to be a shifter, but she realized she hadn’t even broken the top layer of understanding.

In her mind, being a shifter mostly had to do with being able to change shape. Here, it also meant being part of a large family. But she’d ignored the other nuances of being a shifter. For instance, she still remained stymied at the idea that Brick was somewhere in this four-legged creature. That they shared an existence. It went against everything she’d been taught as a physician, and the unique challenge of having these people as patients began to dawn on her.

Kim kept track of the two animals only by the sound of their barks and playful growls. When the noises faded, however, she strolled back inside to snag another of those muffins and to top off her cup.

It said something to her that Brick had not only invited her to his place, but

allowed her free reign. She could have been one of those people who went snooping through medicine cabinets or prying open drawers. Instead, she kicked off her shoes, placing them by the front door, and made herself at home simply by relaxing.

Before she'd taken two bites of the muffin, however, her cell phone chimed. When she glanced at the name on the display, she almost fumbled it.

"Hey, Becka," she said, keeping her voice low. She moved to the window, looking for Morris or Brick, needing them both to be outside during this conversation.

"What did you send me?"

The level of confusion in Becka's voice did not inspire confidence. Yet it was on par with the reaction she thought she'd get. "What do you mean?"

"Honey, I've been doing this a while. You know that. This sample had to be the most off-the-charts thing I've ever seen. I mean, just the genetics on it alone... It was contaminated, right?"

"Assume it wasn't contaminated. What can you tell me?"

"But there were bits of animal—"

"Becka," she chided softly, "I can't talk to you about the sample. I know you have questions, but this is as confidential a case as I'll ever have."

She blew out a disgusted breath. "Alright, I followed a few rabbit holes during my search, but because of the limited sample, I can only give you limited feedback. Is your patient a child?"

"No, why?"

"But the patient is alive?"

What? "Yes. It's not a post-mortem sample. What did you find?"

"Christ, this is getting weirder. I ran a catecholamine test because of some of the abnormalities, only to discover even weirder stuff. Your patient has levels of neurohormones that are lethal, I mean *insane*. Weirdest thing I've ever seen."

The panel Becka had run tested for epinephrine, norepinephrine and dopamine levels. These hormones were critical for a person's "fight or flight" response. To have none would have indicated Brick suffered from a number of ailments. Her question about the patient's age made some sense now. Catecholamine levels in a child could help diagnose a few ailments, different than in an adult. For them to be elevated, exceptionally high, Kim had no idea what it could mean. "So maybe something's wrong with his adrenal

function?”

“No...that’s what I’m trying to tell you. I can’t get a full picture of what’s going on. Your patient has the freakiest biological makeup of anyone I’ve ever seen.”

Kim couldn’t bring Becka fully into the world of the shifters, but she needed someone to help her sort out what she did know. “So, in a person with a healthy level of catecholamines, you wouldn’t notice. Someone on the polar end though is probably undergoing some sort of stress...”

“Maybe a tumor to inflate the levels.”

“Or sex.”

“*Huh?*”

When they’d had sex, they’d had to artificially inflate epinephrine to the level of hormones in Brick’s body. It was what helped him keep the beast from breaking free of whatever kept it in place. She knew that a prolonged orgasm, including those brought about by partner-engaged sex, generally produced stronger orgasms. She still hadn’t the opportunity to do research, but she’d bet good money the stronger orgasm somehow related to hormone level spikes. Maybe the extra push Brick needed to maintain control.

The adolescents were somehow linked in this conundrum of hormones. Their levels would be constantly in flux. Someone with an incredibly strong scientific background might have linked all of these things together somehow.

“I’m getting a headache just thinking about this,” she muttered.

“Listen, girl, get me more blood and at least get me an H and P on your patient. I don’t need specifics, but I’m flying blind on this one without at least a basic background.”

The H and P—history and physical—was an impossibility. Not until Kim had a much better reason to pull Becka into the world of the shifters. If Knox found out about the little she already knew, Kim didn’t think he’d let it pass. “I promise the next time I’m in Atlanta, the very next time, I’ll tell you as much as I can. But right now, over the phone, there’s not much I can say. I can’t get you more blood, maybe not ever, but you’ve given me a lot of good info already.”

“I’m not done. Honestly, that was the tip of the iceberg. I can email you a full report.”

“No, I don’t trust email. Overnight it?”

“Sure thing.”

Kim gave her the clinic’s mailing address. While her friend sounded more confused, she seemed willing to respect Kim’s insistence on confidentiality, which was all she could ask for. This entire conversation thrust her back into undergraduate years, but she couldn’t trust her memory on any of it.

“Becka, just one more thing. You can’t tell anyone about this.”

“I know you told me that, but this is beyond me. You need people with training I don’t have looking at this sample and these results.”

“No one can know.”

“Okay, but you’re not getting the big picture by a long shot. I can conjecture, but you need a team of experts for this one.”

They disconnected a moment later, but Kim felt the overwhelming responsibility of having leaked the pack’s business to an outsider. She trusted Becka to keep her word.

The adolescents and Brick’s shifting abilities were linked somehow. She just had to figure out how.

* * *

Before Brick returned, Kim came to a decision. She had to tell him about the blood sample. It was the only way to give him all the information she had about his shifting troubles.

That also meant destroying the best relationship she’d had in decades.

It hurt her heart to know she’d done such a selfish act, all with the intention of ultimately betraying him. Making him lunch to busy her hands and mind while she waited for him to return helped ease the ache somewhat.

She’d just slid the diced avocado into the salad when the front door opened and she felt his presence. Felt the change in the air, the lethal sensuality making her breasts perk and heat pool low in her belly. Kim didn’t turn around, although very tempted to do so. If he knew how much his presence affected her, he’d delight in it. She did.

Before long, he moved in close, his hands resting on the counter on either side of her. She’d become trapped by the solid wall of this man and instead of fear, it provided safety. Kim smelled the earth on him, a wildness that hadn’t been there before.

“You smell incredible.”

“Your wolf is beautiful,” she said softly, gaze on the greens. Too intimidated to face him.

“You standing in my kitchen is even more beautiful.” His voice sent a shiver down her spine.

She smiled. Taking over the room had been a gamble. She hadn’t known how he’d react to her rifling through his fridge and appropriating ingredients to feed them both.

“There’s steak sandwiches and—” Her breath caught when his lips slid down her neck. Goose bumps seemed to rise one by one, each one taking its slow, sweet time. Mimicking Brick pressing one kiss after another on her skin.

“And?”

And? Hell, she had no idea what she’d been saying. Her thoughts narrowed to focus on sensation.

“You have no idea how sexy I find it that you’ve seen my wolf run and your first instinct is to feed me afterward. I’m ravenous after a run.”

“Then sit,” she said with a shaky voice. She was hungry too, suddenly, but she couldn’t decide if the hunger was more for food or for him.

She mentally shook loose the lust. They needed to talk. Kim had a confession to make and some data to reveal. Once she said her piece, he’d probably send her packing, but it might be worth it if it helped his pack.

The blazing heat of Brick’s body left her backside, a relief and a letdown. By the time she scooped up the salad bowl, he’d gone in the direction of the bedroom. He returned a moment later wearing a pair of sweat pants and pulling on a T-shirt. “My father would skin me alive if I showed up at the table in nothing but my birthday suit.”

The mention of his family made her warm that much more to him. “Are your parents still around?”

“Yeah. Retired and on the other coast.”

She set down the bowl and took a seat. After pushing the plate holding the sandwiches toward him, she used a fork to scoop out some of the greens for herself. “Do you get to see them much?”

“Yeah. *My God*. You made this with the leftovers?”

Kim startled at his exclamation, but pride infused her. She couldn’t cook worth a damn, but she could throw together a mean sandwich and salad with the right fixings available.

Before she could encourage him to try the salad, he'd finished all of his sandwich and eyed hers. Beaming, she said, "I can have just the salad. Eat that if you're hungry."

His gaze met hers. "Shifting burns a ton of energy. I could inhale two large pizzas by myself right now and still not be satisfied. That you made me food... I don't think you understand how much that means to me. That you looked after my basic needs."

"I had a hunch you might be hungry, but even if I was wrong, this stuff would keep. I'm glad I was able to help. Being here is monumentally less depressing than my place."

He cut the remaining sandwich down the middle and deposited half on her plate. "Are you ready to tell me about it?"

No, and probably never would be, but maybe it would help him know her more. At the breakneck speed they'd been traveling, she wanted to say with perfect certainty that he accepted her, infamous past and all.

Kim used her fork to turn over a lettuce leaf. She couldn't stand to look him in the eyes right now. "After twenty-three days of testimony and evidence and the state of California spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to convict me, I got off on a technicality."

"What happened?"

"The licensure of the lab that performed the autopsy had expired one day prior to receiving Shelly's body. Some kind of governmental delay. Anyway, all evidence related to her death had to be tossed out. Although they knew, *everyone* knew I'd been negligent, the evidence had to be wiped from the record. And with that gone, they couldn't convict me of involuntary manslaughter."

"That's... Wow."

She'd never been so relieved in all of her life. There hadn't been a shred of uncertainty in her mind that she would be convicted, serve jail time, lose her license and never practice medicine again. And then her very, very overpriced lawyer—in the end worth every penny, she supposed—had pulled the Hail Mary of all Hail Marys. They'd discovered that blessed expired license.

"The family rightly sued in civil court. The judge rightly took my entire life's savings plus some, seeing how I was severely in debt to my attorney, in damages. I walked away with the clothes on my back. Friends gave me a few

thousand that I burned through while trying to avoid the media and start over.

“Friends in high places allowed me to keep my license, otherwise I wouldn’t be in Fire Creek. But now that I’m here, I have nothing to my name. Clinic doesn’t pay much either.” She shrugged.

“Especially when your clients trade tomatoes and squash for your services. *Christ.*”

“I really wouldn’t mind that part if I had enough to cover my staff’s salaries and the remaining bills. I messed up. I’m paying penance, so I don’t need the big salary I used to have. I wish I could say that I didn’t do it, but the fact is, I did. It was an accident, but I killed my patient.” Her throat thickened at the admission, one she’d verbalized less than a dozen times since the trial. She stabbed at a wedge of tomato, her appetite gone.

“Are you okay?” His voice was low and comforting.

Kim shook her head. “I don’t know what happened to medicine that patients now have such an adversarial relationship with their providers. I know Dr. Google knows all and tells all, but every doctor I know is doing the best they can with the knowledge and tools they have. Shelly wasn’t just my patient, she was my friend. I would no sooner have hurt her than anyone. I liked, no—I *loved* the money I made as a doctor, but I also liked going home with my head held high. I was too arrogant for my own good and that’s why I messed up, but it wasn’t because I wanted to hurt her.”

She wouldn’t cry about this again. Wouldn’t. She’d cried for days after Shelly’s death, weeks after the exoneration and every single time she reviewed her budget after the civil suit. Over two years later, she shouldn’t still be crying over the death of her friend. “If I could turn back time, if I could do it over, in a heartbeat, I’d go back. I’d tell myself that she didn’t need one more dose, that I needed to find another solution or a different way to treat her. I’d remind myself that I don’t know everything and that the human body should be respected for the magnificent computer that it is. Everyone hates me for killing America’s sweetheart, but not any more than I hate myself.”

“Fuck that noise.” Brick stood so suddenly, Kim’s head snapped up to follow his movement. He towered over her, his expression set into one of determination. “If anyone had any idea how much you’re torturing yourself over this, they’d know you aren’t a bad person. You’re just like the rest of us, capable of a mistake.”

“Thanks, but—”

His mouth crushed hers, a hot, wet kiss that ate her protest. Brick pushed his hands into her hair, holding her place to receive the sensual silencing. Every part of her went languid as she gave in. By the time he pulled away, she could have been floating.

It felt good to have someone on her side, someone who knew the entire story and supported her anyway. She opened her eyes, wanting to thank him. The eyes looking back at her were brilliantly blue, the eye shine surrounded by a ring of black that could only mean one thing.

Brick's beast was back.

Chapter Twenty

Brick couldn't stand the pain in her eyes, the anguish in her voice. He kissed her not to distract her, but to give her his support.

He kissed her because she couldn't possibly know how much he appreciated her taking care of him, especially when it seemed the rest of his pack had turned their backs. Morris might have gone on the run with Brick, but it was just as likely for the purpose of keeping an eye on him as it was for exercise.

All this time, he'd wanted her to share just a part of herself, instead of keeping up the aloof doctor act. She'd done it. It had cost her a piece of her pride, but she'd done it for him. More than he'd hoped for.

Now though, her eyes widened, her entire body stiffening. A level of concern in her wan expression. "Your eyes, honey."

He tilted his head, watching her. That kiss had spiked arousal in her. Flushed cheeks and parted lips, a beacon for his rising lust. "He's close to the surface, but not in control."

The beast hovered at the border, using its shoulders to push against it, but it wasn't rampaging yet. The position of the moon made it stronger, but not strong enough to break past the reinforcement he and Kim had erected.

"Close enough that it's scaring me, though," she said, her heart pounding loudly, testifying on her behalf.

Despite her words, Brick could also smell her arousal coming from her skin. She might be a little afraid, but he reveled in the understanding that she wasn't afraid of him.

He unbuttoned the topmost button on her shirt. "How scared?"

"Terrified," she whispered.

Brick's fingers worked through another one. "Terrified enough to need comforting?"

"Hard to say. It could help." She swallowed hard when another button lost its hold.

The first hint of her bra became visible, and his dick went hard at the sight of it. With a promise to himself to buy her a new one later, Brick pulled hard

on the shirt. Buttons flew in opposite directions but saved them the torture of waiting for her to get undressed the old-fashioned way.

“Hey!” she squeaked. Whatever indignation she suffered must have died when Kim pushed her hands beneath his shirt and shoved the material out of her way. She looked up at him, eyes wide and dilated. “You realize I’m only in this for the science, right?” she teased before sliding her lips over his pecs. He hissed in a breath when her teeth grazed his nipple because it felt so fucking amazing.

Without thought, Brick picked her up, and Kim’s legs went around his waist. She nibbled on his lips, and the sweet taste of her almost did him in. He growled low in his throat and took from her. His tongue swept into her mouth, and hers dueled with his.

“Wait...” she mumbled. At least that was what it sounded like.

He ignored her, because if this was about the stupid condoms, he’d lose his mind before they could get fully naked.

“Brick, we need to talk before—” Her words dissolved into a moan when he captured her nipple between his own teeth. The taste of her skin fueled him, and he suckled hard, loving the way her nipple beaded into the tight bud. “That mouth of yours is lethal.” It came out a gasp. He subjected her to more torment, supreme satisfaction ripping through him when she threw her head back, spilling a guttural moan.

Climbing the small loft to his bedroom with her in his arms gave Brick more pleasure than anything he’d experienced with any woman so far. After depositing Kim on the bed, her shirt gaping open and revealing the decadent swell of her breasts, something primal inside him roared its approval. She *belonged* here.

“We need to talk,” Kim said. But her eyes spoke louder than her voice. Her eyes called out to him, hungry for him.

The beast remained confined. The pack wasn’t out for his head any longer. They could talk. Later. Everything else right now was of distant importance.

Brick pushed down the sweatpants, relieved to be free of the confines of clothing again. He needed his skin next to his woman’s. His woman. Sometime in the past few days, she’d become his woman. His to claim, to protect and to...*love*? He slanted his mouth over hers, drowning the noise. Losing himself in her taste and her touch.

“Brick,” she whispered. Such an erotic sound. His name said with heated

want.

He nibbled over her skin, removing clothing, exposing more of her to him. His tongue went to the soft skin in the fold of her arm, before his teeth grazed over the pulse point in her wrist. Although she'd used the soap in his bathroom, he felt confident that he didn't smell nearly as pretty as she did. Clean in a way that made him want to sully her with his scent.

Kim sighed, her back arching off the bed.

Together they worked off her jeans, and his heart double-timed at the vision of little white panties. A damp center drew his attention, his mouth watering at the prospect of her tasting her cunt again. After pulling off the scrap of lace, he feasted.

* * *

Kim's mind splintered into a million pieces.

An orgasm raced through her, Brick's onslaught more than she could withstand. Her body cried surrender almost immediately, pussy pulsing hard and greedy for more. She twisted her hips, turned on by the way Brick's hand splayed flat against her belly holding her down. Forcing her to endure.

She raked her nails over his arms, demanding he come to her. She needed more, needed *him*. Inside her now.

"Fuck, girl," he growled.

"*Please.*" It came out needy and hoarse and pleading. The one word sounded like an epic story of lewdness. Kim knew she clutched at him in blazing ecstasy. She rolled her hips beneath him, her skin alive and tingling. Her entire body drowning beneath desire.

Brick brought his mouth down on hers, an assertive claiming disguised as a kiss. She reached lower, hand brushing against his taut abdomen, and found the tip of his cock. The hot length of it fit in her palm as if designed just for her.

He hissed as if she'd scalded him with her touch. Head snapping up, he seared her with a look of destruction. "*Shit...*no condoms here. Fuck—"

Kim's frantic mind worked, drawing ideas and casting them aside in microseconds. "No illness?"

"No."

"Can't get me sick?"

“No.” Quick and sharp.

She came to a decision. “Don’t come inside me.”

By way of answer, his hips shifted and then he was inside her, stretching her, filling her. So incredibly good. Soon she was coming again, her body shocked into awakening as his pelvis slapped against hers. It might have been the feel of his bare skin against hers or the recklessness of overwrought lovers. Every part of her gone torrid.

Fueled by her reaction, Brick drove into her again and again, each thrust shoving her higher and higher. Her vision went black at the edges, a silent scream lodged in her throat.

A rumbling sound, like a roll of thunder in the distance, wedged next to her, and it took a moment of confusion and misunderstanding that Brick had provided the sound. A low growl made the hair on her arms stand straight up. It soothed away the sexual high, but her awareness of him and his needs pushed forward.

“Come back to me,” she whispered, unable to ignore the change in his eyes, cautiously turned on by it. “Let me be your anchor, Brick.”

He shuddered before dipping his head, bringing his face next to her neck. He dragged his lips across her skin, the abrading sending sensation rough and sensual. The low growl hadn’t stopped, instead a constant motor of sound.

Her heart thundered when Brick’s mouth opened over the fleshy part of her neck. Her breathing quickened as teeth scraped her skin because she knew what he would do next.

Between the growling and the eye shine, the beast’s rise to the surface, she knew.

He would be compelled to bite her, to mark her in *some* way. With the little she knew about the lycanthropes, their beasts and their wolves, it only made sense. She tensed, not sure about what it meant and whether she should stop him. At the same time, it felt *right*. They shared a connection. Over a short period of time, her feelings for this man had blossomed.

What to do with that?

As his thrusts grew harder and faster, her body tightening, being pushed toward bliss one more time, she felt the moment of acceptance. When she wouldn’t fight Brick or his beast and surrender herself to the inevitable.

The rumbling grew louder, more intense, and she heard the quickening of his breath. Kim raked her nails over his shoulders, and Brick lifted her thigh

higher. The new angle meant his thrusts touched her sweet spot, the one he'd discovered previously. The fear she felt about having him bite her shattered beneath pleasure. She angled her neck, giving him the access—and permission—he needed. “Brick,” she whispered. *“Do it.”*

Her neck went aflame, sharp pain enveloping it. The burn ended as quickly as it began though, before the first tear trickled from her eyes. Her skin throbbed where he'd marked her, but it only spurred her body into seeking ecstasy. She cried out as her back arched and the rest of her shuddered. Brick studied her face, his thrusts beginning to overwhelm her. His hand balled the sheets next to her.

Brick howled, an animal sound that sent her over a ledge. The rawness sent her falling and not caring, because he would catch her. She reveled in it, the sensation of drowning and wanting to in the most perverse of ways.

At the last possible moment, right before she shattered, he pulled out. Between half-lidded eyes she watched him jerk his glistening cock, sending spurt after spurt of semen on her belly. The warm liquid coated her skin, marking her as surely as his dark kiss had.

They both panted, but Brick paused to massage the wound with his mouth, the growl long since fallen away. He pulled back just enough so that she could look into his hazy blue eyes, and reflected back at her was gratitude. “You’re mine now.”

A moan of satisfaction hummed out of her. “I know.”

“No regrets?”

Kim thought about the beast and its crazed behavior. She visualized the wolf and its wild beauty. She focused on the man, who'd somehow stolen her heart. “None.”

He didn't break their locked gaze when he kissed her again. Slow, sweet and tender. All frenzy gone. The rushed, wild claiming had simmered into soft sighs and delicate touches. The tight grip on her thigh eased, allowing Kim to move with him. To revel in being thoroughly loved.

The bite throbbed, matching her sluggish heartbeat.

Later, when she looked back on this time, she would forever remember the concentration on his face, the hard lines of his body pressing into hers and the way she clutched at him, desperate for more.

He toppled to her side, the sudden loss of his body both a regret and relief as cool air swept over her sweat-slickened skin.

Chapter Twenty-One

Kim lay with her head in his lap, and damn if the proximity of her mouth to his dick didn't make him hard all over again.

At this time of year, it was hard to choose between turning on the central air or toughing it out with the borderline temperature. Coming outside on the porch to cool off had been a reasonable compromise.

But Brick tortured himself by watching the sheen of sweat form over her creamy skin. It made his fingers itch with the urge to swipe away the moisture. And when a bead rolled over her breast, zigzagging a decadent trail down her cleavage, he couldn't tear his gaze away from its progress. She wore one of his shirts and an older pair of denim shorts that slid down her hips every time she moved. He loved knowing his clothes might smell like her when she left them behind.

"I can feel you watching me, you know," Kim said. Her eyes were closed.

"Is that a bad thing?"

"It could be worse, I guess." She smiled, making her a picture of serenity all stretched out on the rattan bench.

Her breathing tended to roughen, a not-quite snore, after she fell asleep. He'd been paying close enough attention to notice that. Right along with the different color strands in her short hair. The way it looked like her eyelashes rested against her cheeks.

How very kissable her lips always appeared.

"Talk to me," she said after a moment of silence passed.

Brick dragged his gaze away from her mouth, knowing if he gave in to the impulse to kiss her, they'd end up entangled again. Not that he would have minded, but he'd ridden her hard for the past two days. "What would you like to talk about?"

"I don't know." Husky and drowsy, ready to drift away again. "Tell me about your name. You said you would one day."

"I can tell you that, sure. It's not a nice story though."

At last she opened her eyes to study him. He could practically see her quick mind seeking and tossing out possible explanations before he'd had a

chance to even begin.

It dawned on him that he'd never before been with a really intelligent woman. A few smart women, some smarter than him maybe, but Kim stood in a class all by herself. Even if she didn't have the healer's magic to enhance her abilities, he couldn't imagine her in a field that didn't require book smarts and analytical thinking.

God, what a turn-on.

"You're staring at me again," Kim said. With that smile. That knowing smile. The one accusing him of lurid thoughts, despite not having one. Not yet. "You're supposed to be telling me a not-nice tale."

"Sure." He didn't mind the story as much anymore. "I've always been good with numbers. They made sense because they were absolute. But that was about the only place I ever excelled as a kid. Used to daydream a lot, hated reading. Teachers got so exasperated with me. I hated to read. *Hated.*" The standoffs he'd had with his mother over homework were legendary.

"I get that. I think kids gravitate to one or the other for the most part. Or maybe parents get lucky and have a nerdy kid like me who kind of likes all subjects."

He poked the end of her nose. Because he could. "Now why doesn't that surprise me? I bet you always kept your room neat too."

She grinned. "Spotless."

"Nerd."

"Proud of it."

He shrugged. "Yeah, nerds grow up to make all the money."

"Until they screw it up and end up in the poor house." She still grinned despite the not-funny topic. It might have been to lighten the jab at herself, but he didn't find it even a little funny.

Probably wasn't the best move to bring up her finances when she'd made it clear she didn't have any. He, on the other hand, would never be rich, but wealth had never been a goal. He had pack. It was all that mattered to him.

"Sorry," Kim muttered. "Didn't mean to wreck the mood."

When Brick touched her face this time, he stroked her cheek with a gentle caress. "You didn't. Besides, I was supposed to be telling you a story about my name."

His wolf perked, and Brick lifted his head to look down the drive and toward whatever caught his attention. He couldn't detect anyone or see

anything amiss, but he didn't deny his friend knew something. They'd probably have company soon. Friendly, if he knew his wolf, and he did. With Morris playing babysitter for the last few hours, it might have been his relief sitter trading places. He wouldn't antagonize any of them by leaving to go inside, as if he had something to hide.

"Anyway," he continued, "although most everyone had written me off, even my father for a while, my mother was determined to prove to everyone that I wasn't lazy or slow. She dragged me from tutor to tutor, looking for the right one who'd show me how to pull up my grades."

"I like her already."

"Well, the one who made the best impression on me taught me a few tricks. He taught me how to memorize anything put in front of me. Everything I heard."

"Photographic memory?" Kim sat up at this question, turning to look at him with an air of wonder.

"I wish. It would have made the memorization easier. No, I just applied a few parlor tricks, honestly. The kinds of things actors do to memorize their lines."

"You would have been handy to know in med school." A light laugh. "But I'm not seeing how any of this leads up to the nickname."

He blew out a breath. "Before all the memorization, before things turned around, I had an older teacher who wouldn't take any shit from his students, and I was the epitome of a shithead. Mr. Taylor's method of motivating me to be better, to work harder, was to use the carrot-and-the-stick method. Except, he preferred the stick. So, for a full year, every time I messed something up in class or didn't know the answer, he'd declare that I was just as thick as a brick."

Kim's face reddened, angry. "*My God.*"

"Yeah. Didn't help that I was husky. If I never heard 'thick as a brick' said by a snot-nosed ankle biter for the rest of my life, it'll be too soon."

"You let me call you that? I've been calling you by that horrific name from almost the first minute we met. And your friends call you that—that name. That mother-bitching name."

Brick choked out a laugh. "Mother-bitching?" Her eyes narrowed and there was so much anger rolling off her, Brick almost scooted backward. "Okay, wait. There's more to the story. Promise."

“There damned well better be.”

“So... I learned to memorize everything. Everything. And things turned around. It’s not like I was the star student or anything, but Mr. Taylor didn’t have reason to poke fun at me anymore. *And...* I went out for JV football. Coach heard the other kids calling me ‘Brick’ and his eyes lit up like Vegas.”

Her scowl softened. “That’s better, I guess.”

“It wasn’t the same and it wasn’t worse. I have no skill at sports whatsoever. But everyone was calling me Brick, I played a season...” He shrugged. “It stuck. It stopped meaning what it had originally, and I kind of liked it. Pretty soon, I was *demanding* people call me by my very cool nickname.”

With those words, he could almost see the tension leech from her body. “Okay, I don’t feel so badly about it now. But I could still kick your teacher.”

“Don’t blame him. Dyslexia was a newfangled thing to him he didn’t know much about. It didn’t help that Mr. Taylor was older than dirt.”

“You’re dyslexic?”

“Mildly. By the time I finished high school, I got lessons on how to deal with it. I’m still a slow reader, but I don’t have to memorize everything like before. Although, it’s a hard habit to break.”

“I don’t know if I’m in awe or scared.” Then she seemed to catch on to the implications of what he’d told her. A slow smile curved her lips. “Show me,” she said softly.

He could deny her nothing. “The first day we met, you said, ‘Your eyes. I’m not trying to hit on you or anything, but I’ve never seen a color like that. Are they real? I mean, no offense if they are real, but it seems like that they can’t be real because they’re just so exotic.’”

It was like he’d finally been able to breathe once she’d said those words to him. Something tight had unfurled deep inside him and opened up his airways for a fresh breath of air. His Kim. Even if he’d never developed the gift for remembering everything he heard, he would have remembered every syllable of those lines. He’d never forget the look on her face as she’d studied his eyes, the way she’d peered up at him with exaggerated and express wonder.

Those words.

She screwed up her face as if trying to remember the exact time and circumstances for saying them. Then the hesitant curve of her lips broadened,

her smile like a beacon for his soul. "I think I was so stunned by you that it just came tumbling out." Her cheeks grew ruddy. "You are a beautiful man."

Brick pulled her close and kissed her.

* * *

By the time Brick brushed her lips with his for the last time, she'd become dizzy with lust for him. Muscles ached in the most delicious of ways, her pussy sore and well-used, but she couldn't deny she wanted to feel him inside her again.

Why did she feel so safe with him? With this man who could turn himself into a wolf, straight out of the movies. Who carried a beast inside him capable of being wild and dangerous. He'd stopped her from disclosing the lab results before. Maybe now, before pack interfered again, would be a good time to talk. Then she realized something...

"Why didn't he hurt me?" she murmured. They'd warned her from the very beginning that the beast was a creature of destruction, but he'd done nothing other than scare her the last time she'd seen him.

Him. When did it become a *him* instead of an *it*?

"Sweetheart?"

She leaned into him again, despite the humidity making her feel drippy wet. Somehow, his body heat gave her comfort. "I don't know. I guess I was just thinking out loud. I need more time with you and others of your pack. I don't have enough data."

"Looks like you're about to get your wish."

Although he didn't move, Kim recognized the new tension in his body. He looked toward the drive, where Morris lay stretched out on his car, sunbathing. But the other man climbed down when a red Charger rolled into view.

"Who's that?"

"Knox. Coming to see your handiwork firsthand, I suppose."

"Not to cause any trouble though, right?" It didn't matter if they were friends. The pack's leader could have Brick taken away or worse. She wouldn't just stand by helpless and watch it happen.

"I know it's probably hard to understand, but he's my friend. This is a difficult time for him too. I'm forcing him to set aside our friendship and put

the needs of the pack first. The responsibility he shoulders is overwhelming and exhausting. Try not to be angry at him about it.”

Kim blew out a breath, realizing she’d been getting angry. It took a few seconds to release the building tension keeping her muscles tight, her mouth pressed together. How very astute of Brick to have noticed it too.

When Knox exited the car, he gave Morris a perfunctory wave. At that signal, Morris slid behind the wheel of his car and cranked it up. Kim didn’t watch him leave, instead focusing on Rowan getting out of the passenger side of the Charger.

The two men approaching could have been models, but they ambled up as if unaware of their physical perfections. Knox’s dreads hung loose today, brushing against the cotton button-down shirt he wore. Blue jeans showcased long legs, and Kim had the fleeting wonder of what his wolf might look like. Although he didn’t appear particularly threatening, the man commanded everyone’s attention. Maybe it could be blamed on the way he carried himself, or maybe it was the natural charisma people like him managed to exude. One day she’d ask Brick about how he became Alpha of the pack, because in truth, she couldn’t imagine anyone else in the role. Not even Brick.

Brick rose to standing when the two men were close enough to shake with him, but Kim chose to stay seated. Although she tried to understand Brick and Knox’s roles, she was still having a hard time not being at least wary of what could happen next.

To her surprise, Knox addressed her first. “So what’s your assessment, Doc? Any info you can provide to help us understand what’s happening with Brick would be really appreciated. A wolf going feral doesn’t happen often—hell, maybe once in the last fifteen years that I can think of—but if we can stop it from happening in anyone else, I need to know about it.” Knox folded his arms across his chest, the expression on his face pure wolfish curiosity. It threw her off.

“I think it has something to do with hormones.”

Something wicked must have run through Rowan’s mind, because he shot Brick a mischievous grin. “I can make a run for some Midol, if you need it, guy,” he said to Brick.

Brick punched him in the arm.

“Anyway,” Kim continued on as if she hadn’t been interrupted,

“something is happening in his physiology that’s causing an upset of hormones.”

“Which ones?” Knox asked. He’d ignored his men too.

“Med school was too long ago for me to be sure. But with a little more time, and some cooperation from you and the rest of the pack, I might be able to figure it out.” The results of the lab tests Becka had done narrowed down the list of suspects even further. But she hadn’t told Brick about the blood yet, and she wanted him to know before she went to Knox about it. She owed him that much for the betrayal.

“This has to do with the adolescents, as well, doesn’t it?” Knox asked.

Surprised at the way he’d linked the two so quickly, Kim nodded. “I’m not a hundred percent, but I have a suspicion they’re related somehow. It would make sense. But it doesn’t make complete sense because of the chronology of the kids, so I think I might be missing something. But maybe there’s something there. Yeah.”

Knox sat down on the stoop. He pressed his head on a support beam and closed his eyes. In an instant, he appeared to age by a decade before Kim’s eyes. When he opened his eyes again, they were filled a burning sadness and regret not present a moment before. “We call them adolescents, but they’re not. Not really. They’re young by a lycanthrope’s standards, but if we look at them as humans, they’re teenagers.”

“Oh? *Oh.*” The day she’d been introduced to Abe, she had no idea his chronological age. The men all referred to him as an adolescent, and she’d followed suit. It never dawned on her that he might be a few years older. The difference in those years was enough to explain a lot of biological changes happening during pubescence. “So that has to narrow down how you can identify potential targets. If a person is biologically old enough for their hormones to be running rampant, full-blown as in a teenager versus a pre-teen, then I guess it would make sense how someone could identify a lycanthrope on the verge of shifting, right?”

Brick’s gaze bounced between her and Knox, but it was the latter man who nodded an agreement. “The boys whose voices are changing and the girls beginning to gain curves. I don’t know any of them well enough to identify those changes, but I bet if we went to the victim’s parents, they’d agree.”

“Shit,” Brick murmured. “We focused on so many other things, looking for relatives and associates first. If this is it, it was sitting in front of us all along.

So damned simple.”

“Putting us that much closer to protecting those left.” Rowan’s quiet words stood tall, bolstered by a steel determination.

“I agree these things are linked and we need to look into the how and why of it some more.” He turned his attention to Kim. “How did you manage to stifle the hormones in Brick, then?” Knox’s gaze was intense.

Whatever she chose to say next could be the difference between making Knox an ally to Brick or keep his suspicions high. She knew Knox clung to a hope that whatever solution they’d found would be transferable to the adolescents of his pack.

Although her face probably went fifteen shades of red, she sat up straighter and said, “Sex.”

“What?” Rowan burst out.

Stoic Knox had a momentary eyebrow twitch.

Rowan’s head was likely to snap off the way he kept turning from side to side to look at everyone in rapid succession. “We were all worried out of our minds about what was happening to you over here. I mean, I imagined all sorts of shit about how we’d have to trap you in a cabin or something, hunt you down through the woods. Fuck me. The shit that was running through my head, and you’re over here sexing up the doctor.”

“Hey. Manners,” Brick snapped.

Rowan scowled, but turned to Kim. “Sorry.”

“You’re not the only one surprised that it worked. We weren’t certain it would either until we actually tried it.”

“And there was the nuance of discovering it wasn’t just the act of getting off that made a difference. I could sit in a room by myself for days, and it wouldn’t work the same to beat off.”

“You’re talking about my manners?” Rowan grumbled.

“It’s everything that goes with sex,” Brick said after flipping his middle finger.

“Would that mean that the adolescents are fully engaging in sexual activity then? That might narrow down the numbers of them. Although it’s every sixteen-year-old boy’s aspiration, I think a lot of the girls are probably more conservative.”

Kim shook her head. “I can’t commit. I need more info from you and the pack. I’d want to speak with the parents and maybe some of the kids.”

“But it means we have something to work with finally.” His expression hardened, a determined look making him appear ready to take on anyone who stood in his way of protecting those under his care. He cocked his head, studying Brick. “Full moon’s a few days away.”

“I know. One night. It’ll pass.”

She looked from one man to the other, trying to read the unspoken conversation happening between them. “What about the full moon?”

“We’ll shift. All of us,” Brick said. “Including me.”

“In your state? How do you know you’ll be able to shift back?”

“It’s not the same. This is willful shift, unlike what’s been happening recently. On the full moon, it’s an understanding and the beast is under control. It’s not the same.”

Her eyes narrowed as she studied his face. “You knew...all this time, you knew you were headed toward the full moon and you might make it out of it intact, or you might not. You knew about the danger the night would hold for you but you didn’t tell me.” She should have guessed. She’d seen enough horror movies to know about the full moon, but her training taught her not to make assumptions. She’d expected him to lead her down the paths of his supernatural life. Maybe too much so, in retrospect. Or maybe she’d subconsciously chosen to ignore what they’d told her because she didn’t want to face this inevitability. Either way, it was here now and couldn’t be put off much longer.

Brick at least had the decency to look ashamed. He cast his face to the side, avoiding the eyes of everyone on the patio. “It’s not the same,” he stubbornly insisted.

Kim’s legs turned to rubber. Everything they’d done...all their theories and hopes and *everything* thrown away by an understanding Brick had failed to share with Kim.

Disbelief churned to anger in her gut.

Knox, the peacekeeper, broke it up. “Doc, I’m going to go with Brick on this one. The full moon shift is different and a part of our natural order. I refuse to believe that it’ll affect him differently from any other full moon. As for you, Brick, keep your beast under control, because I need you for this. We’re on our way to finding this fucker hurting our kids and getting rid of him for good.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Brick couldn't remember the last time someone he knew made him so damned proud.

Knox and Rowan left a few minutes earlier, and without Morris there to watch over them, Brick and Kim were at last alone again. That a guard hadn't been left behind to watch over Brick spoke volumes over how Knox felt about their discoveries and his confidence in what Kim had accomplished in a few short days.

The sun had fallen beneath the horizon, and mosquitoes circled in drunk patterns in the cooling evening air. Soon enough they'd realize a meal awaited only a few feet away and begin to make nuisances of themselves. At least they would drive him and Kim inside. Hopefully into the comfort of his bed. In the dark.

"You hungry?" he asked Kim.

"No." Her voice sounded distant, and he cocked his head while studying her. She didn't acknowledge him though, her gaze caught on something in the distance. He visually followed, but even his wolf sight didn't catch anything that should have mesmerized her. It probably meant something troubled her thoughts. From what he knew of the doctor so far, she'd puzzle it out in her mind before bringing it to him.

"Can I get you anything at all?"

"Thanks, no. I'm just... No."

He watched her, certain something tumbled around that analytical mind, but she wasn't ready to share yet. He'd be patient and wait for now. The urgency over the weekend seemed to have cooled to a slow simmer, a pace he could appreciate and be comfortable with.

Brick checked on his wolf, slumbering lazily in his home. The run with Morris had been long overdue. Somehow the past few days seemed to have stretched time. Instead of the few weeks since his last run with pack, it had felt like months.

When he looked in on the beast, it watched him in return with a kind of weariness. The beast appeared fatigued, with shallow breathing and listless

movement. What he saw today was an extreme opposite to the raging beast causing havoc recently. The startling change brought Brick up short.

Brick frowned, sending empathic communication down the metaphysical link they shared. The return reply left him as baffled as the state of his beast. The full moon was only two nights away. The beast's despair made no sense. "Kim, is it possible that suppressing whatever hormones are enhancing the beast's control might come at a price to it?"

She made a noise before swatting at an area on her arm. "No idea. What we're doing, all of this, is completely uncharted territory. Are you having an issue?"

"Not sure." Brick stood, holding his hand out. She took it, allowing him to instinctively thread his fingers with hers. Ducking her head kept another mosquito from landing. They'd be overrun shortly if they didn't head in.

"Look, that's not going to cut it. I can't help you if I don't know what the issues are." Her hand curled in tighter around his, a motion he doubted she'd done consciously.

"Something wrong?"

When she started forward without answering him, he couldn't be sure she would answer at all. Some unknown had set her off during Knox's visit, and Brick didn't have a clue what might be running through that ever-turning mind of hers.

They had fixed the problem with his beast, the crack in his barrier no longer a pressing concern. She'd helped him make it a minor inconvenience that he'd either learn to live with or maybe find a way to heal the rift. Days ago he'd been certain no amount of reconfiguring could have saved the barrier. Now, he felt close to actually reversing the damage. Remarkable.

"Nothing," she mumbled. "I need to get back to my place. Get the laundry done and get ready to go to work tomorrow."

"You want to leave?"

Kim dropped his hand. She crossed the threshold without looking back. Inside, she headed straight for her sneakers, pushing her feet into them. "I don't *want* to leave, but I have a job to go to. I can't just stay here and sex you up and hope to pay my bills."

He didn't make a lot of money, but he lived comfortably. A handful of contractors insisted on his custom cabinetry. There were peaks and valleys for orders, but he'd learned to live well with the roller-coaster budget. But he

could acknowledge Kim didn't have even that.

It pissed him off to think he would be sending her back to that dismal rental. "Why don't you get your stuff and bring it back here? There's plenty of room, the pantry's full. We get to spend a little more time together before the work week sends us in separate directions—"

"Because that's *exactly* what you need." Sarcasm infused every word. "Not only are you dealing with a beast trying to take over your body, you've got your pack hunting you down, you want to feed and shelter a stray and oh, let's not forget, there's a serial killer on the loose. I couldn't make this shit up." Kim threw her hands in the air before storming off in the direction of her keys and purse. She snatched them up, glared at him and stomped her way to the front door.

"What is happening here?" She'd snapped. Gone off the deep end, probably due to stress. Not that he blamed her, but damned if he could figure out what set her off.

"What's happening is I'm going home. I have to figure out what to do next with you. Knox wants answers about the adolescents too. I need time to think."

"Take all the time you want," he said slowly. "But I'd really, really like it if you did your thinking here."

The beast chose that moment to perk. It stretched, making a show of spreading its claws and scraping them against the barrier. Brick winced although no sound traveled to him.

The brat just wanted to be seen. This was the beast he knew, the one who'd grown up with him and helped make Brick a stronger, more formidable lycanthrope. He'd missed this iteration of himself.

Right now though, he had more pressing issues at hand. His lover—girlfriend?—had begun to crack around her own edges.

She pulled open the front door and without looking at him said, "If there's a problem with your beast, I can be back in less than twenty minutes. I think you should be safe enough for a little while without me, though, right?"

Brick nodded before realizing she couldn't see him. He tried to come up with a reasonable explanation for her change in behavior and couldn't think of one. Not one. "Kim—"

"I'm up and out of the house by seven. If you need me, my phone'll be on."

And just like that, she walked out.
He still had no idea why.

* * *

The ride home didn't help all of the images, ideas and doubt churning through Kim's mind. The worst of it was she couldn't figure out why she'd become so angry. The conversation with Knox had helped focus some of her own turbulent thoughts concerning the adolescents. He'd managed to piece together parts of the puzzle making her gray before her time. She supposed that ability signified yet another reason why he made a good leader.

But what about her?

While she'd been able to provide a fraction of data, her contribution boiled down to the fact that she had a vagina. Not the years of med school, not the months of no sleep while in residency, nothing from the school of hard knocks. All she'd done was have sex with a man, and it solved all of his problems. Almost a hundred grand in student loans, studying until her eyes crossed, and her contribution to saving a man's life boiled down to s-e-x.

Wasn't life a bitch?

As she got out of the car, she glanced up at the night sky. The big, beautiful moon illuminated the ugly front yard, but she forced herself to find serenity in her surroundings. Back home, she would have considered a locale like this one *rustic* and maybe called it a nice *getaway*. Then again, back home she hadn't become intimately familiar with tree frogs or palmetto bugs the size of rats. Worse? They flew at you.

It wasn't quite the season for the bugs, but for some not-so-strange reason she decided to go inside, not wanting to linger outdoors any longer than necessary. Probably because all this exposure to werewolves had taken away her innocence. The full moon no longer meant just a pretty night. Now, in Fire Creek, it meant staying indoors and not venturing outside for any reason. The *real* full moon wouldn't be in effect for two more nights, judging how it looked tonight. If the stage tonight could send her scurrying indoors, what would happen Tuesday?

She would be terrified. Not just for herself, but for every one of her human patients who didn't know about the pack living among them. She'd be terrified for Brick and what happened to him during the shift. Would he be

able to return to himself?

As she twisted the lock, she did it with more force than necessary. Because her fear pissed her off too.

She liked Brick. A lot. Maybe more than she should in the very short time she'd known him, but feelings were feelings and she liked what she was feeling. It had been a long time since she'd harbored something more than friendship for a man. Not since med school if she thought about it. She'd been too busy since then.

Except, what did he think of her? Had he even stopped to consider a long-term relationship, one that went beyond the bedroom? Or did he agree she served a purpose by halting his shift? If nothing more than that, it didn't matter, because she had what he needed.

Yeah, that hurt. More than she cared to admit.

She'd lied about coming home to do the laundry. Although a lot of the more practical pieces of her wardrobe had been consigned, running out of clothes would never be an issue. What she couldn't stuff into the wardrobe remained shoved into two pieces of oversized luggage she'd permanently borrowed from a friend.

Practically everything else had been left behind because she didn't have room or sold because it had some sort of retail value. Walking into Brick's home, the bungalow he'd put together himself, had driven home her destitute situation. She worked with two burners substituting for a stove while he had a butler's pantry. Life was so fucking unfair.

After completing a few minor chores, none of which couldn't have waited another day, she couldn't say her mood had improved any. The breathing room she'd demanded from Brick stifled her, instead.

Crawling into bed later, she ignored the way the sheets scratched at her skin. How flat the pillow felt, even when doubled in half. A traitorous mind conjured up an image of a king-sized bed, Egyptian cotton sheets and a giant of a man with a body hard enough to bounce quarters off of.

"Stupid house." Growling, she sat up enough to punch a fist into the pathetic pillow. A dent formed, but the lump didn't get any softer. Nor did it give her the wonderful scent of wild and leather the way curling up in Brick's bed had.

She missed him curled around her already. She missed the weight of his arm draped over her waist. The way his body heat seemed to seep into her

every pore. And how the hair on his chest, arms and legs tickled and scratched. She missed Brick.

Three soft knocks echoed from the front door, and she bolted upright. Blinking rapidly, she waited while her heart rate slowed because surely she hadn't heard correctly. Maybe a raccoon getting into the trash or the oak tree out front losing a few branches. That made a hell of a lot more sense than someone coming over. Fire Creek shut down around nine each night, that much she'd learned.

"Kim, it's me," a male voice called.

There's no way she'd ever mistake that molten honey voice. Already in a rotten mood, she was well on her way to annoyed when she pulled open the door a minute later. "What are you d—"

Whoa.

That luminescent eye shine greeted her first. Hell, she could scarcely see the features of his face. But that beautiful, conniving moon managed to find a way to highlight the faint stubble covering a strong jaw. It made sure she could appreciate the delicate bone structure of his collar and the broadness of his shoulders. As if her eyes had detached from the rest of her, Kim found it impossible not to sweep her gaze over the rest of Brick's naked glory. Maddeningly naked. *Stunningly* naked.

Moisture pooled in her mouth. As if she hadn't spent all weekend doing semi-acrobatic feats with this man already. The same things she'd been annoyed over not long ago.

Focus. She made a performance out of peering past him. "Kind of late to be out here showing off your stuff."

"Wolf needed a run."

"So you show up at my door in the nude?" Not that she wasn't enjoying the view, because God knew she wasn't complaining.

"The man wanted to talk." He just stood there. Unclothed and unashamed and gorgeous. "Can I come in?"

Somehow feeling inadequate in her oversized T-shirt and panties, she took a step back. "It's getting late, and I was already in bed..." She would have asked him to keep it brief, but that eye shine of his glinted at the mention of being in bed. It made her hot all over to see the physical reactions she could cause in him. There was something to be said about the very obvious attraction Brick felt toward her. Did wanting more make her greedy? "*Talk,*

Brick. Just talk. It's been a long weekend, and I don't want to show up tomorrow all bleary-eyed. Don't forget that I'm still learning who my patients are and they're learning me. I have to make a good impression and all that."

His gaze moved beyond her to the miserable bed before coming back to rest on her face. "I just want to say *thank you*. This weekend has been amazing and my life is literally in your hands. Without you, by now, I'd be feral. Hunted. I don't recall thanking you even once so far, and it wouldn't have been right if you didn't hear it from me."

A tight muscle in the center of her body uncurled, relaxing and allowing a sense of calm to seep in and take over. "W-well," she stammered, "you're welcome. It's not like it's been a real hardship or anything. I like you."

"I like you, too."

Any residual tension vanished just like that. All earlier anger—annoyance, really—swept away under a soothing tide of his gratitude. It hadn't been a deep, declaration of everlasting love and eternal devotion, but she hadn't needed that. Doing a job for goodness's sake and being appreciated for it in return... She didn't know how to process that. Maybe the disconcerting feeling of being a convenient vagina to him had been exaggerated.

"I don't want to keep you up any longer," he said. "But I'd like it if you let me stay."

She'd like it too if he'd stay. A whole of liking happening in such a short period of time. But she liked that too. "That bed is pathetic. It doesn't even hold the two of us comfortably."

"It did well enough before."

"Those were just cat naps. I need more than that."

She could imagine spending all evening tossing and turning, elbows jamming into sides and feet kicking the other person's. Tomorrow, she'd wake up with dark circles under her eyes and deep-seated hatred for all twin-size mattresses.

"I won't disturb your sleep, Kim. Promise." His eyes flashed something mysterious and even in the dim lighting, she had the sense they watched her in amusement. "Go on. Get comfortable, and I'll be there in a minute. I'm just gonna lock up here."

Suspicious, but not wanting to be too obvious about it, Kim crossed the laminate flooring and crawled beneath the covers. She inwardly cringed as she scooted closer to the wall, making room for the bulk Brick called a body,

knowing damned good and well they would both be miserable by morning. But she appreciated his coming here and wanted him there, after all.

Someone who knew her past, liked her *anyway* and wanted her help. She'd not soon throw that away. Not for anything.

"Sleep now," he murmured when he got closer.

A rise of goose bumps rippled across her arms as a *pop* sounded. She might have blinked twice when Brick disappeared and an overly large wolf stood in his place.

Kim watched in wonder as it padded across the room and then leaped onto the bed. It circled itself into a ball that fit perfectly in the indentation beside her. Her pulse raced, the proximity of the wild creature exhilarating and awesome. With a tentative hand, she curled her fingers into his fur, putting her face near his. A soft rumble of growly pleasure came from the wolf, but he didn't shift or discourage her touch.

This was Brick. Regardless of what he looked like, this was the man she liked—more than liked.

Her heart swelled with pride.

This was Brick.

Kim closed her eyes.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Kim pushed her arms into the air, spreading her fingers as wide as they could go, almost relishing in the *pop* of her bones and knuckles. Without a shadow of a doubt, she knew she'd woken from a completely and utterly dreamless, perfect sleep. For the first time in perhaps—she frowned while she thought about it—forever.

Turning, she came face to face with a pair of watchful blue eyes. By the morning light, the wolf appeared menacing. Its size alone suggested if she blinked the wrong way, it would leap over and crush Kim beneath an oversized paw. Tentative, unsure if he minded or cared, she scrunched her fingers into the soft fur at his nape. Brick didn't shift or fidget or make any signs of distress. When her fingers traveled to behind his ear, however, his eyes rolled in the back of his head and his body stiffened. Kim froze.

The wolf issued a low, whining growl. She didn't think it was supposed to be menacing—she didn't think—but couldn't be certain. She'd never had a pet and beyond making sure there was food and water available, she didn't know the first thing about animals.

She moved her fingers tentatively and when the wolf stiffened this time, she didn't stop. He went stock still while she scratched. If he didn't enjoy her attention, she couldn't tell. Encouraged, Kim kept rifling her fingers, enjoying the soft pelt.

“Big guy, I'd love to stay here all morning and pet you, but work calls. You're more than welcome to make yourself at home here today, but if you leave, lock up behind you, okay?”

Her irritation from the previous night had gone the way of the moon, but the uncertainty of what would happen to Brick during the full moon weighed heavily on her mind while she got ready. Seeing the purple bruise left behind by his love bite drove home the understanding of who she was dealing with. What it could mean for her.

Not knowing if the flux of hormones would help or hurt Brick worried her on a near pathological level. The meditative routine of the shower should have provided a hint or two, but no ideas came to her.

By the time she stepped into the bedroom to get changed, Brick—the man—waited on her bed with the sheets slung across his lap. “Are you still mad?” he asked quietly.

That pulled her up short for a second. She had to pool her thoughts before addressing him. By the time she’d snagged underwear out of the plastic bin, she thought she could make sense. “I’m not angry, Brick. I’m worried. There’s a huge difference.”

“You barely wanted to speak to me last night.”

“Because you didn’t want to listen,” she said, exasperated. “I’m doing my best to help you, but you’re acting like a kid about this. It’s all fun and games and sex until the full moon. Then what? What happens to you when you’re forced to shift and you can’t come back?” *To me?*

“Shifting during the full moon isn’t abnormal. It’s not part of this unnatural cycle I’ve been experiencing, and that’s why it doesn’t concern me. I might be thinking naively, but you’re asking me to fear one of the things that makes me, me. I’m not dismissing your opinions outright, but you aren’t trying to see it from my point of view either.”

He had a fair point, however it wasn’t something she wanted to admit. She wished he would be more aware of the dangers they faced and react to them in kind. She wanted him to have a stomach twisted in knots—just like hers—and a night of restless sleep and anxiety eating his insides. She wanted a partner in her worry, and he didn’t seem to mind failing in that department.

“Never mind,” she muttered. “I guess this is just one place where we won’t be able to see eye to eye. I’ll be worried for the both of us and hope to God that you’re right. I’m going to work. Maybe I’ll see you later.”

Brick opened his mouth, but Kim didn’t stick around to hear his argument. It didn’t make sense to drag this discussion out when they stood at an impasse. She didn’t want to go to work in a bad mood and she refused to let Brick put her there. Not after the wonderful night of sleep in the serenity she thought she’d found. When she left, though, she made certain not to slam the door or storm out or give him any other indication they were still fighting. Even though they were.

The day passed without incident, the patient cases mundane and routine. Thank goodness for small favors. Tonya commented on Kim’s pensive mood once, but Kim’s response in the form of a grunt kept her from prying further. She ate dry cereal and coffee for breakfast, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich

for lunch. Going through the day like normal as if she didn't have the fate of one very sexy werewolf in her hands. Or the fact that she knew about werewolves at all.

"New pediatric patient's in room two waiting on you," Jules announced. "Brought the whole fam damily with him too."

"Wellness check?"

"Yeah. Need me in there?"

"Not if it's as crowded as you say it is. I'll call if I change my mind though."

When Kim pushed open the door, she found herself staring face-to-face with a sullen young man sitting on the exam table. A pair of blue eyes next to light brown skin snagged her attention first. He had a broad nose and pink lips some girls would envy. About two dozen curls of hair sprouted from his chin, and Kim would bet money he spent hours every day grooming his wannabe beard.

Although at least five other bodies crowded the room, she went directly to him, hand extended. "I'm Dr. Sharpe. You must be Corey."

"Yeah." His shake didn't have the strength of experience behind it; instead it spoke of polite response.

She turned to seek out his parents, coming up short when she spotted a familiar face. "Knox? What are you doing here?"

"Corey's family. My nephew."

"Oh...oh!" He had to be pack then.

Knox continued, "His mother is my sister, Corianne, his father, Jackson." She shook their hands as they were introduced, seeing the resemblance between Knox and Corianne right off the bat. Jackson was a good-looking redhead, tall and lean like the other werewolves she'd met so far. She couldn't say why she'd bet money that he was pack as well, but she had a strong suspicion. Whether or not Corey's mother could shift would remain to be seen.

"Why do I take it this isn't the typical before-school checkup?"

"Corey's a popular kid," Jackson said. He'd retreated to the far side of the room, arms folded across his chest. While Corianne might have tried to smother Corey, the father reached out and roped her to him. As if they'd done it a million times before, their hands intertwined as soon as they'd stopped moving. They couldn't seem to stop touching. Kim couldn't tell who was

more immersed into whom—and she loved that. “He knew a few of the adolescents who were attacked. Might be able to help with preventing future attacks if what Knox tells us is true.”

“Let’s test your theory, Doc. Let’s find out as much as we can about the kids and their habits.”

“You realize it’s a long shot?” she asked Knox. “I’m shooting into the dark and hoping I hit a target here. What kind of damage am I doing if I get it wrong? Like maybe redirecting resources to the wrong people or causing fear in some that shouldn’t be there.”

“It’s the *only* theory we have. The only one. I’d rather spend a few minutes exploring this and finding out that it’s wrong than continuing to wait around with my thumb up my ass hoping to keep my people safe when I know I can’t. Doing nothing is not an option. This is doing *something*.”

But what if she was wrong? The uncertainty ate at her, the same way she hated not knowing if the temporary fix they’d found for Brick would last. If he’d somehow *still* manage to lose control and all of them, including Brick, would blame and hate her for it. It might be unfair to think so harshly of the pack, but remnants of Shelly’s ghost hovered close by. She knew what it was like to be turned on by a mob.

Corianne stepped forward, her dulcet tones breaking through the doubt invading Kim’s head. “Corey’s the same age as the others. It’s only by the grace of God that he hasn’t been attacked. For all we know, he’s on the hit list.”

“God forbid,” Jackson muttered.

“You ask him whatever you need to find out, Doctor. He’ll answer you true. We need your help.”

She glanced at Corey and although he seemed mildly annoyed in the way that came with that age, especially when parents were involved, he gave her a slight nod of encouragement. “What do you need to know?” he asked. “Shoot.”

* * *

Brick waited outside of the clinic for Kim, willing the memories of the last time he’d waited like this to die a swift death. He didn’t like this tension between them, her mistrust of his fundamental nature causing a rift he

planned on healing.

Unlike the other night, she didn't walk out alone. Her nurse gave him a friendly smile, not the first one exchanged between them, and as with every other time, he tried not to encourage her to see more than what was there. Small-town living meant small-town pickings, sometimes, and the women were overly enthusiastic in the presence of a single guy.

"Hey, Chris," called Julia. She seemed surprised to see him there and her gaze bounced between him and Kim. "*Oh*. Right. Have a good night, Doc. Chris."

She and the other clinic nurse leaned into each other as they walked away, looking back and undoubtedly coming up with a conspiracy theory as to why he was there. Kim's reputation would be in tatters by morning. It filled him with a studly kind of pride, one she probably would not like.

"Hey," Kim said softly. "What are you doing here?"

He didn't sense any vehemence, only curiosity. That was a good start to putting aside their argument. "I was hoping to invite you over for dinner. Any chance of that?"

"I don't know, Brick. Maybe we need to slow down, let me focus on the adolescents at least for a few days." She looked stricken. "Unless you're not feeling okay? How's your beast doing?"

The last thing he wanted to do was alarm her. "Everything is under control. The wolf is tired but happy, the beast is in his hold, not trying to get out. I simply want to take you on a date, do things the way they should have been from the very beginning." He didn't remind her of the full moon looming over them. Tomorrow night they'd know for certain whether his beast could be contained or if he'd go feral. He wouldn't remind her, not tonight. "I owe you a lot, and saying thank you isn't enough. I don't even know if I have the speech capable of conveying my gratitude to you."

Or the feelings he had being with her, the dismay at leaving her side or the rush he felt simply by thinking about her. This relationship became more complicated and impossible with every hour they spent together. If by some nauseating chance he wouldn't get much more time with her, he'd make certain what time they had would be monumental.

"So, please let me do this one thing," Brick continued. "It's just something that I thought would be nice for us. I want to be nice to you." He hoped it didn't come out as needy or pleading as he thought it did, but he couldn't

stand another hour of Kim being angry at him. He couldn't forget the look on her face as she'd left that morning.

"I don't know. I mean, the adolescents and Knox..."

"You've done more in under a week than we've accomplished on our own in months. Just this weekend we sent some men to talk to contacts about the slayings, and a fight broke out."

"A fight?"

"Yeah." Their man would be alright, the bullet not doing as much damage as they'd originally feared. The vampire who'd shot him had managed to leave unscathed, but the pack wasn't done with him yet. "Sometimes our kind can have a serious lack of diplomacy."

"You think?" she asked, tone bone dry.

He chuckled. "Come with me," he said, holding out a hand. When she took it, the beast grumbled. Brick tried to gauge its mood, but it had been sullen and quiet for several hours. Brick didn't know how to handle the change in the beast. The night before a full moon, he expected restlessness and agitation. This seemed like the calm before the storm. Not necessarily a good thing.

Together they walked to his car, although Kim hesitated as they passed hers. "What about—"

"We'll come back for it later, or I can bring you in the morning."

"I keep forgetting that I don't have to worry about carjackings or break-ins. I don't know if I'll ever get used to being in a place where people still leave their doors unlocked."

"In case the neighbor needs to borrow something," Brick said as they got inside. He made sure they were both buckled before reversing and heading to a spot she might find familiar. "It's not a perfect place and certainly not without crime, but our concerns are different here. I visited Chicago once and can't say that I was impressed with all of the noise and movement and busyness. Life is slower here, but there's something magical about the way time seems to stand still. Our worries are simpler and easier, I think."

They rode along in companionable silence for a few minutes. At one point, Kim reached over and took his hand in hers. It sent a thrill of possessiveness through Brick, along with a sense of rightness.

"You're bringing me back to Lover's Lane?" Kim asked with a smile. He'd deliberately chosen the same path they'd used before, slowing once he

reached the entrance. Waiting for that moment of recognition from her added to his delight.

His mouth watered at the remembered taste of her, the way she'd held on to him for strength while he kissed her cunt. *That* was what he would always remember about this place. Cutting off his thoughts before his hardening cock betrayed him, he glanced at his woman.

Brick caught that curve of her lips and his heart pounded a little harder. "It ended badly last time. I wanted to do it over, the way it should have been the first time." He parked and when they got out of the car, Brick retrieved the collapsible cooler from the backseat. He'd spent a stupid amount of time picking out groceries from the local mart, having no idea what she liked or disliked. Hell, what she might be allergic to. Even now, his stomach twisted in knots over the idea that he'd chosen wrong and he'd ruin everything for a second time.

"Our first time here was memorable for more reasons than one. Like everything else I've known with you, I don't regret it for a minute." She looked like she wanted to say something else, something more, but held herself back. It wasn't the first time he'd noticed her hesitation.

He cautiously nudged her to confide in him. "I'm here for you, Kim. Whatever you need..."

"I'm terrified of making another bad decision," she whispered. It came after such a lengthy pause and in a voice so burdened, if not for his sensitive hearing he might have questioned whether or not he'd heard her correctly in the first place.

Brick chewed on the implications of her confession while scouting a good location to stop and eat. He had no idea what it was like to be responsible for the welfare of another human. Having lost Shelly to a bad decision must be the kind of burden that ate at a person's self-confidence until there was nothing left.

He found a grassy area—winced when he realized he hadn't thought to bring a blanket—and watched with satisfaction while Kim made herself at home anyway. She curled her legs beneath her, reaching for the cooler, while Brick joined her. They were once again alone in the make-out spot and it seemed to him already they'd made this a routine. This place belonged to them.

He took his time withdrawing the containers, watching the curiosity grow

on her face by the sixth one. Now that he could see it all spread out like this, perhaps he'd gone a little overboard.

By the time he'd withdrawn everything, he thought he'd found the right words to say. "There's nothing more important to me on this earth than my pack. I've spent my entire life making decisions based on what's best for pack. I suppose when you're a doctor, you spend your time making decisions that are best for your patients. Always."

Kim nodded, but her eyes didn't focus on him. They seemed far away, as if his words couldn't touch her. Still, he persisted.

"When this problem with my beast first started, I hid it from my Alpha. That was a mistake. I'm obligated to go to him, so he could make the decision that was best for us all. I could have hurt not only the members of our pack, but also the humans of Fire Creek who are doing nothing more than living their everyday lives. I could have killed them all before being stopped. All of them. Including you. I had no right to keep that to myself."

"But no one died," she said, her voice cracking on the last word. "I make a mistake, and people *die*."

"You're not listening to me. Are you really sitting here and telling me that you think you're the only person in the world to ever make a mistake? We *all* make mistakes. Every single day. Sometimes the results are horrible and catastrophic and cannot be fixed. Sometimes, we skate by and clench our assholes while we do, knowing things could have gone south really fast. But from every mistake we make, we learn from them. Each one."

"That's easy to say while you're sitting there not having to face the consequences of your mistakes. I have to look at myself in the mirror knowing that someone whose care I was responsible for doesn't get another day."

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself!" It took a minute for Brick to realize he'd been yelling. Christ, he hadn't brought her here for this, but he also wanted to shake loose the self-pity she wallowed in. He was falling hard for Kim and couldn't stand seeing her do this to herself.

Oh, fuck. He kind of liked her. A lot.

Stunned, not knowing what else to do or how to get through to her, he went for broke and said the words he was feeling out loud.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“I think I’m falling for you.”

Okay, wait.

Wait a minute.

Kim’s ears rang with the fading sounds of six very short words, and she paused to replay the words in her head again because she couldn’t have possibly heard him right, not when they were in the middle of arguing and the only thing that made sense for Brick to do was to yell and make her see logic.

Not tell her he was falling for her.

Not that.

Her heart boomed.

She stared at him, stared at those blue eyes, stared at his parted lips and stared harder there because if he’d said those very important words—words they weren’t ready to exchange yet, not when they barely knew each other—surely if he’d said them, there would be some sort of aftermath to be cleaned up.

Except there was no aftermath, no cataclysmic event with fallout damage. Instead, there was a delicate warmth in her belly, a hesitant smile pushing up her lips. There was the overwhelming urge to curl her fingers into the collar of his shirt, yank him closer and brush her mouth against his. So she did.

Brick growled low in his throat, pulling her into his lap to explore more. His tongue darted between her lips, tasting and taking, spreading heat through her entire body as she hungrily kissed him back. Beneath her butt, his arousal grew harder, and the sexiness of his reaction threatened to consume her alive.

Her fingers tightened in the material of his shirt and if she came close to choking him, Brick was too polite to point it out. Instead, he slipped his hand between her legs. Somehow, he managed to stroke her through the rough material such that she could feel his touch as if nothing separated them. Her clit became swollen and sensitive, but it wasn’t enough to get her to the completion she needed.

Kim snarled her frustration, stopping long enough to nip at his bottom lip. Her playful bites went to his chin before claiming his lips again. Brick

watched her at work, his brilliantly blue eyes wild and intense.

She rocked her hips, trying to increase the pressure she felt. Pleasure remained elusive however, and she gripped his head, pulling him closer, almost consuming him in her ardor. He did that sexy growl thing one more time, then whispered harshly, "Enough!"

The heat in his eyes could have sparked a flame. Brick blew out a breath though, shaking his head while a slow grin awakened. "You..." Although she expected him to dive back in for another heated kiss, he surprised her by reaching for one of the containers. "We eat. Then more. Later."

"Eat?" His erection felt like a steel rod. She could hardly ignore it and couldn't figure out how he could.

"Eat," he said before slipping a date between her lips. The sweetness of the fruit, combined with tangy goat cheese and smoky bacon, had her moaning in pleasure a moment later. "Damn it, woman, I'm going to seduce you *the proper way* whether you like it or not."

Brick began prying open the lids of the containers, and her stupid curiosity wanted a peek inside each one before she made up her mind whether to be offended or not.

"I hadn't realized there were rules for seduction."

"Absolutely. If it's done right, we get to tell the grandkids stories of it fifty years from now. When it's done the way I've been carrying on, you only get to tell your closest girlfriends."

Amused, Kim snorted out a rude noise. Between the declaration of his feelings and the very brave daring of bringing up grandkids, she had the very certain sense that she was falling hard for this man, too. But to respond with it now, so soon after he'd said he was falling for her yet after a sizable amount of time when she didn't respond in kind, it didn't feel right, somehow. She'd let him know, when the time was right. Let him seduce her for now. She'd enjoy herself.

He pulled out a variety of foods, most she recognized, a few she didn't. All of them were fed to her. Many of them fed to her in between kisses.

The days were longer, but time appeared to stand still, helping Brick with his plans. Nature colluded with him to ensure that Kim wanted to stay bundled next to him for as long as possible, until the food ran out, and longer than that. The bottles of water he withdrew from the cooler remained cool, soothing her parched throat while they talked about themselves. Neither

mentioned his lycanthropy nor her failings as a physician. Kim discovered he didn't like white chocolate—practically a sin—but hoarded Girl Scout cookies in his freezer every year. He found it appalling that she'd never been to a national park and suggested a trip to the Grand Canyon in the fall.

They talked and they laughed and they ate. They kissed. They touched.

Humidity came and stayed, a third, uninvited guest to their picnic. Kim swiped at her face on occasion, wicking away the sweat, while Brick seemed oblivious to the change. Jealous, she thought of the ancient window unit of her rental and hoped it would crank out enough cool air to sleep by. If push came to shove, she could nap for an hour in the car, engine running. If in the early days of spring she already felt this way, August would be hell on earth.

But her fears dropped away as Brick loosened a button on her shirt, peeling away the material from her sticky skin. When she thought he would have stopped there—ever-polite Brick—he unfastened another one. Then another. The dry air over her damp skin brought with it a small measure of relief. Seeking more, Kim arched her neck. He brought his mouth down, growling softly as he bit the delicate flesh. The other side of her neck still smarted from the previous bite and she tensed, expecting another marking from him.

Instead he inhaled as he dragged his nose down, and she flushed with embarrassment that she wasn't the type of woman who merely glowed in the face of Florida heat. Sweat rolled down her forehead and neck. But the erection he held on to for almost the entire time they'd been here seemed harder. Apparently he didn't mind.

God, this man.

His hand slipped into the shirt gap, questing fingers locating her nipple with unerring accuracy. Kim hissed out a breath as he plucked at it over the material of her bra, his touch as hot as a brand. Her breath stuttered out of her, her mind and heart full of emotion and need. Her appetite for food now satisfied, a carnal appetite now raged.

If she couldn't tell him with words the extent of her desire and depth of feeling for him, she could tell him bodily. She reached for him, pulling him closer. Her other hand sneaked between them, stroking along his length. "What is it about you and the outdoors? I think you bring me here because you have a bit of exhibitionist in you."

"It's our nature. When we're not being stifled by clothes, we're running free with nothing but the wind touching fur. We play in the grass and leaves,

it only makes sense to love there too.”

She made a sound in the back of her throat. Brick nibbled across her lips, licking away the sting periodically. “I think you lucked out once with your attention-shy doctor. I’m afraid the best I can do for the next time is *maybe* the backyard.”

He drew back far enough to study her face. His eyes hadn’t turned radiant yet, but the desire reflecting in them made her flush. “Is that some sort of hint that we should pack up and head to a more private venue?”

“Only if you want to get lucky.” She shrugged. “Up to you.”

He tweaked her nipple, rubbing it to a swollen tip. When his mouth captured it a moment later, a breath escaped her. Brick managed to pull down her bra low enough to expose her to his pleasure. If he was working on convincing her to join his exhibitionist ways, he wouldn’t have to work long.

“I’m already lucky,” he said in between licks. “I’m here with you and couldn’t ask for anything more.”

“I think you can ask for one more thing, Brick,” she said softly.

“Yeah? What would that be?”

“Ask me to come home with you right now.”

* * *

The ride home should have been mundane and boring. Except Brick kept sliding Kim these heated looks, these looks that spoke volumes about his intent, these looks full of *promises*.

The car jerked to a halt in front of his house, and Brick was out and next to Kim before she’d unbuckled her seatbelt. The door flew open, and he scooped her into his arms, demanding a sensual kiss before she could ask his intent. He ravaged her mouth, his tongue sweeping in and parting her lips.

Brick stole her breath, kissing her until her head swam, and she had to grip him tightly, certain gravity no longer existed. The seconds it took him to fumble with the knob she used to wrestle away the shirt from his body, exposing him to her viewing pleasure. Heat flooded between her legs, the sight of such a gorgeous man ready and available to her seemingly more fantasy than reality. How had she gotten so damned lucky?

“Stay still,” she grumbled when they stumbled over the threshold. Her shirt gaped open, and the material of his trapped his arms at his sides. It put him in

the perfect position for what she wanted to accomplish.

Brick had just enough time to kick the door closed before she kneeled before him, hands working with haste on freeing him from his jeans. She loved the way he looked inside his clothes, but even more, she loved the way he looked out of them. It took a small amount of self-control from touching herself in response, very lurid thoughts inspired by his beauty.

He seemed to know the effect he had on her, the way her eyes feasted on him. Brick stepped out of his pants and shoes, but left the button-down shirt on. With the material rolled up at the sleeves and the flaps giving her only the barest peek at his washboard stomach, Kim had to bite her bottom lip with appreciation. Her breath caught, inhaling air of secondary importance. She walked her fingers over his muscled thighs, bypassing his cock already beading at the tip, to smooth them over the ridges and lines of his abdomen. It gave him the strength to break free of his bond, but she decided to distract him before he took control.

Brick hissed in a breath when Kim rose higher and ran her tongue beneath his balls. The musky scent, dark and savory, encouraged her to open her mouth delicately and suck on one, then the other. She moaned in deep appreciation of his taste, in how very much she wanted to worship him like this for hours.

Above her, Brick seemed at a loss on what to do with his hands. He threaded fingers into her hair, only to withdraw them a moment later. As she swirled her tongue over his sac, he pulled her head forward and immediately released her, torn on what to do next. She thought he might collapse when her mouth went to his cock.

“Kim.”

She shuddered, hearing her name said with such exasperated pleasure. “Hmm?” Perverse pride tickled her while she acted as if she didn’t know what all of this licking and teasing was doing to him. Her pussy squeezed while she memorized the seductive taste of Brick. “Something the matter?”

Whatever he might have said evaporated when she gripped his cock and closed her mouth over the spongy tip. This time he allowed himself the luxury of holding on to her head, gently guiding her over his length as she sucked. He murmured encouragement, interlaced with a blue streak of cursing. The more he tugged on her though, the less pressure Kim applied. She grinned in between licks, enjoying the way his muscles tensed and

jumped.

Suddenly, Brick pulled his hips away, forcing her to stop her tease. Her mouth watered, already missing the taste of him, but she saw the look on his face. His expression was hungry, tight and as needful for her as she'd been for him. It sent her arousal spiraling out of control.

The look in his eyes was so dark, Kim stood quickly, then backed up. Her thighs hit the couch hard and she almost toppled over.

Brick's arm shot out and caught her though. "You don't get to tease and then get away that easily," he murmured.

A sexy growl underlined his words, so much animal hunger in the way he looked at her, in his ragged breathing. He brought his mouth down on hers in a sizzling kiss that should have melted every bone in her body. It took a strength of will to not puddle at his feet.

His hands made quick work of her shirt, exposing the rest of her skin to him. Her bra and panties followed soon behind, and she had the distant, hazy thought to be grateful he hadn't destroyed them in his haste.

He seated her on the armrest of the couch and stepped between her thighs. Blunt fingers tested her readiness and his eyes flashed when he discovered what all of this kissing and touching and arousal did to her.

Kim held her breath when the tip of his cock nudged at her opening, gasped when he slowly sank into her. It stretched her so deliciously full that she groaned, her greedy pussy pulsing the deeper he went. She closed her eyes and gave in to sensation, blinded to everything but the feel of Brick filling her. The scent of their sex perfumed the air.

"Look at me," he said softly.

She had to bite her lip to concentrate, but her eyes fluttered open. The way he thrust inside her was slow, sweet agony.

Brick reached forward and touched a spot near her neck. It lit up with sensation, bordering on pain. "My mark on my woman. Do you understand?"

She nodded, resigned and cautiously happy about it. By some instinct, Brick leaned in closer to her, and Kim wrapped herself in his strength. But when his shoulder came into proximity, she gave in to temptation and put her mouth over the skin. Brick must have sensed what she would do next, his breath quickening. "Yes."

Kim bit down, gently at first, but with the sound of his growls filling her ear, and the force of his thrusts increasing, she went for broke. She worried

her mouth over his thick skin, as hard as she dared without actually breaking it. If she thought for a second that she might be hurting him in a bad way, the pitch of his growl encouraged her.

Before she'd finished, Brick reached between her legs and began to stroke. He found her swollen clit with pinpoint accuracy and slid his finger over it. Kim's world brightened, her pussy clenching hard on his cock as he fucked her.

She released him to savor the sensations traveling through her, but she glimpsed the damage of her bite, and pride swelled through her. She couldn't help but touch it, to make certain he was aware. Through half-lidded eyes she peered up at him and whispered, "My mark on my man."

She lost herself to pleasure, in the feel of him loving her. It was overwhelming and wonderful and an experience she'd never forget.

Rolling her hips, she gave back to him, needing to bring him with her in this ultimate release. Throwing her head back, she gasped as she fought for air. His tongue laved a hot, wet trail across her skin until his mouth found the tip of her breast. Her nipple was tight and hard, his mouth and teeth sparking a delicious, pleasurable pain as he consumed her.

She scraped her nails along his back, reveling in the feel of his muscles and strength. It was a tease to the senses to know this man in all his gloriousness belonged to her. The knowledge made her slide her hands further down, caressing his ass, and encourage the forceful thrusts making her cry out his name.

Brick suddenly withdrew, the sudden loss of him like being stripped down to her bare soul. When he tugged her onto the couch, Kim understood and kneeled facing away from him.

At the same time Brick thrust inside her again, he reached between her legs and found her swollen clit. God, she was sensitive—so sensitive—from his attention and she moaned, certain her abused body couldn't stand one more orgasm, couldn't stand to be pushed over the ledge just one more time.

His other hand cupped her breast and when Kim elevated herself on her knees, he covered her back with his front. Skin to skin, she felt connected to him, a part of him. Capable of falling in love with him.

Overwhelmed, she fell forward, Brick mounting her once again. He scraped his teeth over her shoulder blade, marking her. His fingers pinched her clit, sending sensation splintering out, and she bucked as an orgasm

claimed her. Kim screamed his name again, coming back to her senses to hear him murmuring her name in an erotic chant.

She sobbed with pleasure as his cock swelled inside her. He groaned a low, desperate sound, and Kim grabbed his hand. She curled her fingers in his as his body slowed, his movements stiffening.

“Brick,” she whispered. He was close, so close to the end, and she needed him to know. No matter what happened tomorrow night when the full moon came to claim him, he needed to know how she felt. Her world was forever changed, forever better because he was in it. “Brick—I think I’m falling in love with you.”

He thrust inside her twice more; twice more she listened to his ragged breathing as he gasped for air and held on to the moment connecting them and then pulled out. The warm jets of his seed spilled onto her back, but Brick pulled Kim close. He wrapped his arm around her waist, holding her to him as he whispered back, “I’m falling for you too.”

She closed her eyes, reveling the moment, knowing what was happening between them was right.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The following morning when Brick pulled his shirt overhead, he winced as a soreness enveloped his shoulder. Facing the mirror, he leaned in closer and inspected the black-and-purple area.

He grinned.

Kim had left for work an hour ago, but not before pointing out the damage of her ardor. He loved it. And the fact that his human chose to show her passion for him with the pack way made him prouder than he'd ever thought he could be of her. He didn't know what he might have done in a past life to have earned a woman like her now, but it humbled him to be able to claim her as his.

The sound of his front door slamming pulled him out of memories of a long night of loving and back to reality. "Yo," he called.

His Alpha responded with a chuff Brick recognized. It caught him by surprise, but of course he welcomed him as he should. "Are you ready for the run tonight?" Knox asked as he made his way into the bedroom.

Brick pulled on his shoes. "I want to get her ready for it, prepare her as much as I can for what she should expect. Other than that..." He grunted, shrugging at the same time. "Should be just another full moon. Nothing to worry about. Right?"

He couldn't help but feel that Knox had shown up to keep an eye on him when any of the other guys could have given him a ride. The visit was unexpected and so was the question about the run.

"We've never had a situation like this before. I don't know what to expect and I don't see how you can either. But you'll be with pack tonight and, of course, we take care of our own."

He refused to think Kim had been brought into his life only to be taken away so soon. Fate had brought them together, the universe sending him a healer when he needed to be healed. "It's just another night when the beast gets to come out to play. Since Kim, he's been under control and God knows I don't know why, but I'm not about to look it too hard in the face."

"So what happens if she leaves?" Knox asked quietly.

“I had a crack in my barrier. It’s still there, but it’s healing. The line isn’t as deep, and it doesn’t run as far across the barrier. With a little luck and a little time, it’ll go from being the crack it was to just a memory. She did that for me.”

His heart hammered, some whispering voice in his head repeating the question Knox posed, but Brick evaded. The thread of fear was unfounded and unwarranted. They’d only just found each other. He wouldn’t doubt the strength of their bond. He refused to.

“I wish you only the best, my friend,” Knox said after a pause. “I’m glad you’ve found your happiness.”

But as they left together to retrieve his vehicle from the clinic, the whispering voice became more insistent. He tried to shrug it off, because it sure as shit wasn’t going to sway him away from Kim or her sweet kisses. Having Alpha put a voice to his own doubt didn’t feel good though.

When they arrived at the clinic, being in close proximity to Kim boosted his spirits. Although he’d only planned on picking up his keys from Kim, who’d borrowed his car to get to work, it made sense to go inside and steal a kiss. Something to get him through the rest of the day.

Knox waved to the mailman, who pulled away from the clinic in his little red pickup. Small-town living. Before going inside, Brick took one last look at the area, and his heart swelled. Four modest cars in the parking lot, his own parked to the side of the building. Off in the distance, a rooster made its presence known. The sun beamed down, promising another scorching day, while bees flew in circles near a patch of wildflowers.

He’d do whatever it took to convince his country doctor that she belonged here with him. She *belonged*. After last night, after he loved her often and loved her well, he doubted she questioned it anymore, but he wouldn’t take that chance. He knew how she felt about living in a small town, but maybe with time she’d learn to appreciate it. Perhaps after spending more time with him in particular, she might actually learn to love it.

“You coming?” Brick asked, not really waiting for the answer. He was halfway across the threshold before Knox responded in the affirmative.

“Have you or her made any more progress on the adolescents?”

The question threatened to hamper his good feelings. Brick mentally shook it off. “I don’t know, honestly. I catch her writing on notepads at all sorts of hours. Brainstorming, I think.”

“That’s good for us. I know you forget to see her as a physician, and we’ve needed someone like her for a while. Doc Casper tolerated our presence, but I don’t think I would’ve ever seen him helping us the way she’s trying to. Dr. Sharpe is good people.”

“I know.” The more he thought about it, telling her that he was falling for her even though things had happened fast and furious between them, he knew it was the right thing to say. He knew going one more day without telling her would have been a mistake. “But do me a favor, tell her that yourself. Her self-confidence has taken a beating and if she hears that you have faith in her, it’ll go a long way.”

“Got to do with that actress?”

The question caught him off guard. The clinic receptionist saved him from having to respond right away. The smile she gave him suggested she knew why Kim had come to work in a different car this morning and that she approved of it. She said, “Good timing. We’re about to break for lunch.”

“Is it all right if we head back to her office?”

“Sure. Would you give me a favor though and bring this stuff back with you?”

For a second, he thought she was going to hand him the cardboard box beside the phone. It didn’t look heavy, but the packages inside—paper cups, longneck lighters, a jar of lollipops and other sundry items—looked ready to spill from the top. She’d been plucking out some of the contents when they came inside. Supplies from the run Julie had made, he supposed.

Instead, the cute blonde handed him a bundle of mail, including a large FedEx envelope. Brick took it all without a second thought. Although he caught a glimpse of a large red font declaring *Final Notice*, he shoved his curiosity to the back of his mind and didn’t rifle. He had every hope Kim would find a way to dig herself out of a hole, even if it meant to leaning on a friend for help.

When they were alone in the office, Brick addressed Knox’s earlier question. “I didn’t know you knew about Shelly. So you knew who Kim was before she got here?”

“Natch.”

“Natch?” Brick snorted. “Think you’ve been hanging out with the adolescents too long. Next thing you know you’ll be saying things like *ratchet* or *nexterday*.”

“What the fuck is a nexterday?”

Brick chuckled, but when the air shifted, bringing with it a wild, feminine vitality, his wolf stirred. They both knew the moment she entered the room. His mirth fell away, and the slow thuds of his heart boomed louder.

When she came inside, a vision of prettiness, a look of pure delight blossomed. A delicate hand curled around a fragrant cup of coffee. She’d been sipping on it until she’d spied him inside her office. Not like she could miss the two werewolves crowded inside.

Today’s designer uniform consisted of plain black slacks and a yellow silk blouse that might have cost as much as his car. Pearl earrings she’d confessed to being plastic replicas and the matching necklace instantly made her a model for fine living. Her look contrasted sharply with his blue jeans and V-neck shirt. It didn’t stop him from wanting her so badly he ached.

“Man, the energy you two give off is surreal,” Knox muttered. “The odds have got to be one in a billion that you found each other.”

“I’ll take those odds,” Kim said softly. Her gaze met Brick’s and lingered there. But then it swept slowly over him, picking up on how he was doing in that doctor way of hers. She probably didn’t even realize she was doing it. “Are you okay, you and your beast?”

She worried about his beast when loss of control was the furthest thing from his mind. His beast remained contained, his wolf content. “No problems and honestly, probably couldn’t be better. Just wanted to see you one last time—”

Her eyes widened. “Brick?”

“For the day,” he said in a measured calm. “Tonight you’ll lock yourself indoors and not come out for any reason.”

Kim rubbed a hand over eyes drooping with fatigue. He felt a tinge of guilt in contributing to her state, but if he were honest with himself, he was giving himself a high-five about her state too. “We didn’t get a chance to talk about this. What does everyone else in town do? What am I supposed to do in an emergency?”

“The church hosts a monthly shut-in, people are safe,” Knox said. A coincidental tradition that pack encouraged and financially sponsored to keep going. “We go to a secluded area to run. Almost never do the paths cross. It’s a safe night, so don’t let him scare you unnecessarily.”

A black look passed over Brick’s face. “Right. You don’t have to be

scared, but you do have to be aware. Stay indoors, and there's nothing to worry about. It'll be a good night for a glass of wine and a book."

She went to him, resting her coffee cup on the table, and tiptoed. He couldn't help himself though and scooped her into his arms, uncaring if Knox watched, and brought his mouth down on hers. The kiss they exchanged might have started out as a way to loan her his strength, but in the end, became a place for him to return to.

When the full moon passed, he would be going home to his Kim.

* * *

By the time Brick released her, Kim's head was swimming. She stepped away from him, meaning to see the guys out, instead stumbling into her desk.

He tried to right her, but between not getting much sleep, a pulse racing from a serious case of caffeine overdose and dizziness from his kiss, she lost all sense of coordination. She scrabbled at the desk to help keep her upright and knocked over the stupid coffee mug. "*Shit.*"

Brick might have been able to move fast, but the coffee spreading over the stained desk and scattered papers moved faster. All three of them snatched notebooks, bills and office supplies, trying to spare them getting soaked. It didn't help much though, and she wanted to scream at her own clumsiness. "I'm so sorry," she said. "Sorry, guys."

Knox trotted to the dispenser and pulled out several layers of the scratchy paper towels. All three of them got to work blotting papers and drying everything within reach. Knox even went so far as to open up envelopes and spread out the papers which had been tucked inside, but now needed some TLC if they were to be legible later. He tore into a FedEx envelope, soaked through on one full corner.

"Brick?" Knox snarled.

Kim's head whipped to see what was the matter, afraid he might have gotten hold of one of her embarrassing bills. Knox dipped his head and then inhaled deeply. By the time he raised it again, his face was a mottled red though and he shoved the paperwork at Brick.

"What the *fuck* is this?"

She moved toward them, at the same time trying to figure out what might be causing the werewolf Alpha to go apoplectic. It took her a long, long

moment to read the name on the return label on the envelope and turn Kim's world upside-down.

Before she could even begin to grasp at a word, some way to explain or apologize, Knox shook out three glass slides. Leftovers from the blood sample she'd sent to Becka for analysis. Brick cupped the slides in his hand, bringing them up to his nose and smelling them.

"Wait," she whispered. Her voice shook, the weight of saying the single word more than she could bear. She'd somehow forgotten how sensitive their senses of smell were. If the package had contained only papers, it might have slipped by unnoticed. The damning slides though gave everything away.

She wanted to admit to a huge mistake. She needed to explain.

Brick read whatever report Becka might have sent; whatever damning evidence she'd returned, he read every word. "There's wild blood in here. Is it mine? *Jesus, Kim. Jesus.*" His fist tightened on the pages, pulling them in until his fingers should have punctured the fragile paper. "We trusted you. *I* trusted you. This is how...fuck, this is how you repay us?"

"Please—" The word lodged in her throat.

"How did this happen?" Knox barked, in every sense of the word. His wolf and maybe his beast rode close to the surface, and she didn't have to look at him to know it. His speech bordered on animal warning sounds.

"My fault," Brick said. Like his Alpha, his wolf's whine could be heard in the response. "She drew my blood, and I trusted her to destroy it as we'd agreed. *I trusted her.*"

Kim had never before heard such despair and anguish in three words. Her heart broke into a thousand pieces as Brick admitted to the grave error. She knew no matter what she told these men, they'd never believe that she had no intention of betraying them any more than she had.

"Why? What could possibly motivate you to do this? Were you hoping to gain something out of it?" he asked in a biting, accusing tone. "I can't even imagine what... I don't know. Some kind of new scientific find that'll get you a job out of Fire Creek. I know how much you hate it here."

Heat filled her face while the blood drained from it. That wasn't true. Not anymore. "That's not fair..." They'd been wronged, not her. She'd done the shitty thing, not them. But to hear Brick throw those words back at her, flinging his disgust, was like a bullet to the gut. She had no defense though. None. "I tried to tell you about it, I tried."

“Is this how you were able to piece together the link between Brick’s condition and what’s happening with the adolescents?” Knox asked.

Fighting back tears, struggling to regain her professionalism, she pulled her gaze away from Brick’s. “Without the analysis of his blood, I could have spent the next twenty years trying to figure out what the two had in common. My motives might have been a little shaky, but I promise you that I did it for a good reason—”

“And just because you lied only once before, we should believe you’re not lying now?” Brick mocked.

“I’m not lying!” she bit out. “It no longer became about a fascinating scientific discovery, but about how could I best serve the pack with the information I gleaned. You have certain hormone levels that are unheard of in regular humans. They led to my first conclusions about the beast inside you. And if I could get more, do a before-and-after analysis—”

“Are you fucking kidding me? You seriously have the nerve to be standing there telling us that not only would you do it again if you had the chance, but you actually *want* to? All in the name of science, no less. You are a snake, you are the lowliest snake, and I cannot believe I fell for your lies. This has been about you, always putting yourself first.”

Kim’s heart was breaking. So many pieces. The two of them faced off, yelling at each other, when this morning she’d been huddled in his arms, in love and the world at her feet. How could have it have fallen apart like this so soon and so quickly? She’d let every flimsy excuse for not telling him get in her way because she hadn’t wanted to confess. She’d been scared to face the exact situation in front of her now. “I know you won’t believe me, no matter how long or hard I explain my motivations, but everything I’m telling you is the truth. This blood, regardless of how I obtained it and what I did with it, is the first step in keeping your pack stable, if not safe. If I had to do it over again, I would.”

“Goddammit,” muttered Brick.

“Would I take that blood and have it analyzed by one of the best minds in the United States? Absolutely. Would I betray your trust in me by not telling you about what I was doing prior to doing it?” She maneuvered until she stood in Brick’s direct line of sight. Every part of her ached to move toward him, hoping by some miracle he’d want to hug her close as they talked. That he wanted to forgive her and give her some small sign that while not liking

her very much right now, they would get past this together and ultimately, he *would* offer forgiveness. “I would never. It hurts me like you don’t know that I did this without your knowledge and that I didn’t get the chance to explain myself like I’d planned.”

The longest pause passed where neither of the men said anything. Brick’s eyes were narrowed slits, too angry to focus on her. The anger seemed to hover above his skin like a coat, covering his entire body and on display for anyone to see. Knox, on the other hand, appeared to consider her words.

“Look,” Kim said at last, “it helped. Whether or not you like my methods or my motivations, I helped.”

“Don’t break an arm patting yourself on the back, Dr. Sharpe.” Brick pushed past her without looking back. He didn’t say anything else before leaving the room, and she couldn’t tell if that made it better or worse.

Kim listened to his footsteps, tracking his progress until she couldn’t hear him any longer. What remained of her heart swept away by a cloud of grief. She’d wanted to reach out to him, to whisper *don’t go*, but she did none of these things, knowing it would only enrage him further.

“What have I done?” she asked, and at last her legs gave out beneath her. She managed to crumple into the waiting office chair, but she couldn’t even feel it. Her entire body went numb, devoid of sensitivity and life.

She looked up when Knox rested his hand on her shoulder. He searched the air, as if looking for the right words to pluck from it before kneeling beside her. He said, “If you were pack, I would have you flogged within an inch of your life for what you’ve done and it wouldn’t have mattered what the reason was. Don’t care much if you did it for science or for altruism. You betrayed us, and being able to trust you is the most critical part of who we are. It’s because we can’t trust the human world that we don’t often let them in.”

“I’m so sorry, Knox. You’ll never know how much, but I am so very, very sorry. Not just because I got caught, but because it was wrong. It was wrong of me on a million levels. I should have come to you first and asked. I should have given you the choice instead of taking the decision into my own hands. If there’s something I would change, that’s what it would be.”

He exhaled forcibly. “I know. And as you’d said, you did a very good thing for us with the results. If you were pack, you’d take your punishment and we’d all move forward, knowing you’d never repeat your mistake.”

“If the medical community learned about this, I’d lose my license.” Once again, she’d failed as a physician. Maybe it was a sign she should give up practicing altogether.

“A second time, you mean.”

Kim closed her eyes against the accusation. “Yes.”

“Then they won’t hear of it, at least, not from anyone in the pack. You make mistakes, like all of us, but I know that you’re good for this community. As a leader, I need you here. And even more important to me personally, you’re good for my friend. A blind man could see that you’re special to him.”

“I don’t think he’ll ever forgive me.”

“Then, Doc,” he said as he rose to leave. “I suggest you find a way to make him.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Brick stood apart from some of the others in the clearing where the run originated every month. He'd left his shoes in the car, the easier to locate when he returned. The grass and damp earth cooled his feet, helping him find his center right before the beast would be given full control of his body.

Emotions he didn't know how to deal with or even identify ran riot within him.

One hundred acres of land, pack-owned and kept for this once-a-month gathering, stretched before him. On an annual basis the trees were farmed and sent to a mill for myriad uses. It kept the pack in a healthy bank account, but also discouraged others from putting up permanent fixtures or trying to claim squatting rights. To the outside observer, it appeared an active, viable business venture. Only pack knew why the land would never be sold or given to the world of humans.

He'd thought he'd be bringing her here to experience a different side of the pack. Those plans didn't exist anymore.

The wolf bayed again, and nothing Brick told him eased the ache they both felt right now. He'd been used and deceived. She'd snuck in like a cancer, spreading until he couldn't fathom himself as separate from her. Just thinking her name put a hurt in the center of his heart where she'd been most present.

But he couldn't stop thinking about Kim.

He'd put her before pack, trusting her because he wanted to, not because she'd earned it. If she'd been just another Joe off the street, would he have allowed her to draw his blood, much less keep it? For her, he'd allowed himself to be distracted and not pay attention to one of the pack's most sacred laws to keep themselves separated from the humans whenever possible.

Brick pulled himself out of sorrowful musings when he noticed Morris approaching. The man nodded at Brick by way of acknowledgment when they stood side by side. "Your doctor going to be okay tonight?"

"She'll manage." He didn't want to explain what had happened to anyone yet. His culpability couldn't be ignored. He deserved censure at the very least and didn't think he'd avoid it. He'd fucked up so many times and in so many

ways with Kim. Over the past week, he'd not been himself at all.

"I gotta say though, I didn't expect to see you here tonight."

"You don't have to tell me. I didn't know what would happen."

"She was determined to save you."

God, was she. Without expecting anything in return, she'd gone out of her way to help him. All of them.

Shit, he didn't want to think about her. Not tonight. This was a night for the pack. A night for his beast to go unrestrained, the way it had been most of his life. His beast appeared less agitated lately as compared to the past few weeks; it looked toward the sky often. It bayed its need for release, and Brick's heart clenched in response every time. "My beast needs this in a way that's new to me. Although it doesn't make a lot of sense, I can feel the restlessness like a bad itch beneath the skin."

"Being newly mated comes with a case of nerves. You are, aren't you?"

"Mated?" Good Christ, no. He hadn't become mated...had he?

Morris laughed, then frowned. "*Nervous*. I already know you're mated. Unless you're not?"

"Hell if I know," Brick grumbled, "but that's a problem for tomorrow."

His friend didn't look as if he believed him, but he gave a curt nod after a small pause. Without speaking further, Morris stepped out of his clothing. Time for the run. Brick followed suit, putting his clothes in the row already formed by some of the others.

The moon's pull warmed his skin, raising his awareness. Every hair follicle appeared to respond by lifting in the direction of the moon, like a plant to sunlight. He'd be a liar if he didn't admit to dreading the moment of the shift every month, but at least the lycanthrope's Creator gave them a flood of pleasure sensations to make up for the split-second breakage of bones and skin, the melding of flesh and muscle.

A moment's trepidation hit him as he looked around and saw the others in various stages of preparation. These were his brothers and sisters, all of them lycanthropes and one of Nature's greatest miracles. They would unleash their beasts, some only to run or feast. Some would rut because the urge was upon them. The hedonistic nature of the beast would dictate what would happen.

He checked the metaphysical barrier and found his own beast pacing and scraping its claws against the barrier. Although it didn't throw itself against the force, the senseless agitation didn't escape Brick's notice. If only he

could communicate with it in the same way he spoke with the wolf. The beast made everything so much more complicated.

Brick pulled his attention away from it when Knox walked into the clearing. Voices fell away as everyone waited for their Alpha to signal the run. Over two hundred shifters congregated in one area. It should have been dangerous and chaotic, but their clever, clever beasts made it work. A tradition like this one would never be broken.

Knox was the first to shift. He bounded away on all fours almost immediately, his beast intent on taking advantage of its freedom. It growled like a wild thing into the evening, but even in this form Brick heard the play in its call. He wanted his playmates to join him and one by one, they did. Around him, Brick monitored the progress of others as they shifted, that beautiful lightning-quick moment of agony and ecstasy.

With all of the chaos his beast had caused over the past week, Brick paused right before he would have allowed himself to shift. He didn't want to punish it for being true to its nature, but he couldn't help but notice the way his heart quickened at the thought of letting the beast finally run rampant. Not long ago, it had been free when it shouldn't have been. It could have hurt Kim, but didn't.

God, he did not want to think about her right now.

But he couldn't stop himself from smelling her skin and feeling her soft body beneath his. He could almost taste her lips and hear her throaty moans. His dick hardened and for a moment, he wondered if maybe he should put off the run for another hour, if only to go back to her and—

No. She'd betrayed pack for her own selfish needs. There couldn't be reason enough for her to have used him the way she had. If he couldn't trust her not to betray him to the outside world, how could he ever believe that the things she'd done with him meant more than just a roll in the sack?

To think he'd told her he was developing strong feelings for her, regardless of how true it might be.

Brick's heart clenched and he shoved aside thoughts of the physician who'd done the unthinkable, in more ways than one.

He'd go on his run, let his beast loose and tomorrow morning, go back to his old life. Everything back to normal. No more women for a while, and definitely stay away from the clinic at all costs.

Brick shifted.

* * *

Kim sat down at her desk, never more thankful than today that the workday was over. Her eyes must have been holding a pound of sand, even her hair weighing more than she wanted to carry. The night had been one nightmare after another, each one stacking on the last one and ensuring she didn't pass one minute in comfortable sleep.

She couldn't stop replaying the look of disappointment on Knox's face, nor the one of utter betrayal on Brick's. Her mind bombarded her with images of Abe, the poor, dead adolescent who'd spent his last hour of life trapped in a beast's body.

Every sound during the night made her sit up straight, heart pounding. She'd wait, breath held, for a repeat sound, some indication that a beast made its way into her small rental. Brick had given her excruciatingly little detail with regards to the full moon. Thanks to the dearth of information, her mind helpfully supplied all of the other details. Things like how the beast liked to break into the homes of unsuspecting women who couldn't afford an alarm system and eat them one limb at a time. Or maybe that the beast wouldn't necessarily eat her, but at least come in and rampage, leaving destruction in its path to get back at the way she'd hurt Brick.

It would serve her right.

Those thoughts assailed her the worst. All of the what-ifs and woulda-shoulda-couldas. What would have happened if she'd told Brick about the blood analysis first? What could getting more blood from Brick or any of the other lycanthropes yield? What if she'd never sent the blood in the first place? Could they have had a future together, especially if he managed to get his beast under control again?

The few times she'd drifted to sleep, her mind conjured up the image of Brick's back as he left her behind. The way he'd walked away from her deceit without giving her a second glance.

It all made for a very long, very tiring night.

If she managed to do the dictation on today's patients without mixing them up, for example putting the details of the chicken pox case into the details of the gastrointestinal bug case, it would be a small miracle. God, the way she felt, if she blinked too hard, it might turn into a thirty-minute nap.

It took more energy than she thought she had, but she dragged the coffee cup closer and drained the cold contents. She grimaced as the bitter brew went down, but had to admit the shock of it gave her a much-needed boost.

When she heard Knox's voice, she attributed it to an auditory hallucination. If she thought long and hard enough about it, she could come up with a medical term for it, but her psych rotation seemed like a million years ago. Maybe if she hit up her favorite search engine...

"Doctor Sharpe—"

"Sorry, Doctor, they just kind of barged in."

Kim's head snapped up as she jerked awake. When had she fallen asleep? "What? Sorry...what?"

Knox burst into the room, followed by three other guys she didn't recognize. Tonya pushed through their bulk, clearly unimpressed that any one of them could bench press her with one hand.

Kim waved her off before she could apologize further or attempt to explain the presence of the shifters. Kim considered them her patients now and if they needed her help, she wouldn't turn any of them down. She waited until Tonya left before addressing them though. "Knox, why can't any of you use the telephone and make an appointment like everyone else?" she asked tiredly. She sipped more coffee. Grimaced.

"Have you heard from Brick?"

She blinked hard, trying to clear the cobwebs from her fogged brain. "I'd sooner hear from the President of the United States." It suddenly dawned on her that Knox stood in her clinic asking for Brick. They'd been together last night when their beasts had run free, and now Brick's leader didn't know his whereabouts? That was fucked. Very fucked. It did have the effect of a splash of cold water on her face though. The fatigue vanished as concern took up residence. "When's the last time any of you saw him? Where would he go?"

"He was still feral this morning, long past the time everyone else had shifted back. We're usually exhausted after a full moon, using up all energy stores. It's not uncommon for a few people to go for shelter outside of their usual domiciles to recoup, but the one person unaccounted for today is Brick. I wanted to give him his space and not draw attention to the problems he'd been experiencing, but that was a shitty call."

"And you thought he'd come here?" Kim threw up her hands, disgusted. "He's pissed as hell at me, there's no way he'd come here."

“He loves you,” Knox replied in a gentle voice. “Regardless of his anger, he loves you and you are home to him. If his wolf is in trouble, he’ll try to get back to you.”

“Me, more than one of you?”

“It’s possible, so we have to check. If you hear from him, you’ll let us know?”

“Of course, but I’m afraid you’re wasting your time.”

Knox gave her a thoughtful look before dipping his head. She glanced up in time to see the other men watching her with a kind of curiosity that said they were innocent of the latest between her and Brick. En masse, they turned to leave, and she stood there not knowing what else to say to them. Brick had made himself very clear about his feelings toward her at their last encounter. If she inserted herself into his affairs with the pack, she’d risk alienating him even further than she had already.

“Wait—” Not a good idea, even a little bit. When he found out, he’d hit the roof. “What about the beast? The wolf would come here, but where would his beast go?”

She had to at least try, even if from a distance. He’d never have to know she’d interfered.

“That’s harder to say,” one of the men said. “If his beast likes you, it might come for you. It’ll find safety, wherever the beast thinks that might be. Are you his safe place?”

When she faltered, not knowing how to respond, Knox added. “Are you familiar with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs?”

“Of course. It’s psych 101.”

“Right. The beast exists at the lowest level, needing only the minimum for comfort and survival. Food, water, shelter...sex. It’ll seek those things first.” Knox’s face was tight. Hard.

It took a measure of strength to remain upright while she considered the implications of what they were saying. Piecing together all of the things that seemed to be left unsaid. “You haven’t mentioned Brick, the man,” she said. “You’ve talked about his wolf and you’ve talked about his beast, but you’re not saying what Brick will do.” *Why is that?*

She knew. She didn’t want to hear them say it aloud though. None of them spoke their worst fears come true, but she needed to hear it for herself. She knew what they wouldn’t say to her because it couldn’t get any worse for

Brick if it was true. They wanted to believe their friend would come back to them, despite all evidence to the contrary.

“He’s feral, Kim,” Knox said softly. “The sun’s up, he’s missing. With all of the recent trouble he’s been having, we have to face reality. You gave him extra time, but he’s gone feral.”

“No,” she gasped. Kim staggered back, reaching out blindly for support. Not wanting to touch any of the men who’d turned their backs on their friend.

“We knew it was a risk. The run was a risk, and it was a good way to go.”

Her throat tightened, holding back the scream that threatened to erupt.

“How can you be so callous?” she gritted out. *Oh God, how could he?* “I thought he’s your friend?”

“He’s my friend and my brother. If I thought it would help, I would lay my life on the line for him. Same with any of these guys. But if he’s gone feral, I have a duty to those who are here. To those who are vulnerable. A feral beast is too dangerous, not only to pack, but to humans as well, to be allowed to roam free.”

“So what do you plan on doing?”

“Exactly what we should have in the first place. We find him and hope for a quiet relocation.”

“But you won’t try to bring him back, will you?”

He shook his head. Although she’d been expecting it, the motion still caught Kim by surprise. Her heart clenched as she choked down his final decision on the matter.

“Maybe you don’t feel like you have to,” Kim said after she regained the ability to speak through her thick throat. “But I do. I’m going after Brick.”

“You’ll only be putting your life in danger, and I may not be able to protect you,” Knox said. “Why? Why would you do this?”

Because he is my heart. “Because I can.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Alone in the room again, Kim swallowed her fear. Her stomach curdled as she thought harder about what she wanted to do. Not only would she have to locate Brick, she'd be finding him in beast form. Knox couldn't warn her often or hard enough about the dangers in what she planned. But she had a chance to help him and she wouldn't tuck tail and run. Not now.

It took a few minutes to peel apart the stuck-together pages, but she pored over the report Becka had sent, this time with the intent of understanding more of it. The numbers and scientific terminology swam in front of her tired eyes though, her brain unable to decipher the meaning behind any of it.

Of all the nights to have gotten less than perfect sleep.

"C'mon, Kimmy," she said, channeling her grandmother's pet name for her. Louder, she called, "Jules, would you do me a huge, huge favor and start a new pot of coffee?"

"Already done," Julie said from the other room. She poked her head in through the doorway a moment later. "Hand me your cup and I'll get you some."

"Um, I can do that, but listen," Kim said, frowning at the snippet of a half-baked thought trying to form as she contemplated both the labwork and the clinic, "you were here with Casper for a while, right?"

"Yeah. He hired me straight out of high school then again when I finished nursing school."

"So, did he always keep case files on every patient?"

"Of course."

Kim looked at the single, four-drawer filing cabinet tucked into the corner. She pointed to it. "I know I got a crash course in operating this clinic, but I'm pretty sure this was all I was told about as far as patient files."

"Active patients, right. The ones who have left the clinic for whatever reason are in the back room. I tried to convince Cas to get them transferred electronically, but who knows when that would have actually happened? He was old school before *Old School* was just a movie."

Kim pushed away from the desk. "Show me."

She'd been in the storage room plenty of times before and as she watched Julie push boxes aside to get to the storage, she mentally kicked herself for not exploring more thoroughly before. Stiff from disuse, the drawers squeaked irritably when Julie yanked one open. Files and papers had been crammed into the tight space, leaving no room for anything else. There had to be hundreds of patient files in there. Blue and yellow colored most of the drawer. Green files had been shoved in the back.

"I think they're sorted by year, although the adults have been separated from the kids. You can tell who started here young because they're the thicker files. More information to cram in there. The really old, fragile ones might belong to someone who'd been born and raised in Fire Creek. It's a fascinating find."

"These green ones? There aren't many of them."

"Pediatrics, mostly. I think. I'm not actually sure. Like I said, Cas was old school and did a lot of the paperwork himself. He kept the nurses around for jabbing needles into unsuspecting babies and distracting men from thinking about his finger up their butts." She laughed lightly. "Do you want me to pack up the old ones on a slow day?"

Kim began rifling through the files, curiosity raging about the thick files where she might be able to review treatment for everything from measles to gout. When she'd been a concierge physician, she'd hovered around ailments for the wealthy like hypertension and elevated cholesterol. She had to admit that working in this community exposed her to illnesses she hadn't seen since medical school. She'd need to go through these one day in fine detail. It would be a good refresher. "No," Kim said, still sorting the files. "We might send them off for scanning one day, but for now leave them as is. I'd like to go over them some time."

Unable to help herself, she withdrew one of the green files. The patient's name, Lee Parker, had been penned in Dr. Casper's tight handwriting. The paper appeared thin, fragile. If she turned the pages too hard, she might rip one. It made for slow going, but she'd come in to see the files for a reason.

From what she understood of Casper, he'd been a good physician. As Julie had said, he'd been thorough. Every physician she knew lived or died by their notes. He might not have told a soul about treating the lycanthropes, but for continuity of care, he would have kept some kind of record. *Something*.

The file on Parker, aged eleven at his first visit, contained the usual stuff

right off the bat. Beyond his parents' names, home and work addresses, on the initial page she found vital statistics, immunization records and growth charts. She flipped through the next few pages of orthodontic and dental records, which made her frown. Her brow furrowed further when she got to the skimpy progress notes that seemed to leave out any details about Parker's diagnosis and treatment regimen. He'd been seen at least six times, but she couldn't make head nor tails of why.

"The file isn't complete," she muttered. Kim looked up, found herself alone and dove back in. She started over from the beginning in case her skimming meant she'd missed something important. Except she'd been in enough patient files to know this one lacked critical information. It had been slapped together in an almost haphazard way, and that went against everything she'd learned about Casper.

She yanked another green file from the back. Sol Hirsch. The contents followed the same format of Parker's file, which meant coincidence wasn't in play. She read slower, but the contents themselves didn't interest her. Kim paid more attention to what appeared to be absent from the two files.

No labs.

Nothing. Not a simple blood count or chemistry panel. Even though both Hirsch and Parker were adolescents at the time of their visits, she didn't find so much as a lipid panel. Vaccine titers, *any* tests indicating their mutual physician had drawn blood at some point.

Kim flopped the two files side by side on a dusty cardboard box. Her heart raced as she flipped them open to the same exact locations inside. She skimmed the pages she'd already reviewed, focusing on the remainder. It didn't take long to make it to the very last page and she knew a few additional things about each patient, but learned nothing that stood out.

It seemed weird to her that Casper could serve as the town's only physician, but have so few files dedicated to pediatrics. Sure, some of them grew into adult patients, transitioning into the blue and yellow folders, but something told her the green files meant something special. If she thought he wouldn't go ballistic, she'd simply call Knox to find out if they were from the pack. With the way things were now? No way. For a little while longer, she was on her own. Except her junior snooping yielded nothing.

She shoved the folders to the side, frustrated. A headache began to bloom behind both eyes, a sure sign she would crash soon if she didn't take a nap.

Maybe if she went home and got some rest, she'd think clearer, including the best way to help Brick, because she didn't have one clue. Not one.

Her gaze skimmed over the lopsided files, jumping from word to word, willing something to announce itself as the clue to all of her questions. Her vision swam and she blinked it away. Then frowned.

Squinting at the back cover of the file, she pulled it closer. With her face about an inch from the page, she stared at the scrawl. At first, her sleep-deprived brain jumbled the letters and numbers, some sort of shorthand Casper must have developed. She grabbed the second file, shoved the pages out of the way and found a similar code written in the very back. Tucked away where he didn't want anyone to see, but still a record to reference when he needed.

A quick perusal of two random thicker files, one blue and one yellow, proved they didn't have the mysterious code hidden in the back. She verified they had pediatric records inside, so the green files' patients weren't *that* much different.

She went back and compared the column of numbers from the back, realizing they matched the dates the kids had been seen in the clinic. The letters were abbreviated for...what? She had no idea. *Epi*. Epinephrine? Epidural? Epistaxis? Shit. She could be here for hours or days making guesses, all of them plausible.

The final column of numbers proved interesting. At first, they seemed as undecipherable as the letters next to them until Kim pulled the two files side by side. The two boys' numbers followed a similar pattern, some of the values steadily increasing over the years, *epi* peaking during the latter dates.

Jules cleared her throat from the doorway. "Doc, we're closing up shop. Do you want us to wait?"

"You ladies go ahead," she called. "Have a great night."

On any other night, she might have slammed down the files in frustration, grabbed her lab coat and headed home too. She was close to something here though, she just knew it.

Tucking her fist beneath her chin, she let her eyes glaze over as she stared at the files. Pediatric visits. Dates. The elusive *epi*.

Her mind drifted to Brick. Where he might be or what he was doing. If he was hurt or scared.

These werewolves...

Kim sat up straighter, inspiration and pride kicking in. Her heart began to race as she put the pieces of her unsolvable puzzle together. As a smile crept onto her face, she knew she'd hit gold. "Casper, you old dog..."

She knew how to help Brick. Knew it. Now, she only had to convince Knox.

* * *

Knox scowled. "Explain it in English, Doc."

They didn't have a lot of time. When Knox had arrived, he'd made it very clear that he wasn't open to discussing his decision about Brick. She'd piqued his interest about the adolescents. In his mind, *they* could be saved; Brick could not.

"The thing is, what I'm trying to get you to understand, but I hope I understand, is there is a link between the adolescents on the verge of transitioning and Brick. Casper knew this and without your permission, and I guess knowledge, tracked the changes for himself." She brought Knox and Rowan to the back room where the green file folders were flipped open to the last page. With more time, she would have recorded everything into a spreadsheet. "I think these files represent kids who were seen by Casper. All of them lycanthropes. At some point, Casper took labs on these kids and recorded the results."

"God damn humans," Knox muttered. "None of you are interested in trust."

"It's not a matter of trust," Kim said. "If we're going to be a part of your world, we have to bring some of the things necessary for our world into it. Casper didn't record these results to betray you, he was doing his job. Your antiquated rules, with him and with me, are making that an almost impossible task. You can't expect me to take care of your people using only my memory as a source of record. If I hadn't stumbled across these lab values, I don't think I would be able to make some of the leaps I have."

Rowan shifted restlessly, and for a few seconds she wished he wasn't there to witness the tension between her and Knox. The leader had a job to do, but as their physician, so did she. "What is it that you're thinking?" Rowan asked. "I'm not sure I understand."

"There's a link between the adolescents and Brick, like I said. Some of

their lab values are through the roof, and I believe it's related to the unleashing of the beast. The same pathway allowing your kids to become werewolves is probably the same one for Brick. Get it?"

When they both nodded, she added, "I did some checking courtesy of Dr. Google and with a little stretch of the imagination, I don't think I'm too far off. The labs Brick and the kids share have to do with stress. I won't get in the fine details of it, but basically their epinephrine values are at a heightened state. With the kids, it's a slow, gradual build."

She couldn't do a before-and-after with Brick, but she'd bet a large sum of money she didn't have that his labs spiked and then fell. Spiked, then fell again. Every time they spiked, his beast managed to break through its barrier and make it to the outside. "I think this last time, it spiked, but then didn't fall off again. That's why he's gone feral. It's a hormone imbalance that needs correction. Nothing more."

"What would have caused it though? He's not a kid."

Kim pushed a hand through her hair, struggling to come up with a rational explanation for a question she hadn't considered before. She shrugged. "Maybe, I don't know, it has something to do with that barrier he's told me is cracked. It could be the barrier became damaged because the levels are off or vice versa. I don't know enough about your kind and without the records, there could be any number of explanations as to what's occurring physiologically. You've said going feral doesn't happen often, but documenting this *every* time it happens to someone would go a long way in finding a solution to prevent it from occurring in the first place."

"Alright, so what does this mean? How do we get him back?"

"I can't say for sure, but if I can bring down his adrenaline levels, we might be able to get his body to allow him to shift."

Knox looked at her with an intensity that made her blood run cold. "Can you do it? Do you have what you need?"

From the minute she'd made the decision to call him, she knew it would come down to this. The clinic had the most basic of supplies, but since it served as a stabilization station for patients sent into the city for more serious injuries and illness, it had a lot of the supplies any well-stocked Emergency Room might need. She'd gone through three cabinets before finding something that would work.

Kim bit her lip. "I can't guarantee you anything—"

“Of course you can’t,” Knox ground out.

“It wasn’t my decision to keep the pack locked away from modern medicine and record keeping. You want the best for your people, then you need to expose them to the latest and greatest. There are ways to document what we know and what we learn without giving away all of your secrets. As far as I can tell, you hadn’t given Casper the chance to do that, and I know you sure as hell didn’t want to give me that chance.”

Kim tried to get her mouth to stop making sounds, to stop jabbing Knox with words meant to make him feel accountable for Brick’s precarious situation. Somewhere in the back of her mind she knew he’d done the best he could in protecting his people, but the discovery of what Casper hid made her realize both he and she were flying blind when it came to the lycanthropes.

“You know about Shelly, I presume?” she asked softly.

“Just what was reported in the news.”

“Then you know I miscalculated the dosage on her medication. My mistake ultimately killed her, and I own that.” She took a deep, steadying breath. “You understand that the differences in your physiology could lead to a similar type of mistake? Not one that I would be responsible for. I can’t be responsible if something happens to one of your pack because of your fear of humans.”

Knox growled low, and Kim took an instinctive step back. “Can you help him or not?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” She held up a hand when he would have interrupted her. “I think so, but I just don’t know. I have the medication handy that should do the trick, however it might not be enough. There’s only one way for me to find out and that’s to try it.”

“Are you prepared for the consequences if it doesn’t work? If we catch him, he’s either cured or he’s sent out.”

Her legs wanted to turn to wet noodles, but she curled her hands around the ledge of the desk. Her heart beat in her throat, throbbing insistently, and a cold sweat broke out along her upper lip. On Brick’s behalf, she made promises that could get him killed if she was wrong.

God, could she go through this again?

“How much do you suppose Brick weighs?” she asked, trying to keep a tremor out of her voice.

“Two-ten. Two fifteen, maybe.”

“Are you sure? Not two-oh-five or two-twenty?” She whirled to glare at Knox. “This is the type of information that’s vital for me to have. I’m calculating a dose based on his weight. I don’t have records to tell me how much he weighs.” She could’ve kept up the lecture, but it would have served no good. “I’ll do my best, but you need to understand that I make no guarantees.”

“Can it kill him?”

“Yes.” That’s what worried her the most about this. If he was banished from the pack, she would be crushed, but he would be alive. If the pack decided to put him down, she would mourn for years. But if *she* made a mistake, a fatal one...

“But we’re not going to worry about that right now, because it’s not an option. The good doctor will pull out the miracle our brother needs. She can save him, she *will* save him.”

Kim looked at Rowan and tried to find comfort in his words. He had a faith in her that she didn’t have in herself.

“Yes, she will,” Knox agreed. Surprised, Kim’s gaze snapped to him. “With every hour that Brick stays feral, his chances at coming back are slipping. If this is going to be done, if it’s going to work, we have to find him now.”

“I don’t understand. What does that have to do with anything?”

“You may not have our medical histories documented, but I know our pack’s history. It’s rare, but people do come back from turning feral. The one thing they have in common, the ones who aren’t saved, is the amount of time the beast has stayed dominant. We’re getting close to the zero hour here.”

“So are you telling me that I have one shot at this?” Kim asked, anxiety level cranked to full blast.

Knox’s nod was grim and final. “That may be exactly what I’m telling you.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

By the time Knox and Rowan left the clinic, Kim had calculated the dose of clonidine based on Brick's estimated weight four times. When they found him—and they would find him—she wouldn't hesitate to give him the necessary dose to lower his heart rate and reduce the amount of epinephrine in his system. It was a lousy long shot, but the only shot in her arsenal.

Practically cross-eyed with fatigue, she did a quick circuit of the clinic. A hard habit to break even when she wanted to crawl onto an exam table for a nap. Hell, that might not be a bad idea, especially considering the twenty-minute drive ahead of her. It didn't take long to ensure the place was secure and that she'd return to find it standing tomorrow.

When she turned the key in the lock of the front door a few minutes later, she glanced over her shoulder and scanned the perimeter of the woods. So used to having a shifter with her at all times, she expected to find one of them nearby. No one waited for her though, and she couldn't tell if she was more relieved or disappointed.

Knox wanted to look for Brick closer to his home, sending a few people there. A larger search party had gone to pack land, a place where Knox said Brick might be able to hide for days without running into anyone. In the current situation, no one could say whether that would be a good or a bad thing. They needed to find him, but they needed him away from civilization too.

As she walked toward the car, she couldn't lose the sensation of someone else being there with her. She'd bet money Knox had left a man behind to keep an eye on her. The jerk could have told her he'd done so instead of keeping her in the dark. If Brick could influence the beast in any way, he wouldn't come near the clinic. It would be a place Knox would look, or at least, have someone stationed. Right?

"You don't have to hide," she called. "I'm heading back to my place if you want a ride."

She stood next to her car, ears straining for a response. The only sounds that met her were the common ones of the woods. Tree branches crackling,

insects and frogs calling to one another, birds singing.

“Last chance,” she sing-songed. When no one responded, she murmured, “Suit yourself.”

Kim slid behind the wheel, almost groaning in relief after her body settled into the seat. The car might be a beater, but it still could boast a comfortable ride. As she slid the key into the ignition, her brain kicked in. “God damn it.”

With as much time as she’d spent on the calculations, somehow she’d left behind the stupid vials of clonidine and the syringe she’d need to administer it. If one of the pack located Brick, she’d have no way of heading straight to them. Not without stopping at the clinic first for supplies. She had to get her doctor bag.

Cursing, she shoved open the door and stumbled her way back to the clinic. God, she was so tired. It took too long to even remember where she’d left the bag last. Hadn’t needed it since the night Abe died.

Even still, she found it without too much searching. The supplies she required to administer the injection waited on the counter in her office. She shoved them into the black leather bag. When she turned to leave, she jerked back.

Shit!

Kim recognized his bulk first. Rowan had said two hundred and ten pounds, but from where she stood, Brick in beast form must have weighed two-fifty, if he weighed an ounce. The clonidine dosage wouldn’t be nearly enough. Not nearly enough.

Although her bladder threatened to release, she took a cautious step back. “Brick,” she whispered. It came out almost inaudible, barely a puff of air.

This was the first time she’d seen him like this, in entirety. The clinic lights were off, but she saw more than she wanted to. The eyes black as pitch, elongated nose and fur-lined face. A large, parted mouth filled with elongated teeth designed for ripping and tearing.

God, he blocked the only way in and out of the office, his bulk an immovable force she didn’t want to go near. Bipedal, he towered over her, having to duck to squeeze through the doorway.

Her lungs squeezed, her chest tight. Breathing impossible to do. She stared in horror at the beast standing before her, afraid of screaming, afraid of staying, afraid of making the first move. How could something so huge be a part of Brick?

In every scary movie she'd ever seen in life, the frightened girl always turned and ran, ending up twisting her ankle for her troubles. The monster got her in the end because people liked to see pretty girls get eaten. Kim might turn a few heads, but she had brains and she refused to end up in his digestive track because she didn't stop and think. But damn if her brain wanted to cooperate.

It studied her, head tilted, and waited. Although her heart threatened to punch its way out of her chest, Kim loosened her grip on the doctor bag in her hand. She had no fucking clue how she'd ever get the time or chance to draw up the clonidine, but if she was going down, it wasn't without at least one attempt to help Brick.

"Hey, big guy," she said with a strangled breath.

It lunged.

Kim screamed.

While the ear-shattering sound rang in the clinic, she threw the bag at the rampaging beast—Oh, God! Why did she throw it?—and ran to safety behind the desk. If she thought for a moment that the scarred wood would keep the beast from getting to her, she'd lost her mind. The beast reached her faster than should have been possible and grabbed at Kim.

She screamed again while pain ripped up her arm. Blood spurted from the new wound where its claws dug into her flesh, but for some reason, it didn't maintain its grip. She snatched her arm back, cradling it against her body after she slid around the desk, moving away from the beast. Goose bumps burst along her skin as the thing roared at her.

It hurt, it hurt so badly. She wanted to curl up and cry and hold her shredded—it throbbed like a bitch—arm.

Cradling that damaged arm, useless and going numb, she slid closer to the doorway. Closer so she could sprint toward it at the first opportunity. When she moved though, so did the beast.

They squared off again, the desk in between them. Brick's beast studied her with cold, black eyes. Sweat exploded onto her forehead in fat droplets that ran down her face. With every centimeter she swayed toward the door, the beast edged closer.

If she called to it, would it attack again? Could she get it to focus on something else?

"Hey, Doc! You back there?"

Both Brick and Kim went alert at the sound of Rowan's voice coming from the front entrance. The beast swung its head toward the door and without a second glance at her bounded from the room through the door. No, no, no! Rowan might be a werewolf and capable of taking care of himself, but not if he didn't see the danger coming.

She took a deep breath and yelled, "*Ruuunnn!*"

The warning didn't slow down the beast. It didn't even pause. Without a second look in her direction, it hurled itself toward Rowan.

Horried, relieved, she watched it leave the small office.

Why had she thought it would be so easy to administer what she hoped would be an antidote? Her arm throbbed and she was afraid to look down and assess the damage, but she would do none of them any good if she didn't check. If he'd managed to get an artery, she would bleed out in no time.

Although she couldn't feel her fingers, she was able to turn her arm. He'd mangled it good, but the blood flow seemed to be slowing already. Nothing vital hit then. She thought she spotted white in between the torn flesh though. Bone, maybe.

Sweat pouring down her face and now making her back damp, she shuffled toward the bag on the floor. Damn it, her arm hurt.

"Stop being a baby," she muttered. It didn't matter how much it hurt. She needed both hands to fill the syringe. Rowan was out there, possibly getting murdered, and he couldn't wait for her to pop a Percocet just to feel better.

Her head snapped up as a familiar roar made the walls vibrate.

Get to the bag. Get the clonidine. Save Brick. Save Rowan.

Good hand trembling like a leaf in a hurricane, she flicked the lid off the vial of medicine. The covered end of the syringe went into her mouth, pulling it away from the business end. Almost jabbing herself in the process, she managed to balance the vial and get the needle inserted. She chewed on the cap left sitting between her lips as she worked.

Her mind went blank as she thought about the dose of medicine.

Four times. She'd calculated it four times, and there was no way she'd forgotten how much to draw. But that number had been based on a wrong weight. What did she do now? What did she do?

Her eyes stung as she drew up more. More than she'd calculated. More... that might kill him. More.

Too much clonidine, and his heart would slow to a stop. Oh, God.

The beast roared again, and she jumped, almost dropping the syringe. This time, the sound of a wolf's snarls could be heard coming from somewhere in the clinic too, and she imagined Rowan out there alone and doing his best not to hurt his friend. All of the shifters had been tasked with bringing in Brick alive, but she knew without a doubt that if it came down to him or them, they'd kill him if necessary.

This she would not allow. Could not. Not when she had a fighting chance.

Kim swallowed her heartbeat and her fear. She caught sight of some gauze and used it in a quick bandage over the mangled part of her arm. White spots floated in front of her vision as the area lit up when she touched it, but biting down on her lip helped keep her focused. Had to stay conscious and alive because she had to help Brick.

She tucked the end of the bandage inside, satisfied it would hold long enough. At the same moment, a loud snap punched into the air, somewhere from either the waiting room or maybe one of the exam rooms. It was followed by the whine of an animal. Then she heard silence.

No growls. No roaring. And that couldn't be a good thing.

It didn't help that her legs wobbled when she tried to stand. Without the desk for support, she might have collapsed again, but she gritted her teeth and managed to stay upright. "Brick," she said softly. Then louder, "Brick. Come and find me. To me."

Although everything in her screamed to rush out to Rowan's aid, she took her time. She walked with deliberate calm down the corridor. If Rowan had been hurt, she'd do him no good by bolting in and getting herself killed. She didn't think Brick had been taken down. Not when the last time the two had squared off, Rowan had escaped by simply leaving. He wouldn't leave her now, and that meant he was hurt somewhere.

With every step, she strained her hearing, listening for any sound of the beast. Nothing came to her though, and maybe that meant it had gotten away? If so, she had to call Knox. She'd left her phone in the car, though, and that was the only place she had his number. The idea of going outside made her bladder spasm.

"Brick?"

Thumb on the plunger, she walked with the syringe poised for jabbing him with it. Her breathing sounded loud to her, and she wished she had the shifters' natural ability for silence. She'd need any and every trick in the

book to make it out of this intact.

Kim skirted around the front desk, peering down the hallway. A spot of blood clotted on the floor, drawing her attention and sending a jolt of concern rocketing through her. A smear of darker blood clung to the wall. She jerked back at the evidence of someone's injury, jostling the box of supplies Julie had promised to return in the morning. Although her heart leaped into her throat at the noise, Brick still didn't make an appearance.

She stood there. Immobilized.

Somehow she found herself in the same crazy position as the other evening. This time, the pictures along the wall didn't help her with reflections. Nothing moved or gave itself away.

She wrestled with the decision to leave or to stay. To save Rowan and Brick...or to save herself. The front door was unblocked and only a few feet away. Would anyone blame her if she took the easy way out and headed for shelter?

If she cared for him though, she wouldn't leave without trying to save him first.

Because she cared for him, she didn't.

Kim peered into a doorway, searched for any sign of Brick or Rowan. Spotting none, she moved to the next room.

She couldn't in her life, not even during the dreaded Trauma rotation, remember seeing as much blood as coated the room now. It dripped from the exam table, splattered the walls and ceiling. The body—the fragile, matted body—of Rowan's wolf lay in a heap on the counter. Unmoving.

"No," she sobbed, rushing into the room before common sense could call her back. Tears stung her eyes and she swiped at them with her free hand, needing to see, having to see if he lived.

He was still, so still, and her heart broke as she accepted his loss. Kim went to reach for him, to see if she could find even a faint heartbeat, but the crash of metal instruments from the next room stilled her hand.

She rushed to the door, pressing her back against the wall. Never one for prayer before, she offered a small word of pleading to whatever deity might be listening. The beast went past the room in its lumbering gait without slowing. Before she could lose her nerve, Kim jumped out and jabbed the syringe into the fleshy part of its upper arm, almost managing to get its back. She slammed the plunger down, heart racing, as the vial emptied inside

Brick.

He howled, whirling and throwing his arm out. It caught Kim in the face, and her head slammed against the wall when it connected. Something snapped. Horrific pain ruptured.

Kim bit back a scream, tasting blood.

The world went black for a split second. Too long. She pushed up, shaky legs almost not responding, but then scrambled when the injection didn't work immediately.

She ran past the beast, a calculated risk. Pain exploded down her back where its claws dug into her flesh, proving she hadn't ducked low enough or moved fast enough. She screamed while wet, hot blood saturated her shirt.

"Brick, oh God, *please...*" Kim choked on her fear, the pain so bright and blazing she couldn't think of anything else.

She fell to her knees, half crawling, half stumbling in an effort to get away. If her Brick was anywhere inside this beast, he wouldn't be hurting her like this. Her Brick would meet his end before allowing his beast to hurt her.

The beast grabbed her leg, pulling her toward him, halting her progress. Kim kicked out, channeling all the rage she felt at this situation into her thrust. Something cracked as she connected, the beast released a whining howl and the sound gave her the encouragement she needed. Kim kicked out again and again, and the beast retreated enough for her to crabwalk backward.

Her back burned, her arm gone useless ages ago. The front door couldn't have been more than ten feet away, but it might as well have been a mile.

She wasn't going to get away, not from this beast who enjoyed spilling her blood. It was obvious the clonidine wasn't enough, wasn't enough to help Brick regain control of his body. She was going to die at her lover's hands, and there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it.

A broken sob erupted from Kim, but she wouldn't die like this. Not like this.

Turning, she saw the gas starter for the fireplace next to her. The broken line gave her a bad idea. A very bad idea, but it was the only one she had. For once she appreciated the very meager finances that had kept her from getting it fixed right away.

Brick had already killed once and would be on her soon. How many more lives would he extinguish before he was stopped?

The knob turned too easily.

Shaking with fear and determination, Kim stood up long enough to knock over the box of supplies still waiting on her to be taken home. With the sound of the beast rushing toward her lending her speed, she ripped open the most important package. The one thing she needed right now.

If she timed it right, maybe she could make it out. Maybe.

Her vision swam and she could barely move her arm. Her leg started to lose feeling too. The scent of hot pennies filled her nose, but maybe she could get to the door.

“I’m sorry, Brick,” she murmured.

He was almost on her, the larger-than-life beast who’d taken her friend and lover away.

“Forgive me.”

She closed her eyes before her thumb flicked the lighter.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

“Kim, don’t you fucking die on me,” he snarled.

Oh God, she hurt. Everything hurt.

“She coming around?” Knox. She recognized his voice, but looking at him to see if he was real or just a figment or her imagination was not possible right now. Not an option, because she wanted to curl up and die until the suffering stopped.

“Kim, you open your eyes and you look at me.”

But that voice... “Brick?”

“Open your eyes, sweetheart. Let me see your pretty eyes.”

She started to cry because she was in misery. Not just the physical pain, the burning in her back and in her arm, but the pain of having lost him. He’d succumbed to his beast, and she’d done the unthinkable to stop him. “No,” she wailed because it wasn’t true. She didn’t believe he was alive, that *they* could be alive.

Kim’s back arched from the ground, her body twisting beneath the agony of guilt and her wounds.

“She’s conscious. That’s good enough for now.”

“Not for me,” Brick said hoarsely. “I did this to her. My beast.”

Blinking hard against the harsh light, she pried open her eyes. Immediately they filled with tears when she caught glimpse of the beautiful face of her lover. His own eyes were worry-filled, the lines etched into his brow deep with concern. “Brick?”

“I’m here, baby. I’m here, so hold on. We’re getting you help, just hold on.”

Her head throbbed as if someone pounded a steel spike into her temples. Darkness swam in the periphery of her vision and she knew she wouldn’t last long. She wanted to sleep. Needed it. But she needed to see his face one more time too.

“You did one hell of a thing, Doc,” Knox said gently.

She gasped as a bolt of pain dragged down her back and for good measure, punched her kidneys. “I hurt so *ba-ad*.”

“Where the fuck is he?” Brick shouted.

Whatever help they were sending couldn’t be enough. If they didn’t do something now, something to stop the torture, she’d go mad from it.

“*Please.*” Tears rolled down her face, and Brick lifted her toward him. Kim groaned, darkness gathering in on all sides. Sweet darkness.

“Right here, right here,” someone said. Maybe Morris. Sean. She couldn’t tell. It didn’t matter.

Kim blinked when a misshapen face moved into sight, hovering just above her own. His eyes were hard and cold, but the unmistakable droop of his face held her attention. He’d suffered some sort of paralysis, making what she would have called handsome something out of a nightmare. “This is a one-time favor,” he said in voice made of gravel. “It didn’t happen now, and it won’t happen again.”

“Just do it,” Brick barked.

The man held his wrist to his mouth, his eyes on Kim. She squeezed her own eyes shut after a moment, the weight of keeping them open too much to handle.

“Open her mouth.”

Gentle fingers tugged on her chin. She didn’t resist. Couldn’t. Her mouth parted and something pressed against it.

She tasted brine and metal.

“A little more,” he said. “You’ll be right as rain in no time.”

“But no lasting effects, right?” Knox asked.

“Fuck if I know.”

“This is *bullshit*. How do we know we can trust him? Fucking vampires.”

“Because he owes us a favor. Your woman’s safe, Brick. I promise you.” A deep sigh. “Victor, don’t antagonize him. She saved his life.”

His wrist, she realized. He pulled his wrist away from her mouth and without thinking, Kim licked her lips. The last of the brine and the metal consumed. Had it been...his blood?

“If she dies with that in her system, she’ll transition. So you watch her and if she dies, you’d better fucking call me. We’ll have the entire vampire nation gunning for all our heads if that happens, so you call me. Got it?”

“She’s not going to die,” Brick said, his voice warm like sunshine.

Victor snorted. “Whatever. I’m gone. Got my own woman to tend to. Good luck, Miss.”

Kim gasped, a weight suddenly lifted from her chest. She could breathe. It didn't hurt to move her chest up and down. She tried it again for good measure, almost weeping because the pain in her chest had stopped.

The scorched sensation, making the skin of her face and neck crackle, faded. Her good hand tingled as sensation crept into it again. It just now dawned on her that she hadn't been able to move her fingers a minute ago.

And she could think clearly. The pounding subsided to a dull ache, one she could handle. Whatever they'd done dialed back all of the hurt. Her back that not long ago burned as if set aflame itched, but not much more than that. What had they done to her?

"How are you doing?" Brick asked gently. He held her in his arms, close to his body so that she savored his body heat. The slow rhythm of his breathing, the insistent beat of his heart, a safe haven.

"I'm feeling...fine. It's weird. I feel fine when I know I wasn't." She searched her memory, trying to recall what happened. Her memory supplied her with the flash of a broken body. Fur and blood. "Oh my God. Rowan."

Brick wouldn't let her up, holding her in place while whatever magic they employed continued its work. "It's serious, but not life-threatening. Rowan will pull through."

"I saw his body, all of that blood." She shuddered.

"Our physiology is an amazing thing. We'll heal even when it seems impossible." He brushed his lips over her forehead. "I did a lot of damage, but Rowan will make it. He's being tended to. Of all of us, you got it the worst with the blast."

She remembered the broiling heat. "I was the closest."

"You've got some balls, Kim."

After taking a deep breath, she realized *nothing* hurt any longer. Her back, her leg and her arm, all functioning without pain. Whatever they'd given her should be bottled. "How did you save me?"

"You saved me first. I don't know if I can explain to you what it's like to be trapped in your body, watching everything that's happening but not being able to stop any of it. None—" His voice cracked. After a pause, he cleared his throat and tried again. "My barrier was broken and I couldn't get it back in place. The beast's home was gone. Being trapped in there made me realize it didn't like being out for as long as it had. The shot you gave me, I don't know what it was or why it worked, but I got to watch my barrier heal. Not

all the way, but enough to give me a stronghold. I transitioned right after the first explosion.”

“I could have killed you.” The thought made her blood run cold even now.

Brick shook his head. “I think that was the point. You didn’t, but you almost took yourself out in the process. I’m sorry about your clinic. I’m sorry for what you went through. I h-hurt you.”

Kim struggled to sitting, while Brick treated her as if she was made of spun gold, delicate and prone to breakage. They’d brought her outside to the far side of the parking lot. At this distance, she could see some of the lycanthropes working to put out the last of the flames.

“The only thing in the world left to my name,” she whispered. The front half of the clinic smoldered, its loss obvious. With it gone, she had nothing left in Fire Creek. She was ruined.

The pain she felt now had little to do with an injury. She curled into Brick and battled the urge to cry. It could have been worse. So much worse. They’d all made it out with their lives intact. That provided her with a small measure of comfort, so she clung to it.

“How are you doing, Doc?”

When she peered out, Knox had dropped to a crouch next to her. His gaze roved her body, his scrutiny as assessing as any physician’s. Kim nodded to show him she’d improved greatly over the last several minutes. Brick tightened his hold on her, his nonverbal command for her to stay with him. “I feel like a walking miracle,” she said and meant it.

He nodded. “Something like that. If you’d leaked more gas than you had or ducked behind a smaller desk, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“My memory of what happened is a little fuzzy, but I know it wasn’t normal. I know I was seriously injured and now I feel just fine.”

“Yeah. That’s true.”

“Are you going to tell me about it?” she asked.

His lips pursed. “You know more than most humans will ever dream of. How much do you really want to know?”

She looked up at Brick, but he didn’t offer her any advice. He studied her as warily as Knox. It made her stomach knot. “It’ll be a long time before I’m back in business, but if I’m going to be the pack’s physician, I have to know everything. No secrets.”

“And you’ll keep our confidence?”

“I should have never broken it in the first place. If you give me another chance, I won’t ever give you another reason to doubt my loyalty to you and your people.”

“That whole Hippocratic oath?” Knox asked.

“More than that,” she said, looking at Brick. “You’re my friends. My family, if you’ll have me.”

Knox patted her hand. “We’ll talk. Figure something out that suits us both. For now, let your body finish healing.” He rose to standing, his gaze on her as kind as a father’s. “As Brick’s Alpha and his friend, thank you for what you did for him. We won’t soon forget it.”

She watched him leave although she had a hundred questions for him. Maybe now wasn’t the time nor place for it. So much had happened over the past few days that they all deserved to take a moment to digest it all.

The smell of burning wood drifted to them, and if it hadn’t been due to her livelihood going up in smoke, she could have appreciated it better. What the hell was she going to do now?

“I never did get a chance to apologize properly to you,” she said after a few minutes. Without a doubt, she felt better now than since the weekend. If she hadn’t experienced it herself, she wouldn’t have known she’d recently suffered a trauma. She and Knox would definitely have a long talk about what Victor had done to her. “I can try to justify what I did by saying that I had the best of intentions and that I did it with only the pack’s future in mind. That might have been part of it in the beginning, but it doesn’t excuse what I did.”

“Kim—”

“Let me finish, please. I need to say this.” She drew a shuddering breath. “When I moved here, I just wanted to hide from my old life and start over fresh. I thought a small town with all its charm and quaintness would be everything that I needed. Then I met this incredible guy. This gorgeous, incredible guy who empathizes with sick little girls, who puts family and friends above everything else and who makes me forget the world when he touches me. And when it mattered most, because I wouldn’t let my curiosity go, I was very close to throwing that guy’s trust in me away. I was ready to break his trust because it was what was best for *me*. Not the smartest thing I’ve ever done. If I could take it back, I wouldn’t. I wouldn’t because what I gleaned helped me in the end. But I would change how I did it. I’d find a way

to get you and Knox to listen to me. I wouldn't betray your trust to satisfy my curiosity about who you are. I'll earn your trust again, I prom—"

His mouth covered hers before she could finish. She tried to pull back, but a storm of emotion flooded her at his kiss. It didn't make sense to move away. Not when she wanted more.

His hands roamed to her throat, holding her by the jaw, his tongue tenderly sweeping her lips. Kim moaned as arousal snuck up on her and dragged her under. She could become addicted to this. She wanted more with him.

He swept his lips over hers one more time before drawing back just enough to speak. "I know you will." Their foreheads touched as he whispered to her, keeping their conversation for them and them alone. "I don't make enough to promise you a Porsche or shopping in Italy, but I'll give you a good life if you'll let me."

"Brick..."

"I will love you to the best of my ability, and you'll never be alone again. Your battles will be our battles. What I have is *ours*." His eyes opened, and she fell in love with the brilliant blue all over again. "Would that be enough for you?"

Throat thick, she said, "More than I could have ever hoped for. More than I deserve."

He smiled. "We are going to have an amazing life together. It starts now, and I can't wait for tomorrow and the tomorrow after that and—"

Kim placed a finger over his lips, her own curving into a smile too. "Let's start with right now."

Brick got to his feet and helped her to standing. Her clothes were sticky in places, clinging to her in the most unpleasant of ways, but as she glanced back at the remains of her clinic, she knew she'd gotten off lucky.

All of her life's events had led her to this moment when she could claim a good man for herself. It made some of the heartache worth it. Even Shelly might approve.

They walked hand in hand toward the lot.

"Oh, I should warn you," Brick said. "I've got a big job coming up. It'll probably keep me away most of the day for the next couple of months. It's good money, though."

Well, at least one of them would remain employed. Maybe she'd learn a craft, something she could sell at a shop or something. "I don't mind. Let me

know if I can help in any way.”

“I think just stay out of the way.”

Her brow shot up.

“Yeah,” he continued, “owners have a way of butting in during reno jobs. Very annoying.”

Reno jobs? “Own...wait, what?”

“Oh, right. Knox probably didn’t get a chance to tell you. Pack destroyed your clinic, pack will rebuild it. It just so happens yours truly knows a thing or two about construction, so...”

She stopped, trying to gather her breath. “Why?” she gasped.

“You’re pack now. This is what we do.”

“I don’t know when I’ll be able to repay—”

“Covered. You’re pack. Family.” He squeezed her hand, took a step forward.

Stunned speechless, Kim yanked him back. She looked into his eyes, saw the wolf’s gaze shining back at her and knew without a doubt her life had been changed forever. She would protect Brick and his pack—her family—with her last breath.

“Thank you,” she whispered, moving to tiptoe. Their mouths met in a tender kiss, and Kim knew it for love.

Chapter Thirty

It didn't matter that three months had passed since they'd given her vampire blood to heal her wounds. Kim checked herself for any signs of vampirism in the mirror every day.

Fortunately, that was always the first indication things were going okay. She *could* see her reflection.

She lifted her top lip, inspecting her teeth. A mixture of relief and disappointment went through her when yet another day they looked as normal as they ever did. She scanned the rest of her face, noting the same smooth skin and unremarkable eyes. Common brown hair now touched her shoulders, but that had less to do with possibly becoming a vampire and more because she still hadn't decided if she should go locally for a cut or make the trek into the city.

"If I thought for a second turning was even a possibility, I would have never agreed to it, Kim," Brick said from behind her.

Looking up, she caught his reflection. They locked gazes and as always since meeting this man, her legs went weak, her belly did some sort of somersault and everything inside her grew warm at the sight of him. That he moved closer to Kim while completely nude only multiplied the effect. She would never grow tired of watching his beauty.

"But he'd said..." She couldn't quite remember what the man with the partially paralyzed face had said. The pain and trauma of that day when she'd almost lost Brick had robbed her of memories she honestly didn't want to hold on to anyway. Now and again though, fragments drifted to her. She shivered now as one snuck up on her. The face of the vampire who'd saved her life.

Brick's warmth enveloped her as he tugged her away from the mirror and into a hug. He tucked her against his chest, and instinctively she wrapped her arms around him. His presence pulled away the bad memory, centering her in the here and now.

Brick slid a hand into her hair and tilted her face. Her heart sped up as her eyes slipped closed. He brushed his lips across hers before saying, "When I

thought I was losing you, the world stopped. I saw a bleak, desperate future without light because it was without you. I might have sold my soul to save you.”

Kim squeezed tighter, words lodged in her throat. They didn’t often bring up that day, the taste of mortality still bitter.

He pulled back, prompting her to look at him, into eyes dark with anguish. “But I would have never sold *your* soul, Kim. When the vampire offered to save you, it was both the hardest and simplest decision I’ve ever made. I believed that he could save you because I needed you. Maybe foolishly and maybe blindly, but it kept me sane long enough to see you back.”

He’d do it again, she knew. The risk of turning into a vampire miniscule when compared to the risk of certain death.

By some unspoken agreement, she’d moved in with him the very same day. An insidious process, she’d woken up two weeks later to realize they’d transferred all of her clothing and meager belongings to his place. He’d made room for her in his life, smooth as wax.

Lost for words, very grateful to him for it all, Kim went to tiptoe, giving him a kiss, hoping it said what she needed it to. Their lips met, tentative touches at first. Delicate.

Then she raked her nails over his back. He took her kiss and turned it into something more passionate. Tongue thrusting into her mouth, demanding entrance, stealing her breath. She grew dizzy, and that made her only want more. Their kiss went from a low-level simmer to downright incendiary.

“We’re going to be late,” she gasped in between bruising kisses.

Brick pushed his body closer to hers, forcing her to take a step backward and then another. When her ass hit the countertop, without pause he lifted her onto it. Before she could issue a second warning, he whipped her shirt over her head and threw it onto the bathroom floor.

“They’ll wait for us. For you.”

She shifted her hips, shamelessly assisting him in getting rid of her panties. He stroked a fist over his hardening cock while Kim spread her thighs. His grip on her would leave a bruise later, but when she gasped, it was full of anticipation. Not until the first thrust did she realize how slick and wet she’d become, how fully aroused for him.

Kim moaned, amazed at how good he felt. They didn’t have time for this, but maybe as he’d said, they’d wait for her.

“Touch yourself,” he said with a low growl. His eyes flashed, and Kim’s heart tripped.

Her fingers grazed Brick’s pistoning cock, swiping away some of the moisture. She rubbed over her erect clit, sensation exploding out. Her pussy clenched and she wished they had more time to take things slower. “Hurry,” she whispered.

Brick watched where his body entered hers, where her fingers danced on her clit. The muscles on his jaw tightened, but he leaned in closer. His breathing roughened. “I can’t get enough of you,” he said in a low voice.

She heard the rising hunger in his words. “Later,” she said behind a panted breath, “when we get home. I want you on your back. Hands tied, maybe. Hours of being all mine.”

“God.”

The decadent image she painted in her mind brought about a new level of lust in Kim. She rocked her hips, matching his rhythm. Her need for him grew as her finger swirled over her swollen clit. Brick thrust harder and faster, the sound of his flesh slapping against hers as brazen as their coarse breathing.

A slow, sweet build of pressure began somewhere deep in her belly. It pulsed out, matching the erotic pattern she traced with her finger. Her pussy pulsed around Brick’s cock, making her cry out in pleasure.

She listened to the change in his rushed groans, eyes intent on his. His cock seemed to swell inside her, and it propelled her into orgasm. Kim called out to him at the same time Brick’s muscles locked. While every part of her soul shattered in ecstasy, Brick gave a hoarse cry while he spilled inside her. They seemed entangled together as his body depleted, at least two more spurts emptying into Kim.

He held her close, his heart racing at a dangerous pace. It pounded against his chest, the force of each beat a tattoo on her breast. Kim clung to him, her mind fuzzy with the dying echoes of their lovemaking.

“I love you,” she murmured, her mouth grazing his pec and distorting the words. It didn’t matter, though. She’d tell him again, later, when her mind was clear and her heart wasn’t a beat away from collapsing.

“Sweetheart?” He sounded as pea-soupy as she felt. What she wouldn’t give to curl up with him in the bed and take a nap. People were waiting on them though.

“Late,” Kim mumbled.

“Yeah.” Still, he hesitated to remove himself, instead holding her next to him. Maybe a full minute later, he growled and slowly extricated his still-aroused cock. “If we leave in five, we can maybe get there in time.”

Kim lowered her legs, ignored the way they trembled but put her weight on them with care. She wanted to groan about the way her joints complained of the unnatural splay of her thighs during sex or about the stinging in her ass where the countertop had dug into her flesh. Instead, she studied Brick’s ass as he walked away and decided a little achiness had been worth it.

* * *

They didn’t make it out until fifteen minutes later, but it would have to do. Biting on her nails helped alleviate some of the anxiety, although she forced herself to stop almost as soon as she’d begun. There’d be a lot of hands to shake today, and she didn’t want to look like she’d been digging out of a prison cell with them.

She glanced at the sky as they rode in Brick’s car, grateful they wouldn’t face another full moon for a couple of weeks. The clonidine given once a day continued to help him transition back, but a small part of her wondered if the effects would always work. What happened if it stopped? Pack kept him closely monitored on the full moon, but eventually, they’d have to grow weary of their vigil. Wouldn’t they?

As if she’d projected her thoughts, Brick reached over and squeezed her hand. “Excited?”

With the exception of the full moon, his barrier appeared to be holding intact. The beast only made an appearance when commanded to do so. She hung all hope on that small victory.

Kim redirected her thoughts. “Of course I am.”

They pulled to a stop, and a weight in Kim’s stomach shifted. She opened her mouth to say...something. No words came. She gaped at the building, what used to be her clinic, surprise robbing her of all speech.

The car door opened, and she realized somehow that Brick had left the car to come around to her side. She’d been so busy staring, she hadn’t noticed him. Then her gaze tracked over the building and ran into Knox’s. He stood there grinning from ear to ear.

Finally, she gasped, “Brick. Oh my God, Brick. What have you done?”

The modest country clinic that stood there before now looked like something she’d see back in L.A. Steel construction, picture windows, a new wheelchair ramp... Kim shook her head as she made her way toward the clinic. In three short months, they’d done the amazing and impossible.

She’d seen pictures of the disaster left behind by the explosion. No one who hadn’t been here on that day would recognize this as having occurred at the same place. “Brick,” she repeated.

She’d known he had skills; his house testified to that. This went beyond her wildest dreams for her own clinic, though. From the outside, it definitely appeared as if he’d modernized the entire place. She’d never be able to repay him. Dollar signs jumped out at her from everywhere.

Damn it, if her eyes didn’t start to mist up.

Kim swiped at the moisture, refusing to break down. “I... I can’t afford this.”

“It’s already paid for. I told you pack would handle it.”

“But...”

Knox walked over. “Dr. Sharpe, I take it that you’ll agree to have pack as patients?”

She nodded. “Of course.”

“If you insist on repaying anything, then I’d ask you to help bring us into the twenty-first century. Research on pack illness and cures.”

In exchange for the work they’d already done. He didn’t have to say the words.

To help ensure Brick’s safety, she would have agreed to anything.

“Hey,” a warm voice called. “I thought this was a clinic. What does an injured man have to do around here to get some help?”

Warmth infused Kim as she watched Rowan limp from one of the other vehicles to where they were standing. On the outside, he appeared no worse for wear, but whatever damage Brick had done to him would need a few more months of healing. The beast’s borrowed strength was the reason he could count himself lucky to be alive. Kim’s skills only went so far.

She went to him, gently pulling him in for a hug. He’d become like a brother to her, and she would never forget how he’d tried to protect her in the very end.

“Hey, beautiful,” he said, grinning down at her. He kept his arm wrapped

around her waist. It might have been a show of affection, but it could have also been for physical support.

“Hey yourself. Are you supposed to be moving around this much without a walker?”

He grimaced. “I was bored, and that thing makes me feel like an old man. Heard there was a party happening over here. Thought I’d come dance the night away with you.”

Brick came over and gently, but firmly, extricated her from Rowan. “Go get your own woman,” he growled, the wolf in every word. “This one’s taken.”

Rowan’s gaze flickered to Knox before he shook his head. “The good ones are always taken.”

“Yeah...they are.”

Something in the way Brick said it caught Kim’s attention. She frowned as she studied a new seriousness on his face. “You okay?”

Brick threaded his fingers into hers. “Let’s go see your new clinic.”

She glanced back to find Knox and Rowan stayed behind. They talked in low tones, too low for her to catch. Their attention was no longer on her and Brick, though. Pack issues to deal with, she supposed. If nothing else, she’d learned to let them bring her in to their confidence on their time. If she needed to know, they’d tell her. So far, Knox had done his best to make sure anything and everything medical-related went to Kim for handling or verification. It was a good start.

The serial killer hadn’t victimized anyone in months, a small mercy they all prayed would last. Maybe he’d moved on to be someone else’s problem, but a worry deep in Kim’s gut warned that the peace wouldn’t last. Until then, she’d work tirelessly to identify which adolescents might be in danger.

Brick cleared his throat. “It’s modular, so not nearly as expensive as it looks. We did gut the offices and exam rooms, though. Touchless faucets, a new lab processing room, better storage. I hope you like it. We toured all sorts of places trying to get ideas.”

“I can’t believe you did all this.” Kim was stunned and she hadn’t seen the inside yet. Without a doubt, she knew the pack had poured heart and soul into the restoration.

“Fireplace isn’t a hazard anymore. Though, that might not be a good thing.”

Kim put her hand on the door handle, wincing. “God. Let’s never go through that again, please.”

Brick covered her hand with his, gently pulling it away. He held on to her when he asked, “Are you happy here now?”

She blinked in surprise. “Very.” She didn’t have to think long or hard about it. Once she’d settled in and decided to make Fire Creek home, it truly felt that way. She joked with her employees, knew individuals and families from the pack, attended church one Sunday just to see what they offered. She liked it here. More than she ever thought she could.

“And are you happy with me?”

“Oh, Brick. I couldn’t be happier.” She hated the doubt she thought she heard. What could have possibly brought this on?

When he dropped to one knee, the world began to tilt.

“Brick?” She struggled for air, looking down at the man she’d come to love in so very a short time. Her heart began to race while her mouth went dry. She glanced over, found Knox and Rowan staring, their faces full of expectation.

Yes! bounced around her head, held back by a clenched jaw. She curled her fists on themselves to keep from grabbing him and screaming it aloud.

When her eyes began to water, she didn’t try to stop it this time. This once, she would be one of those women. The kind who sniveled and cried tears of joy when extremely happy. With Brick, she’d found that extreme happiness, so why not?

“I love you too, Kim,” he said, surprising her. Darned werewolves and their stellar hearing. He’d known what she said earlier when she’d been overcome with feeling for him. “I love you so much that I can’t imagine this world without you. I can’t imagine my life without you. I know I’m bringing you a whole lot of trouble—”

Kim put a finger over his lips, silencing whatever recrimination he thought to utter. “You’ve brought me adventure and excitement. Passion and a crazy, crazy thing called love. Don’t you dare take that away from me, Brick Preston. You marry me and promise me a lifetime of it.”

Brick rose to standing, his eyes glittering with amusement. She stepped closer to him, basking in his warmth and his presence. “Who’s asking who to get married here?” he drawled.

Kim studied his face, the beauty of this man, and wondered again how

she'd been so lucky. He was lycanthrope and different, maybe even flawed, but she wouldn't have him any other way.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, their bodies pressed together. "So ask."

Putting his mouth next to her ear, he whispered, "Will you marry me?"

Without fear or hesitation, Kim said yes.

* * * * *

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About the Author

Dee Carney began writing short stories in middle school, but she did not attempt completion of a novel until almost ten years later—which, despite good intentions, she never finished. Almost ten additional years later, she challenged herself to begin writing again, and her love for storytelling was rekindled.

Now, Dee is a bestselling, award-winning author who lives at home in Georgia with her husband, two dogs and a cat. When not writing, Dee is usually curled up on the couch with a good book!

To learn more about all of Dee's books, please visit her at www.deecarney.com.



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Taming Her Wolf

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