


SHADOW CITIES
SHIFTERS



BLACKMAILED BY THE
**BILLIONAIRE
WEREWOLF**

New York Times & USA Today Bestselling Author

MINA CARTER

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CHAPTER 1



Holy shit. She was so screwed, and not in a good way.

Eva Tarrant sat in the expansive granite and chrome foyer of Kingwood Consolidated and did her best not to hyperventilate. She really did. Honest. It seemed her body hadn't got the memo, though and was currently heading on its merry way into a full out panic attack.

Shit. Taking a deep breath, she used the breathing exercises her therapist taught her and tried to calm down. Calm down? Her lips twisted wryly at the thought. Until three weeks ago, she'd never had a problem with stress, and panic attacks were things that happened to other people. Eva had always been independent and self-sufficient; a woman making her own way in the world of business.

She looked around and winced. Okay, maybe not the world of big business, like Kingwood Consolidated, but she rocked the world of handmade cupcakes. Weddings, small conferences, parties... She was all over that shit like white on rice and her client list was growing nicely.

Closing her eyes, she sighed. And thanks to one stupid decision by her little brother it was all crashing down. She could lose everything. Business. House. Worse... It could cost Davie his life. Unless she did something about it today.

"Ms. Tarrant? Are you sure you have a meeting with Mr. Kingwood? I've checked his schedule and your name is not down." The cultured voice of the receptionist behind the steel and glass desk in the middle of the floor broke through Eva's

musings. She opened her eyes to meet the woman's gaze. Professional and disinterested, she'd assessed Eva with one glance when she'd arrived and apparently found her wanting. Eva didn't blame her.

She didn't fit in here. Not with her chain store dress—practical and hard-wearing, and her one pair of good shoes bought three years ago and still going strong. Her appearance was a far cry from the elegant sophistication of the perfectly groomed receptionist. She might not own designer clothes anymore, but she could spot them a mile off.

She lifted her chin, gaze hard and determined. “Yes, I'm sure. We have a one o'clock. Mr. Kingwood confirmed it himself.”

He hadn't, of course. The last time Eva had seen Alex Kingwood had been ten years ago, when both were teenagers. Well, Eva was a teenager. He'd been about to hit his twentieth birthday when the relationship between her mother and his uncle broke down irretrievably. Somewhat of an understatement, considering they'd all been tossed out on their ears with little more than the clothes on their backs. Something her mother hadn't stopped whining about since.

Outrageous, utterly outrageous... That Charles could treat me this way, she was prone to whining, often into her fourth drink of the day, as though she was some wellborn socialite rather than a waitress the wealthy werewolf had picked up one evening.

And wealthy the Kingwood's were. Excessively so. During her mother's marriage to Charles, money had been no object. Wardrobes filled with expensive clothes, foreign holidays, jewelry... Her mom had had it all. Before she'd thrown it all away for a quick screw with a handsome pool boy.

That had been the last Eva had seen of any of the Kingwood's, in the flesh anyway. She'd followed them on the news like everyone else, but when her co-workers cooed over how handsome Alex, now the alpha of the Kingwood pack, was she'd always refused to give a comment. As nice looking

as the man might be, looks didn't help the fact that he was a ruthless SOB.

And one she had to charm into helping her. Shit. This was so not going to work.

“Really? One o'clock?” The receptionist pursed her perfectly glossed lips. Red gloss, really? Did Alex insist on his female staff looking like real-life sex dolls or did they dress that way on their own, hoping to snag the billionaire werewolf's attention? “That's funny because he has a one-fifteen with a client.”

“It's a quick meeting.”

Yeah, like real quick. Probably about the amount of time it'd take for him to summon security and have her thrown out. Eva crossed her fingers and kept her expressions off her face. Mind you, if the woman in front of her were a werewolf, she'd smell the nerves leeching from Eva's pores in a hot heartbeat. But while elegant, she didn't move with the lethal fluidity that marked a werewolf so perhaps Eva was safe. For the moment.

Shit. Why couldn't the woman have taken her word for it and shown her to Alex's office? It would have been so much easier to waylay him then and get him to talk to her.

“Let me just ch—” The woman didn't get to finish her sentence, cut off by a commotion at the doors. Eva shrank behind the line of potted plants as security guards swept through ahead of a small group. Unlike the girl at reception, these were lycan, their amber eyes and movements betraying them. A man walked behind them, and a slender brunette talking a mile a minute trotted after him in heels so high, Eva would have broken an ankle just taking a step.

She froze as recognition kicked in a moment before the man stopped, sliding his sunglasses down his nose as he turned to look at her.

Alex.

He'd grown up. *Boy* had he grown up.

All traces of the lean youth were gone. The body under the suit was broad-shouldered and powerful, despite the fact

businessmen were known to push more paper than pump weights. His features had hardened, become stronger... more defined. The teenager he had been was the unformed version of the man who stood before her now.

The effect was devastating.

Taking the glasses off, he turned away, effectively dismissing her as he carried on across the floor. Eva was out of her chair and across the room like a shot.

“Alex? Alex, it’s me.” Dammit, she had to get him to talk to her. To help her.

He turned to spear her with a look, the amber ring offsetting the blue, just the way she remembered. For a moment, she quailed under the hard gaze and almost lost her nerve. Then she thought of Davie’s name on a headstone *if* the vamps he owed money to left enough of his body to be found. The steel in her spine returned.

“Eva Tennant? My mother, Naomi, was marri—”

“I know who you are.” He cut her off with a dismissive wave of his hand. Asshole. *Hot* asshole. That thought didn’t make her feel any better. “I’m more interested in what you want.”

“She claims to have a one o’clock with you, Mr. Kingwood,” the receptionist simpered. The breathy note in her voice was a new addition since Eva had spoken with her minutes ago. Sex appeal and availability practically dripped from her and she might as well dry hump Alex’s leg, she was so obvious. Eva clenched her jaw to avoid making a comment.

Alex nodded to the woman, not taking his eyes from Eva.

“I need your help. Please. For Davie.”

There, it was out. She waited for him to reply, and caught the look from the brunette in the heels. As the receptionist had, she glanced up and down Eva in assessment, the look bringing Eva’s hackles up. She gave her a hard glare in return, tempted to smooth her hands over her hips. *That’s right, sweetheart. I’m your worst nightmare. A woman who likes her goddamn curves. So suck it up, sister.*

“Davie? Why, what’s he done?” Alex asked, his lifted eyebrow plainly adding “this time” to the end of the sentence. Ten years wasn’t long enough to forget that her little brother, nineteen this year, had an unrivaled talent for attracting trouble. With a capital T.

She shifted from one foot to the other, unable to stop the small display of nerves, and flicked a glance at the group that surrounded them. “I’d prefer to discuss it in private, if you don’t mind?”

A small muscle jumped at the corner of his jaw and after a long moment, he nodded.

“Sylvia, rearrange my one fifteen for next week. It’ll do Stravos good to stew for a while,” he addressed the brunette as he turned, waving for Eva to follow him.

Anger welled at the arrogant gesture, but she fought it down. She needed his help. She couldn’t afford to get pissed off, or have any other emotion about Alex Kingwood, other than be grateful he would listen to her.

“Yes, Mr. Kingwood.” The brunette studiously ignored Eva as they both trailed him to the elevator. “Anything else?”

“Yes, I want details of the proposed Glenwood development compiling. Use this time from the rearranged meeting for that and have it on my desk by the end of play today. That will be all for now.”

He waved her away, standing aside to allow Eva to board the lift next to him. The brunette’s expression radiated surprise and annoyance at her path being halted. Eva hid her grin, ignoring the temptation to stick her tongue out at the woman. Stuck up bitch anyway.

Alex carried on talking to the men, all werewolves, around him while she did her best to make herself inconspicuous in the corner. This wasn’t *business*, it was pack business, and she’d long ago learned to tune it out.

Finally, the elevator came to a stop and the doors opened. Alex turned to her, ignoring the men around them, an unreadable expression on his face. “Come into my parlor...”

* * *

...*S*aid the spider to the fly.

Only, he wasn't sure which of them was the spider and which the fly. Alex stood to one side to allow Eva to disembark the lift before him. Of all the people he might have expected to see in his lobby today, he had to admit Eva Tennant wasn't one of them.

She nodded, a graceful incline of her head and stepped out. Alex had never claimed to be a saint, so he took the opportunity to sweep his gaze over her while she wasn't looking.

Fucking hell, she'd grown up nicely. The slender teenager he remembered, while pretty, had blossomed into an absolute siren. From the gentle arch of her neck, revealed by the messy updo, to the cello curve of her waist, she was absolutely stunning. A simple shift dress highlighted her voluptuous curves, not skin tight but far more appealing for its modesty, the wide neck revealing delicate collarbones he ached to stroke his fingers over.

His wolf growled with lust, his body on instant alert as heat flooded his groin. Biting back his groan, he schooled his reaction and walked after her. Hopefully, she wouldn't turn just yet and notice his reaction. Damn the hold she had over him, always had over him, even back then. Back then, though, his father had been the alpha of the pack and Alex had to toe the line. Especially about no human-wolf fraternization.

Now though, he was in charge...

"This is nice." She paused at the window, turning to look around. But not at him, thankfully. "Your office is this entire floor?"

"It is. I prefer the space."

Turning away, he sat. There were no other chairs, which forced her to stand awkwardly in front of the desk. Leaning back, he watched her until she fidgeted a little. The scent of

her nervousness and desperation filled the air, easily discernible to his lycan senses.

Interesting. This was obviously more serious than just Davie getting into another scrape. Way more serious if she'd broken years of silence to approach him. Whatever it was, he didn't care. One thing he did know, though. She'd taunted him for years, in reality and his dreams, so she wasn't getting out of here before he had a taste of her.

The fact she needed something from him meant he had all the power here.

“So...out with it. What's he done this time?”

Resisting the urge to reach for the folder in the desk drawer, he watched her. He'd kept tabs on her all these years, telling himself it was in case her gold-digger mother tried to find another way back into the pack or to the Kingwood fortune. It was a lie. He'd wanted to know more about the woman in front of him.

Unlike her mother, she hadn't decided to pay her way on her back, marrying well and living off a rich husband like Naomi. Instead, she'd gotten a degree in business, night school from what he could work out, while paying rent on an apartment in a quiet area of the city. Not flashy, but not run down either. Nice, middle of the road. Average. She'd raised capital and started her own gourmet cupcake store in the city center. All reports indicated it was a viable, profitable business with a good reputation.

Not a lot impressed Alex, but she did. Not that he planned on telling her that.

“He's been a bit of a tearaway recently.” She wrung her hands, then appeared to realize what she was doing and folded them neatly in front of her to meet his gaze. “But he wanted to start a business, actually supporting himself and contributing to the household. Which, to be honest, we needed.”

“You live with your mother and brother?” he asked, knowing the answer before her hesitant nod. From what he

could work out, Naomi Tennant was a leech who quit work as soon as her daughter began to bring money in.

“Yes. And things can be a little tight. Mom’s...well, she struggles to find work, so with Davie earning as well.” She sighed, flicking back a couple of escaped strands of hair that had fallen over her face. “It helped. It really helped. Especially when he started to earn well. Gave me a little bit of breathing room so I could get some savings behind us.”

He nodded as she spoke. As a Kingwood, most people didn’t expect him to understand the concept, but his father had ensured he did, keeping him on a tight budget through college. Everything he had back then, he saved for or earned working for his father. Luckily for him, he’d shown an early talent for business, so his earnings had been beyond most teenagers’ dreams.

“Then something went wrong?” He was into guesswork now. The regular agency he used to keep tabs on the Tennant’s had suffered an office fire, and he’d ordered them to pull coverage until they were back on their feet.

She nodded, her face paling. On instinct, he stood, moving to rest against the front of the desk, arms folded across his chest.

“Yeah. You could say that.” She gave a little laugh, but he spotted the tremble of her lip. She hadn’t worn perfume, even though he knew she favored a particular brand. A consideration because it made him sneeze?

“Turns out Davie wasn’t doing what he said he was, and he had a couple of ‘partners’ I wasn’t aware of. Ones who weren’t happy when he took their money and lost it. They want it back, with interest. Or...”

“Partners?” The hairs on the back of his neck rose. Secret partners weren’t good. Neither were secret business practices. “What did he say he was doing?”

“He’s an artist, really creative. He said he was doing custom murals for clients.” She studied the pattern on his

carpet. A faint flush rode her cheeks. “Turns out he was using the studio I rented for him to run Faery Dust.”

Alex rocked back on his heels. Faery Dust was a highly addictive paranormal drug, usually pedaled by pixies and vampires. Both were vicious and highly territorial. Neither viewed humans as anything more than playthings.

“I gather he ran afoul of one or the other.”

She lifted her gaze to his and he could see the lines of strain around her mouth. Around full lips, he had the inappropriate urge to run his thumb against to see if they were as soft as they looked.

“I can’t meet the amount they say he owes. They said it is the money or a body.” She took a little step forward, then stopped, looking at him beseechingly. “I have savings, the house...a business. You can have it all, Alex. I’ll work for you for as long as it takes to clear the debt...just please help me.”

“I’m not interested in your house, your savings, or your business.”

At his words the light of hope in her eyes died.

“I see,” she nodded, and as he watched, pulled her armor back around herself. “Well, thank you for listening to me. I’ll see myself out.”

God, she was a strong woman. He felt a complete and utter shit but ignored the feeling. After watching her from afar for all these years, fantasizing about her, she was finally right where he wanted her. At his mercy.

“But you do have something I want.”

She had turned for the door, but stopped and looked at him over her shoulder. “I do? What? Those are the only things of any value.”

He pushed off the desk and approached, stopping mere inches from her. To her credit, despite his larger form, she didn’t flinch, just tilted her head back to look up at him. Reaching out, he tucked the stray strands of hair back behind her ear. Anything to touch her finally.

“You. I want you.”

He saw the moment the words sank in. Her eyes widened, breath catching with a little gasp.

“What do you mean?”

He barked out a laugh, looking away from her for a second. It hurt how naïve she was. Had she really not noticed his obsession with her all those years ago?

“What do you think I mean, Eva?”

She dropped her gaze, refusing to meet his eyes. The flush on her cheeks and the fine tremble that racked her body told him she knew exactly what he meant. To underline the point and ensure there was no confusion, he leaned in, his breath whispering over the side of her neck.

“I’ll deal with your brother’s little Faery Dust problem, but my price is your body. Mine for as long as I want it.”

CHAPTER 2



Eva blinked, stunned by his words. She'd expected...hell, she didn't know what she expected. A loan perhaps, with crippling terms that would have her working three jobs until she was gray haired. It would have been worth it to save her brother's life and she would've agreed in a heartbeat. But...her body? Sex? Could she coldly sleep with a man to achieve her aims? There were words for women who did that and they weren't pleasant ones.

But this was Alex. They had history. They'd been close, kind of, back in the day...

Her heart gave a little leap. Perhaps he'd felt the same way she had all those years ago? A glance up at the hard look on his face quickly disabused her of that notion. No, there were no tender feelings hidden away. This was about lust and power. Over her.

"Why?" She couldn't think of anything else to say. "I mean, look at me." She gestured down herself. "I'm not exactly supermodel material. Don't get me wrong, I don't want to be. I'm quite happy with the way I look, but a man like you—"

"A man like me, what?" His nostrils flared, heat warming his eyes until the touch of his gaze practically scorched her.

Reaching out, he snagged her around the back of the waist and pulled her toward him. She didn't stop him. Couldn't. Breath fled her lungs as their bodies met and pressed together. Holy hell. He was big, taller than she remembered, and solid

with muscle. That wasn't the only thing hard. Her eyes widened at the pressure against her stomach. He was aroused, very aroused by the feel of it.

“You think all men want skinny clotheshorses?”

He watched her. There was no give in his manner, nothing to help ease her into the moment. Bastard. Not sure where to put her hands, they fluttered against her sides for a moment before she clenched her fists.

“Some of us like curves,” he carried on. “I like a woman's body to be soft and welcoming, not half-starved or with a bodybuilder's muscles.”

He lifted his free hand to cup her jaw. It wasn't a gentle touch, but one of ownership as he rubbed his thumb over her lower lip.

“Well, Eva? Do we have a deal?”

She couldn't speak. Was she going to do this? Really?

An image of a headstone filled her mind again. She couldn't let Davie die, not when it was in her power to do something. Her mind skittered around the idea of sex, with Alex, but she forced herself to focus on it. Not like it would be a hardship, he was as hot as hell, always had been. She could do this. Plus, she had to face facts, a man like him...he'd quickly tire of her. This was not a long term thing.

Slowly, she nodded.

Triumph and heat flared in his eyes, and it felt like his cock swelled even more. Shit, she knew nothing about werewolves and sex. What if they liked different, weird things? Without much experience even with humans, how was she going to satisfy a werewolf?

“Full disclosure,” she said, hesitantly. “Because I don't want you to say I misled you on the deal and you back out of helping Davie, but I'm...not what you're expecting. I've had a few boyfriends, but...”

He watched her, his expression unreadable. For a moment she thought she saw anger, but it was gone before she could

isolate it, then he shrugged.

“I’ll deal with your problem today. Would that reassure you I won’t back out? Of course...” He leaned down to whisper his lips over hers. She tensed a little, waiting for his kiss, but it didn’t come. Instead, his grip tightened on her jaw and he tilted her head to the side. Ran his lips across the tender skin of her throat. “I could take what I want, right now, and you can’t do anything about it, can you?”

She couldn’t help the small whimper. Part fear and part need at having him so near, it escaped her lips before she could stop it. Crap, how did he do that? Be so arrogant and high-handed, yet so sexy at the same time? But his grip could have been cruel, and it wasn’t. And he was right, he could quite easily take what he wanted and throw her out without helping her.

“You could, but you won’t.” Her voice was soft, her courage a thin core but there all the same. She lifted her hands to his arms, then ventured to his broad chest. “You’re a good man, Alex. You wouldn’t screw an agreement like that.”

He’d stilled at her touch, lips still just below her ear, almost brushing the skin. She fought the weakness in her knees. If he kissed her there, she would melt. Right here and now. He’d be able to do anything he wanted with her. To her.

He let go of her, stepped back. His expression was back to unreadable. “No, I won’t. Follow me.”

* * *

She followed him as he led her up in the lift to the next floor, which turned out to be a penthouse apartment.

“You live here?” she asked, eyes wide. If she’d thought the rest of the building was posh, this was luxury taken to the extreme. Elegance surrounded her, from the plush carpets underfoot, to the understated beige and cream décor that complemented the heavy dark wood furniture. It was obviously a man’s domain, and he fit right in.

“Just during the week. Weekends I go back to the manor.”

She nodded. She remembered Kingwood Manor. She'd lived there a few years, in one of the smaller properties set back from the main house. Her mother had always railed about that, niggling her husband to get them moved to the main house. There had been enough room, but Eva understood what her mother had not. They weren't welcome because they weren't wolves.

Now, like then, it appeared humans still weren't welcome. She was to be kept here, out of sight of the pack.

“Alex, darling...”

They both turned at the sound of a seductive female voice as Sylvia, his personal assistant, walked through the door. The jacket she'd worn earlier was gone, to reveal a silky camisole top. Making herself comfortable, apparently. Did Alex often hold “meetings” up here with his PA?

Amber flared in her eyes as she looked at Eva. “I thought you were getting rid of her.”

Alex simply walked past her as though the woman hadn't spoken, motioning for them to follow. “Eva will be staying for a while, Sylvia. She'll need suitable clothing for the fundraiser at court tonight. See to it.”

“Yes, sir.” Sylvia glowered, obviously biting back a retort and the amber in her eyes faded. Not a born wolf then, but bitten. Depending on her sire, her rank in the pack could range from the lowest of the low, to higher than a born wolf...if Alex himself had turned her.

She turned and raked a disapproving glance down Eva. “I doubt any of the usual designers have anything quite so...*full* figured, but I'll do my best.”

Alex paused, looking over his shoulder. The tiny muscle jumped in his jaw again before he turned his attention to Eva. “Third door on the left. Make yourself at home. Sylvia, a word?”

He stalked past them both, followed by the pissed-off brunette. Eva hovered in the hallway for a moment before

curiosity got the better of her and she padded after them on silent feet. If they were screwing though, she was going to need eye bleach. What kind of man fucked his assistant though, it was so cliché it was laughable.

“Don’t you fucking *dare* say anything like that to Eva again, understand me?”

The snarled words reached Eva’s ears in the corridor and she froze. Shit. They weren’t screwing. Instead, Alex sounded pissed. Easing herself along the wall, she peeked through the gap in the door. It was darker here in the hall, so she shouldn’t be spotted.

What she saw made her bite back a gasp. Alex had Sylvia pinned against the counter, her body bent backward and his hand around her throat. It wasn’t a sexual hold, or gentle like the way he’d held her in his office. Not when every line in his body radiated anger.

“She’s here. She’s mine, and that is the end of it. Understand?”

“Yes, Alpha. Perfectly.” Sylvia nodded quickly, her eyes closed and her face turned away from Alex’s furious one.

He growled but stepped back, releasing the woman. She sagged against the counter, hand rubbing her throat. Eyes wide, Eva moved closer. Crap, he hadn’t hurt her, had he? She knew wolves were different, but she’d never thought he was *that* much of an asshole. Sylvia dropped her hand. Her neck was unmarked. Eva breathed a sigh of relief. Not even wolves healed that quickly.

“Make the arrangements for tonight,” he ordered, motioning her toward the door and the lift beyond. He followed her out, his voice filtering back to Eva hidden in the hallway. “And make sure I’m happy. If I’m not...”

She waited for a few moments to see if they’d come back, and when they didn’t Eva slipped through the kitchen and peeked through the door to the lift. The door was closed and the light above showed it was moving downward. No keypad, nothing. It must be operated by card alone.

No way out. Crap.

Blowing her bangs out of her eyes, she turned and looked at the kitchen around her. Large and spacious, it was outfitted with clean white cupboards and granite work surfaces. Chrome appliances offset the monochrome look. Large skylights provided light that wasn't too bright, making it airy. She skirted the island in the middle of the room and walked into the hallway. Several doors led off and she felt no guilt in opening them to explore. Alex hadn't said anything was off limits, now had he?

The first door led back to the central living area. Dominated by large leather couches and the biggest TV screen she'd seen outside a cinema. The wall of windows commanded an excellent view of the city laid out below. A man's room, designed for relaxation. She could see Alex sprawled on the couch, watching sports or those documentaries she remembered him liking so much. Perhaps shirtless...

Getting her wayward imagination under control, she turned and carried on opening doors. The next one belonged to an office, the computer equipment turned off and lifeless. Probably password protected, but that made no difference. As a businesswoman, she wasn't into industrial espionage, just cupcakes.

Another door led to a home gym, weights racked and stacked. She lifted an eyebrow at that. She'd never heard of a werewolf working out, had always thought they didn't need to. But then, just like humans, some werewolves' human forms were less than impressive. Alex, on the other hand, was ripped and toned. Perhaps that was less good genetics and more dedication than she'd thought.

Closing the door gently, she opened the next. His bedroom. Unable to help herself, she took a hesitant step inside. Even if she didn't know this apartment was his, if she'd been blindfolded and dumped in here, she would have known this was his room.

Two walls were entirely made of glass, giving a perfect view over the city below. His bed was against the opposite wall. Covered in black satin, it was the biggest damn bed she'd ever seen, easily large enough to sleep six people, probably more.

There was no TV, nothing but a nightstand and a small music center. Speakers dotted the room. Above the bed was a painting. She paused to look at it. A study of the forest at night, it was utterly stunning, perfectly capturing the wildness and beauty of nature. It called to her soul in ways she couldn't explain. This was the side of Alex she'd never understood but always wanted to.

Not that she expected him to show her now. She was a booty call...that was all.

With a sigh, she left the room and headed to her own. She should text her mom and tell her she wouldn't be home for a few days, then maybe get some rest.

Looked like she wouldn't be getting much sleep tonight.

* * *

A crash and a snarl brought Eva abruptly awake. She jerked upright to a sitting position and shoved her hair back out of her eyes. The room was in darkness. Only the soft glow from the corridor provided light, rather than the sunset when she'd laid down.

Shit. She'd only meant to close her eyes for a moment, but she must have dropped off.

"Fucking *hell!*"

The curse filtered to her ears from down the corridor. That was Alex and he didn't sound happy. Sliding off the bed, her bare feet made no sound on the thick carpet as she went in search of him.

She tracked him down to the ensuite off his room. He hadn't seen her yet, so she hovered in the doorway, eyes widening at the sight before her. When he'd left earlier, he'd

been wearing an expensive suit. Now he was naked to the waist, what was left of the suit jacket and his shirt dumped on the floor next to him.

Her heart lurched. He was hurt. Badly if the amount of blood on the shredded clothes by his feet was any indication.

“Fucking vampires.” Growls spilled from his lips as he studied the vicious wounds across his chest, dabbing at them with a dressing doused with green fluid. With each touch, he curled his lips back from his teeth and hissed. “Should’ve toasted the lot of them.”

Crap. He’d gone through all this to help her? She winced, hand covering her mouth. At the movement, his gaze locked on her in the mirror. His expression was hard, eyes maxed out with the amber of his wolf. She was used to seeing the amber ring around his iris but seeing his wolf displayed so prominently took her by surprise.

“Get out!” he ordered, his expression forbidding. In fact, he looked pissed she was there. “You can’t be in here.”

“Please...let me help. It’s my fault you’re hurt.”

Despite his anger, she took a step inside the room, her instinct to help more powerful than her fear of his anger. Besides, he’d never really hurt her. They were friends. Sorta.

Hands braced on the counter, he growled at her. “Eva. I’m not kidding, get the fuck out.”

Ignoring him, she took another step forward. His gaze didn’t leave hers as she reached out to touch him.

“Don’t,” he warned, shaking his head. “This isn’t a game, Eva. I’m warning you.”

“So? You expect me to leave you like this?”

She put her hand on his shoulder. He flinched and broke eye contact, dropping his head down between his shoulders. The muscles in his back flexed, pulling at the edges of the vicious wounds.

Reaching around him for the dressing to clean up the wounds, her fingertips barely grazed it before he moved. His

hand snapped out and closed around her wrist, yanking her off balance. Before she knew what was happening, he'd spun her around and she was pinned between his hard body and the countertop behind.

"I told you to leave."

His voice was rough and low, not human anymore. Neither were his eyes as he looked down at her. As he spoke, she felt the tips of his claws against the skin of her wrists and real fear raced down her spine. Her heart stuttered.

"Blood in the air." Words dragged from him. "Too much temptation. I can't be gentle."

Frozen in place, he held her wrists so she couldn't touch him. His fight with his wolf was in his eyes until he closed them, lines of strain drawn on his face. A tortured conflict that had nothing and everything to do with her.

"Alex..." She wriggled, wincing. "You're hurting me."

His eyes snapped open and his grip relaxed. A little. Not enough. It didn't matter. Another growl ripped from his throat and he hauled her closer. His lips crashed down over hers. Giving no quarter as he demanded her response. He held her to him, his arms a cage of steel, and his tongue pried her lips apart to plunder within. Clawed hands snagged on the fabric of her clothing. Claws that could tear flesh just as easily as cloth.

Never run from a predator. The words from years ago filtered through her memory and she relaxed, her body pliant against his. When she didn't resist, he gentled. A little. Seeking her tongue with his, he slid and stroked along it. A sensuous, yet demanding dance she couldn't help but respond to.

Heat and need flared, overwhelming her fear. He wouldn't hurt her. Even wounded, he was careful. So his kiss was a little rough, she could handle that. More than handle. She wanted more. Much more.

Her hands crept up to his shoulders, wayward fingers exploring the hard muscle. He was masculinity personified; virile and powerful even without his wolf side. Reaching

down, he hooked her behind a knee, pulled the leg up against his hip, and opened her so he could press right where she needed him. She whimpered as the thick bar of his cock pressed against her. Everything female in her responded... needed. Now.

He broke away with a gasp, lifting his hands as he stepped away, leaving her bereft. She clung to the countertop, breathing ragged. One look at his face froze her protest on her tongue.

His features were harder, sharper, more primal...his feral side showing through.

“Go,” he ordered, voice almost unrecognizable. “Unless you want me to fuck you on the counter. Just *go!*”

CHAPTER 3



As far back as she could remember, Eva had wanted to attend the werewolf court. To the teenager she had been, it represented the fantastic and exotic. A step away from her mundane human existence. So when she stepped through the double doors on Alex's arm, her expectations were high.

Half an hour later, she'd realized werewolves were just like everybody else.

Alex had abandoned her three steps inside the door, leaving her to fend for herself. The soft hum of conversation filled the room, the wolves present congregated into little groups, none of which she belonged to. The sole human in the room, she felt a little like a goldfish. Watched, studied, but not spoken to. Not exactly the fairy tale she'd imagined it to be. Snagging a glass of champagne from one of the circulating wait staff, she retreated to the corner of the room and tried to blend with the drapes.

At least she was dressed for the occasion. The dress Sylvia had picked for her, far from being the monstrosity Eva had expected, was a stunning confection of midnight satin. With a low, but not trashy neckline, it emphasized her generous bust before nipping in at the waist, then flowing out into a wide skirt. Matched with strappy silver sandals, the delicate swish of satin around her ankles was a sensory delight and even she had to admit the stylists Sylvia had drafted for her hair and makeup worked wonders. She almost hadn't recognized herself in the mirror, instead wanting to look behind her for the ethereal beauty she saw.

Alex had taken one look at her and turned away. He hadn't spoken to her all the way here, sitting in silence opposite her in the limo. Limo! How the other half lived. Still, his brooding silence had eaten at her composure and she'd barely managed to avoid fidgeting. The only thing that stopped her was the desire not to give him another advantage over her. That hot as hell kiss in the bathroom had been more than enough. Even now, her lips and body tingled at the memory.

"Took out a whole nest of vampires, I heard." Strains of a nearby conversation reached her ears and she paused, champagne glass halfway to her lips. Two older women stood nearby, gossiping as they looked across the hall. "Just waded in and cut them all down."

It was easy to see who they were looking at. Alex stood near a large fireplace on the other side of the room, chatting to a petite and exquisite lycan woman. Jealousy clawed Eva's stomach for a moment until the woman turned. She was pregnant, heavily pregnant. Eva's breath left her lungs in a rush. The woman was another lycan's mate. She had to be. From the little she did know about werewolves, they sometimes found it difficult to conceive. If Alex had fathered a child, then there was no way he'd be making carnal deals with her.

"I always did say he took after his grandfather," one of the women carried on. Despite herself, Eva flitted closer. She knew all about Alex's dealings in the human world, about his business and the myriad trophy girlfriends he was pictured with in the media. But she knew very little about the lycan side of his life.

The side that meant he'd returned covered in blood with vampire claw marks all over his body. She'd assumed he'd click his fingers and have a bunch of lackeys, bully-boy bodyguard werewolves or something, take care of the problem, but he hadn't. He'd sorted it himself. Personally.

"He does indeed. Looks like him too." One of them sighed. "If I was twenty years younger..."

Her companion cackled and elbowed her. “Twenty? Get real, Agnes, you’d need at least forty just to qualify as a cougar!”

“Screw you, Violet, you cantankerous old biddy. Some men like a bit of experience.” Agnes smoothed her hand down her hip. Given she was advanced in age, Eva had to admit, she still had a figure. Obviously one of the advantages of non-human blood.

Violet drained her glass and signaled a waitress over. “Experience? Is that what you call it. I call it wh...”

The two women moved off, their voices drowned out by the music from the classical quartet in the corner. The crowds parted and a few couples took to the dance floor. Eva watched them with envy. Werewolves moved with such grace and coordination. There was no way she could match that, like ever. In comparison, she’d be like a fairy elephant clumping around. Abruptly she went from feeling like a princess, right down to serving maid with a thump.

“So, what’s a pretty lady like you doing all by herself?”

She jumped at the sound of a male voice and turned to find herself looking into the smiling eyes of a lycan who’d managed to creep up on her. Since her senses weren’t the sharpest in the room, it wasn’t that difficult.

Her lips quirked. “Interesting chat up line. Does that work often?”

“I need to work on my technique, don’t I?” He grimaced. “Not my fault, I’m out of practice.”

The grimace became a smile, and he tapped a finger adorned with a gold wedding band against the stem of his glass. “Not trying to pick you up, I swear. You just looked a little lost over here.”

He was a wolf, that much was evident, but the lack of amber in his eyes made her relax a little. Not a born wolf, so he wouldn’t look down on her quite as much as the rest. Kind of odd looking as well, and she couldn’t work out if he was

attractive or not. Regardless, he paled in comparison to Alex's brooding looks.

"I'm good, thank you for checking. Just..." She looked around and bit her lip. "Feeling a little overwhelmed, you know?"

"It can be a bit much the first time, I agree." He smiled and moved to stand shoulder to shoulder with her as they looked out over the dance floor.

Unbidden, her gaze crept to Alex, still in conversation with the pregnant beauty. She held a glass of orange liquid in one hand, the other curled protectively around her bump. A pang shot through Eva for a moment, but she shut it down. No babies, not for her. Not yet. She wanted them, but there was no way she was going to turn out like her mother, popping them out without being in a stable relationship first. And with a father who was as committed to raising their kids as she was.

"You're here with Alex, I take it?"

Color hit her cheeks. "Obvious, is it?"

His lips quirked as he took a sip from his glass. "You can't take your eyes off him. But what's more telling is that he hasn't looked at you once."

"Not once? Well, doesn't that just trash a gal's confidence." She tried to make light of it, but her heart fell. Perhaps he'd changed his mind about their deal. Or perhaps it would be a *wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am* with the lights out. Even she had to admit she wasn't his usual type. She was too human and not enough wolf.

Her companion cut her a sharp look. "You don't know much about wolves in general, and Alex in particular, do you?"

She stilled. "What do you mean?"

His glass was empty, but he didn't make a move to summon one of the waiters. Twirling it in long fingers instead, he studied her. "You're being stalked, darling. In a way specific to one particular wolf. I've never seen him expend this much effort on any woman before."

“Yeah, right.” She snorted. “He’s not looked my way since we arrived. I doubt he even remembers I’m here.”

Amusement entered her companion’s eyes. “I highly doubt that. In fact, I’m sure he’s been focused on you all evening. Would you care to help me test that theory?”

She tilted her head to the side curiously. The guy was off his rocker, of course, but it wasn’t like she had anything better to do. “And just how do you propose to do that?”

“Would you care to dance?” Extending his hand, he smiled. For a moment she caught the flash of amber in his gaze and froze like a rabbit in the headlights, reminded that he was, after all, still a wolf. And she was very much a sheep. Slowly, she reached out and placed her hand in his.

“Word of advice, my dear.” Strong fingers closed around hers. “Don’t flash your throat like that. It’s seen as a sign of submission amongst us. Could get you in a lot of trouble.”

“Oh.” Her eyes widened. She hadn’t even been aware of the gesture, but now that he pointed it out, she could see what he meant. “I see, thank you. I’ll be careful with that in the future.”

“*One...* You do that...*two...*” Hand clasped firmly in his, he led her onto the dance floor. “*Three...*”

He twirled her elegantly and took her into a ballroom hold. She looked up at him curiously. “Why are you counting?”

His answer was a grin that showed white teeth, thankfully blunt, while an imp of mischief showed in his eyes. “You’ll see. *Four.*”

The music started and they moved. Although she loved to, she wasn’t a brilliant dancer, but it was obvious within a few steps that her partner was. Damn that innate wolf grace. It would be worth getting bitten just to get a bit of it. “*Five.*”

A low growl and a gasp behind them warned her trouble was imminent. She turned to see Alex bearing down on them, his face like thunder and his features sharp with his wolf.

“Veyr,” he barked, the air around him shivering with rage as his wolf tried to take over. “I know you’re the master, but touch my woman again and you’re a dead man.”

She gasped, stepping back from her partner hurriedly. Even she knew the name of the Master of the City, the lycan overlord. Blinking, she looked at him again. *This* was Veyr? He’d looked so...normal.

He grinned, and as she watched, the human mask sloughed away to reveal...oh fuck, how the hell could she have thought he was anything other than a powerful werewolf? One who was supposed to be lethal and dangerous, with a hair-trigger temper. Who Alex just threatened...

“No, please.” She jumped between them, hand out to keep Veyr back. Fear crawled through her veins, trying to sap her strength, but she stood firm. “Don’t hurt him. It’s my fault, not his.”

The gasp that rolled through the room clued her in that she’d made a mistake. Shit. She looked around. All eyes were on their little altercation. Alex’s face was set, lips compressed with anger.

“My dear, I applaud the sentiment.” Veyr smiled, reaching out to take her hand, his voice low and measured. “However, Alex is an alpha. It’s his job to protect you, not the other way around. By doing so, you just made him look weaker in front of the court. Besides, I baited him... so the fault is mine. Let’s say no more about it.” He let go of her hand and looked around. “What happened to the music? And where is my wife? Let’s get this party going!”

“Right here, my Lord, now you’ve had your bit of fun.” The pregnant lady who had been speaking to Alex earlier appeared at Veyr’s side and the way he folded her gently against him made the romantic in Eva sigh. He looked back at the two of them. “Alex, you may want to take your lady home now. I think she’s had quite enough lycan politics for one night.”

* * *

Shot.

Alex sat in the back seat of the limo and closed his eyes. He'd almost lost it and challenged the damn Master of the City. Which was, in a word, suicide.

Oh, Alex was good. He knew he was. As pack alpha, he had to be. There was always some jumped up little asshole who thought he (it was usually a he, women had more sense) could run the pack better. The challenges came as regular as clockwork every couple of months. Generally bitten wolves but occasionally one of the born youngsters got cocky after they mastered their part-shift and thought they could take on an alpha with years of experience.

So in a fight, he was the man. Plus, his inner beast had stone-wolf tendencies which made him hard as granite and as difficult to kill as the gargoyle who'd donated DNA to their line generations ago.

But Veyr was not just good. The Master of the City was a hardcore badass who'd spent his teenage years in fight clubs, fighting first for money, then in a twist no one had expected: ownership of them. Lethal, and with a vicious streak a mile wide, even Alex would be hard pressed to take him down. Only one thing was certain. The best outcome he could hope for would be mutually assured destruction, which he didn't want.

But seeing Eva in another man's arms—even those of a friend with a loved mate and a pup on the way—had almost sent him over the edge.

Jealousy had not so much boiled over as it exploded through him with the force of a nuclear bomb. Even now, his hand shook as he raked it through his hair. Deep within, his wolf snarled. The beast was still unhappy about Veyr touching what was theirs.

Theirs. Eva was theirs.

How the hell had she gotten under his skin so fast? He thought he'd gotten a handle on it. A plan. One night to slake his lust and rid himself of an old teenage fantasy, then they could both go about their lives. No harm, no foul.

But no. The instant he claimed her lips earlier, riding the high of pain and bloodlust, he knew one night would never be enough. A lifetime might never be enough. He had pushed her away...no, scared her away...because the depth of his need for her terrified him.

He should let her go. Now. Screw their agreement. She could have this one on him. Instinct told him if he took her, he would never reclaim his soul. It would belong—lock, stock, and barrel—to the beauty sitting on the other side of the limo looking at the night lights of the city as they passed.

He flicked her a glance and realized she wasn't looking out. She was watching him.

“Alex?” She reached out, the gentle touch of her hand on his arm like a brand even through the multiple layers of material. “I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to embarrass you.”

“Well, what did you mean to do then?” he snarled, too much of his wolf in the sound, and she flinched. And he felt a dick. “Forget it. We're here.”

The walk into the building and to the lift was short. He waved away the usual guards, not wanting them in the enclosed space with them. If he couldn't handle Veyr, his overlord, touching Eva, then he sure as hell wouldn't be able to handle subordinate male wolves anywhere near her. Not with the way that dress clung to her luscious curves. What the fuck had Sylvia thought she was doing, dressing Eva like a present to be unwrapped?

The instant the lift doors closed he regretted his decision. Her scent wrapped around him: sweet, evocative, and seductive. Shit. They should have taken the stairs. Leaning against the wall, he dropped his head back, closed his eyes and tried not to think about the temptress mere feet from him. He should let her go, he really should...

“Alex?” The soft, tentative note in her voice drew his attention. “I’m not trying to get out of our deal or anything. Not after you got hurt and everything helping me, but...if you’d rather we work out some kind of financial agreement instead...”

She trailed off when he looked at her blankly. Wet her lips nervously. The sight of her little pink tongue flicking over the plump flesh made him bite back a groan. Fuck’s sake, did the woman not realize how damn sexy that was?

“Financial agreement?”

“Yeah, if you’d prefer.” She took a deep breath and her next words fell out in a rush, almost tumbling over one another. “I know you don’t like me much. Never did. So I understand if you changed your mind and don’t want to do this.”

She studied her hands, her cheeks bright pink while he looked at her dumbfounded. Finally, she looked up and the doubt there almost brought him to his knees. She thought he didn’t like her? Fuck. Was she blind?

“If this is about your figure, I told y—”

“Don’t be ridiculous! You think I’m that insecure about my size?” She barked out a laugh, sounding very lycan. “Screw that. This is about you and me. You say you want me, but you’ve been nothing but an asshole, snarling at me, trying to scare me. Go the big, bad wolf.” Her voice hardened as the lift pinged their arrival. She swept out, pausing to deliver her parting shot over her shoulder. “If you want out, Alex, then fucking man up and admit it.”

CHAPTER 4



Riding a wave of hard-won courage and righteous indignation, Eva stormed through the entrance hall and into the kitchen. The quicker she got out of this dress, no doubt another hefty addition to the amount she already owed him, and into her own clothes, the quicker she could leave.

Right now, that couldn't happen fast enough. Hell, yesterday wouldn't be fast enough. In fact, if she could go back, she'd march right to her apartment and box her own ears for even *thinking* of asking Alex for help.

She had made it halfway across the kitchen before he caught up with her. A whisper of air stroked over the back of her neck before a hard arm wrapped around her waist. She shrieked in surprise as he spun her with a quick movement.

“Alex! You scared me. Don't sneak up on me like that!” she spat, battering at his broad chest and shoulders. It made no difference. He hauled her against him like he didn't even feel the blows. The touch of his solidly muscled body brought back all the tension from earlier in the bathroom and she froze.

“Don't run, then,” he rumbled, his features tight as lust flared in his eyes. His hand slid into her hair, holding her head still. “You think I don't want you?”

He leaned down but didn't kiss her. She thought he was going to, and her body relaxed in preparation. Instead, he brushed his lips against hers. Almost but not quite kissing her. Teasing her instead.

She tried to follow him, capture his lips and gain the kiss, but he evaded her. Carried on teasing her. Not fun, light-hearted teasing but a hard-edged controlling tease. It was a message. They were doing this on his terms, not hers.

Forcing her backward, he boosted her onto the island counter. Him being over a foot taller than she was, it brought their lips level. Before she could get her wits about her, he parted her thighs and pushed between them. A large hand splayed over the back of her hips pulled her flush to the solid erection that strained his pants.

“There,” he murmured against her lips. Rocked his hips so she felt the full width of him. “Does that feel like I don’t want you? That I don’t *like* you?”

“You don’t have to like me to fuck me,” she threw back, the words in a voice way too breathy and *fuck-me-now* to be hers. But it was. And she wanted him to, despite everything. Despite the tension between them, despite the fact she was paying for his help with her body, she wanted him. Always had.

“No, I don’t.” He shoved her skirts up, hand driving beneath them to find her thigh. A groan rumbled in the back of his throat as his hand stroked her skin under the midnight satin. “This dress...all I’ve wanted tonight is to rip it from you. Discover the secrets beneath.”

He kissed her finally, lips claiming hers before she could answer. She whimpered and drove her hands into the short strands of hair at the back of his neck. Held him to her as she parted her lips in invitation. If nothing else, she was honest with herself. She wanted him and she wasn’t going to hide behind any lies to herself that he was forcing her to do this.

Giving another deep moan, he slid his tongue deep to taste her. She clung to him, wrapped her legs around his hips as he made love to her with his mouth. God, the man could kiss. Heat spiraled up and out of control, her breathing ragged when he broke away to kiss her neck roughly.

“Fuck, Eva...” he moaned, pausing with his lips against the side of her neck. Suddenly she realized she’d tilted her

head to the side to give him better access. Baring her throat. Just like the master had warned her not to do.

“You like this?” she asked, turning her head and tilting back to offer more to him. “Does it do it for you?”

His growl and the sound of tearing cloth was her answer. She sucked in a hard breath as his clawed hands trashed the bodice of her dress, leaving the ruined fabric hanging loosely and revealing she wore only a strapless bra beneath. Not push-up, the girls didn’t need any help in that department.

“Stay like that,” he ordered as he pulled back to look at her. His eyes glowed amber. “You know what that means to us.”

It wasn’t a question, but a statement. She nodded slowly, not moving. Not taking her eyes from his.

“You’re offering me your surrender?”

Another nod. It was hard to breathe. Like the air between them was thicker than molasses. She’d barely finished the movement when he was on her again. His breathing punctuated by small growls. He kissed her again. Hard, on the lips. He tore his mouth away to kiss her throat.

She was swept away, his hands hot against her skin. Touching, exploring...claiming. Her own hands weren’t idle. Stroking across his shoulder, she tested the muscles of his arms where his jacket strained over them. Did he get bigger when he partially shifted?

Muttering a curse in the back of his throat, he shrugged out of the jacket and dropped it unheeded to the floor. He tore his tie free and her pleased murmur filled the space between them. She couldn’t wait to touch him. Reaching for his shirt buttons, she couldn’t get the damn things open.

“Rip it off,” he urged against her lips. She nodded, tucking her fingers between the layers of fabric and yanked. Material tore, buttons pinged. She sighed in relief and pleasure as she ran her hands over his exposed chest.

“Hell.” He leaned his head back, eyes closing for a second. “Do you have any idea what you do to me?”

“Might have some idea.”

Taking advantage of his distraction, she leaned forward to plant a kiss just under his collarbone. She'd expected a reaction, but not the one she got. A snarl ripped from him and the next second she found herself flat on her back with him leaning over her. His teeth grazed her throat and she groaned.

“I could take you right here, turn you, make you mine...” his voice was a silken temptation in the semi-darkness of the kitchen. “You'd be mine forever. No walking away. No divorce.”

A fine tremble ran the length of her body. Tied to Alex forever? It was the stuff teenage dreams were made of... She'd planned their wedding so many times, practiced writing her “married” name in secret. Adult reality intruded. He didn't love her. He might lust after her body, but he didn't love her. This was a business arrangement. A pleasurable one sure, but still an arrangement.

He dropped his head before she answered. “You make me crazy. I can't be gentle.”

“Screw gentle. I won't break.”

He pulled back to look into her eyes. Searching for something, but she wasn't sure what. Then he nodded, and pulled her up. “Not here. Not like an animal.”

She brushed his cheek with her fingertips. “You're not an animal, I never thought of you that way.”

He didn't speak, just scooped her off the counter, ruined dress and all. Silence reigned, punctuated only by the sound of their breathing as he carried her to the bedroom. Despite the fact she had no issues with her weight, being carried was an entirely new experience. Most, okay, all of her previous boyfriends had joked that lifting her would put their backs out. Alex managed it without breaking a sweat.

The door to his bedroom yielded to one broad shoulder and he crossed to the bed. Letting go of her knees, he slid her down the front of his body. A move that ensured she felt every hard plane of muscle on the way. She bit her lip, hands

smoothing over his chest, and couldn't resist rubbing her fingertips across his nipples.

He jerked, nostrils flaring. "Dangerous games, Eva."

"So?" She flicked her now loose hair back over her shoulders. "I'm feeling dangerous tonight."

His lips quirked and he stalked her backward. "Really, now? That I'd like to see."

Her knees hit the back of the bed, but he didn't stop, tumbling her onto the soft surface and following her down. For a big man, he moved with such hypnotic grace that she couldn't look away. It was deadly, dangerous, and so sexy at the same time. And all focused on her.

Braced over her, he took her lips again and she realized playtime was over. His lips were hard and commanding, demanding she yield to him and reap pleasure in return. She moaned, clutching his shoulders as his hands stripped away what remained of her dress.

His claws made a reappearance and her bra disappeared, her panties likewise sliced at the sides. He didn't pull them away, just cupped her over the fabric, long, strong fingers pressed against her aching clit.

He worked his way down her neck with a trail of rough kisses. Her hands drove into his short hair as he kissed over the swell of her breast. The warm, wet flick of his tongue over her nipple made her cry out. A wave of liquid heat escaped her, dampening the fabric between her legs and he growled against her nipple in approval. Then he closed his lips around the beaded tip and sucked.

Arching her back, she offered more of the rounded globe to his talented lips and tongue. He took it, working her with licks, suckles, and gentle nips that strung her out, stretching the tension within her tighter with each touch. When she thought she couldn't take anymore, his fingers pressed against her clit. Pressure, then gone. Tapping her through the ruined panties. She panted, parting her thighs to grant him better access. She needed him to touch her. Now.

He rumbled, a small sound of masculine amusement and swept the scrap of satin away. His fingertips stroked her soaked pussy lips at the same time he claimed her lips again. The small moan she made was lost under his lips. His tongue thrust into her mouth at the same time he slid a finger deep into the soaked depths of her pussy.

“Tight and hot.” His words were soft against her lips. “Wet... Are you ready for me, Eva?”

He curled his finger back, pressing against her G-spot and she couldn't answer. Who needed words? She dug her fingernails into his upper arms, bearing down on his hand as she rocked her hips. He hissed, pleasure on his face.

“I'll take that as a yes.”

Another kiss, harder this time as he added another finger to fuck her. She whimpered and writhed, almost out of her mind with the need for him to fill her. Then his hand was gone, his breathing ragged as his lips hovered just above her. The sound of clothing being removed reached her ears and within a second he was back, parting her thighs with a hard knee to settle between them.

She sucked in a breath as the broad tip of his cock brushed against her pussy lips. Reaching between them, he set the head against her and pushed.

“Ohhhh,” her lips parted on a soft exclamation.

He was big, thick cock parting her as he pressed forward. It burned, but in a good way. Her pussy ached, pulsing around him as he impaled her. His hand slid under her shoulder and cupped the back of her neck, tilting her head back to bare her throat for him again. He pressed hot, biting kisses against the tender skin as he penetrated her. Only halfway. Grunting, he pulled back and pushed again, shorter, sharper strokes to work himself all the way inside.

“Fuck, Eva...you're—” He didn't finish the sentence, instead groaning as he bottomed out, his balls against her ass. She closed her eyes, loving the feeling of him over and within

her. His cock jerked and her pussy pulsed in response. She'd always imagined what sex with Alex would be like.

Her imaginings came nowhere close to the reality.

He started to move, drawing his hips back almost all the way. This time he slid into her in one long, slick ride that made them both moan in pleasure. His pace started slowly, allowing them to savor the sensation as he drove in and out, but soon heat and need took over.

Speeding up, his hand was firm on the back of her neck to hold her still beneath him. She didn't mind. Although the hold was possessive, it was also protective and fed something primal and feminine inside her.

It didn't take long for all thought to be swept away. The pace increased, the growls rumbling from the center of his chest deepened. She moaned in pleasure and wrapped her legs around his lean hips. They both groaned as the change in position slid him half an inch farther within her.

He swore and slammed his free hand into the bed next to her head, claws erupting from the ends of his fingers to shred the bed clothing. Then all bets were off. His thrusts became harder, more feral. All she could do was hold on for the ride. And what a ride it was.

He spared no effort, his entire body taut with power and control as he fucked her hard and fast. But not just for his own pleasure. Moving again, he pushed to his knees, lifting her hips to slide them under her ass. She arched, mind blown by the sensation as his cock pressed inside her in an entirely new way. He held her hips, muscles in his arms tensed with the strain.

"Oh...I'm..." Her orgasm swept up, faster than she'd ever felt before. She gripped his wrists, needing something to anchor herself.

"Come." It was an order. Pure and simple. "Come all over my cock. I want to feel your sweet release as your cunt grips me."

The harsh order did it. With a cry, Eva let go and came hard and fast. It rocketed through her, invading every cell, every limb with the speed of a bullet. Her body arched with the force of it. He dropped forward, his hands braced either side of her head to power into her. The gloves were off, but she didn't care. With her own release pulling her body taut, his heavy thrusts drew her pleasure out. Ignited more sensation in her hypersensitive body.

His face tightened, expression hard and with a last thrust into her, he stiffened. Throwing his head back, he snarled his release. His cock pulsed within her, bathing her inner walls with his hot seed. He dropped over her, not crushing her but to gather her close as his lips brushed her throat. Almost like he was thinking about biting her, right then and there, and damn the consequences.

She stilled, waiting for the sharp slash of pain but instead his lips caressed her throat.

“That was...” she paused, her voice little more than a whisper.

He lifted his head, eyes pale in the semi-darkness. “Was what? You think I'm done with you already?” His lips twisted into a smile. “Sweetheart, we're just getting started.”

* * *

Eva woke to sunlight streaming through the large windows and onto the bed. She was warm, sleepy, and content for all of three seconds before her memory kicked in and she remembered she was in Alex's bed. Heat hit her cheeks and an ache between her legs reminded her that Alex hadn't just been an excellent lover, but an insatiable one. He'd woken her several times, almost as though he couldn't get enough of her body.

And he was... gone.

She spread her hand over the other side of the bed. It was cold, Alex long gone. No note. No nothing. The room was neat

and tidy, the remnants of her clothing as absent as the man himself.

Sanitized. As though what they'd shared had never happened. Deal done. Move on.

Heart heavy, she slid from the bed and padded to the guest room. Her clothes were on the bed, neatly laundered and folded. She wasted no time showering and changing so she could get out of here. As much as her heart railed against the idea, there was no way a man like Alex would want more than a night with her.

Finally dressed and with her damp hair pulled back into a messy bun, she headed for the lift. There had to be a way to call it from this floor. Either that or she could call the lobby and have it sent up.

She had her hand in her purse, rooting for her cell when the lift door opened to reveal Alex. Suited and booted, he was as devastatingly handsome now as he had been every other time she'd seen him, even though she knew he'd had next to no sleep.

Surprise flowed over his face for a moment before he frowned. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Umm. Home? Work?" She shrugged, trying to keep her poker face in place. Hard to do when he started to stalk her. She backed, but quickly ran out of room. Her breathing hitched as he crowded her against the wall, tucking a finger under her chin to make her look up and meet his eyes.

"You're mine, remember? For as long as I want you, and believe me, I'm nowhere near finished with you yet."

CHAPTER 5



Monday mornings. They were a curse from the deepest pits of hell afflicted with alarming regularity, and in Eva's eyes, should be banned altogether. Then there were people who were up early on Monday mornings.

Like Alex.

Who was up.

And whistling.

Asshole.

She cracked an eyelid to the pleasant sight of a half-naked man clad in just a towel. His hair still wet from the shower, droplets of water coursed down his ripped abs while he walked. Even though he was a werewolf, she knew that impressive physique wasn't a gift of genetics, mainly because he'd woken her when he'd gotten out of bed to workout this morning.

Still, the scenery was worth it. She could get used to Monday mornings if they started like this. The duvet was a warm nest around her as she watched Alex get dressed. Even at this damned-awful time in the morning, and after the...full weekend they'd had, he was still as sexy as hell. His dark hair was short, even though a lot of weres preferred to let it grow. Said it kept them closer to nature, or something like that. Not Alex though. In fact, he didn't fit the hipster werewolf image perpetrated by the media.

Instead, when he was clad in a sharp suit and tie, he looked every inch the boardroom predator he was, a businessman with

a fearsome reputation. Only the amber ring in his blue eyes gave him away as non-human.

He pulled a shirt on and started to do up the buttons. Grumbling to herself, Eva checked the time and slid out of bed. The room was warm, but she still shivered after the warmth of her duvet cocoon. Her mind full of her plans for the day, she padded through to the bathroom to use the facilities and brush her teeth. She'd grab a coffee with Alex before he left, then shower and leave for work. Although she had staff to open the shop, she had plans to try new frosting and decoration ideas for a wedding fare coming up. And the early—very early, thanks to Alex—bird caught the worm.

By the time she came back into the bedroom, Alex was straightening his tie in the mirror. He glanced over his shoulder, a frown on his face at the sight of her in a robe. “It’s still early. Why don’t you go back to bed?”

She shook her head. “No can do. You snooze, you lose in the cut-throat world of cupcakes.”

“Work?”

Her path to the door was suddenly blocked. His body heat—lycan’s ran hotter than human’s—wrapped around her an instant before he snagged her around the waist and pulled her against the solidness of his body. Heat pooled between her legs, as a shiver of awareness and need whispered over her skin. She bit her lip, color washing over her cheeks. He only had to touch her and instantly her body responded, ready for some between the sheets action, no matter what her brain said.

Her body was a hussy. Obviously.

“Yeah, work. It’s that thing ordinary people have to do to meet the bills.”

She looked up to meet his eyes and lost her train of thought. Heat flared there. A primal darkness that had nothing to do with the amber ring around his pupil that marked him as a born wolf and everything to do with the thick, hardened bar of his cock prodding her stomach. Her pussy clenched, liquid

heat flooding her as her body signaled its willingness to get back into bed.

“You’re not going to work.” His nostrils flared, eyes darkening another notch. “God, Eva...don’t look at me like that, or I won’t make this meeting.”

His words made her pause. “What do you mean, I’m not going to work? Of course I a—”

His lips covered hers, cutting off her sentence before she finished. Instantly her train of thought derailed and she moaned in pleasure. He tasted of toothpaste and mouthwash. Minty-fresh with a side of pure man. Despite the fact they’d spent most of the weekend in bed, and her body was pleasantly sore in places she’d only vaguely been aware of before, desire hit her hard and fast. Operating on sheer instinct, she opened for him, allowing him access and they both moaned when he slid his tongue past her lips to tangle with hers.

No foreplay. Instead, he made love to her with his mouth. Thrusts and strokes that mimicked other acts. Acts that heated her blood and made her stomach quiver. One big hand spread over the back of her full ass to hold her against him as he rocked his hips against hers. She whimpered, the sound lost as he undid the knot that held the belt of her robe and slid his hand within.

Hot, rough skin brushed against hers and his hand closed over her breast. Pleasure surging, she arched into the touch. His lips didn’t leave hers as he caressed her, big hand easily covering the mound of her breast. Cupping her, he teased with feather-light touches on the curve beneath before his thumb swept over her nipple. Instantly the sensitive peak hardened, a pebble that ached for his touch.

The rumble in the back of his throat rang with approval and masculine pleasure. Strong fingers closed over her nipple, tweaking and pulling gently. At the sharp bite of pleasure-pain, she tore her lips from his, desperately trying to catch her breath and slow this down.

“Alex, we were up all night. You can’t...”

His knuckles brushed over her stomach, his voice little more than a rumble in the quietness of the room. “I can...I am. We are.”

He leaned in to brush his lips over her neck, nuzzling the soft spot beneath her ear that made her knees weak. Biting her lip, she clutched at his shoulders for support as heat washed through her. Made her body bend against his. His big hand slid down farther, nudging her thighs apart to allow him access. Her breath hissed through her teeth as he stroked her pussy lips and found them already soaked.

“Hot,” he murmured. “And wet.”

Barely before he’d finished the sentence, he urged her backward, but not toward the bed. Instead he turned her, backing her against the window. She didn’t have the breath or focus to argue, not when his fingers rubbed her clit with each step, then as her back hit the cold glass, were thrust deep inside her.

“Ohhh!” She couldn’t manage anything else, her eyes wide as he pumped, using two strong fingers to fuck her. He held her easily against the glass, a hand hooked under one of her thighs, holding it up and open.

Heat darkened his eyes, rendering the blue almost midnight, startling against the amber. So strong, but yet so gentle with her sometimes. Not now though. Now, his breathing was ragged with arousal and his grip firm, perhaps a little rough on her thigh, his fingers digging into the soft flesh hard enough he’d leave marks.

And she didn’t care. All that mattered was what his other hand did.

He’d brought his thumb into play, sliding the rough pad over her clit. For saying he was a boardroom shark, his hands were deliciously rough against her soft skin, as though he’d worked manual labor all his life.

“You like that, Eva?” he said softly, moving in and using a brush of his nose against her chin to tip her head back. His lips whispered against her throat with his next words. “Like to feel

me deep inside you. Deep inside your sweet little pussy. Stroking... sliding.... stretching... making you ready for me?"

She managed a soft croak, but that was it. Hell, like always when she was around Alex, even that sounded breathy and sexy and totally unlike her.

He branded her throat with a line of hot kisses, not stopping the motion of his hand. She felt wrung out, her body tortured by pleasure as he turned his hand and stroked over her G-spot. At the same time, he rubbed her clit. Over and back, then around, until she panted and writhed against him.

"More," she begged, unable to think. She needed to come. Like now. More than she ever had before. "Please...more."

He didn't disappoint. Turning to the side, he pinned her leg against the window with his body and drove his now free hand into her hair. Tilting her head up, he claimed her lips with a devastating kiss. It wasn't foreplay, it wasn't even love-making, it was sheer and utter sexual domination. He plundered her lips at the same time he took her body with his hand. She whimpered, unheard beneath the force of it, as with a few hard strokes, he brought her up and to the edge of pleasure.

She hovered for a moment, her body so strung out, she didn't know whether to laugh, cry, or scream with frustration and need. He pulled away, nipping her lower lip, and whispered.

"Come. Now. Over my fingers."

As though she had been waiting for his permission, her climax rushed up and enveloped her. A cry of pleasure ripped from her throat as it crashed through her, her head dropping back. Her pussy convulsed, gripping his fingers in a velvet embrace and liquid heat washed over them. He gathered her to him, claiming her lips again as the waves rolled through her. She had no option but to cling to him and ride them out until, finally, she came around to find herself resting against him. Wrung out, her body weak, she lifted her head to meet his gaze.

“No more talk of going to work. The deal was, you’re mine until I’m done. And that means you stay here, ready and waiting for me.” His voice was firm, his expression even more so. “Understand? Or do I need to repeat the lesson?”

* * *

No. He didn’t need to *repeat* the lesson. Eva had gotten the message loud and clear. Still trying to catch her breath she sagged against the window when he pulled his hand from her, let go of her leg and stepped back. As though nothing earth shattering had happened, he licked his fingers, eyes on hers, then straightened his clothing as his breathing returned to normal.

Jealousy surged through her. Damn his bloody werewolf physiology. He looked as cool as a cucumber while she was hot, sweaty, and needy. Again. Already. What was with that? It seemed as soon as they were finished, she wanted to go again. With Alex, only ever with Alex. She’d never had such a reaction to a man before and it startled her in its intensity.

“So, what am I supposed to do all day?” she asked, hating the fact she pouted a little. Whatever happened to the independent businesswoman she’d considered herself?

Oh yeah, she’d made a deal with the devil...albeit a sexy werewolf flavored one. He owned her. For now.

“I don’t know. Watch TV? Surf the net?” Alex shrugged, walking across the room to straighten his tie in the mirror. Eva watched, fascinated. He was hellishly good-looking, so much so, all the glossy magazines practically fell over themselves to interview him, knowing that getting him on the front cover meant instant sellout.

He was easily handsome enough to model, or grace the silver screen. Yet he only looked in the mirror long enough to ensure his appearance was satisfactory. As far as she could tell, he didn’t bother actually looking at himself at all. As though his looks didn’t bother him one iota.

“Are you trying to drive me insane?” She demanded, getting it together enough to straighten her robe and fold her arms over her still aching breasts. The release he’d brought her to wasn’t enough, she needed more. She needed him. Buried deep within her. That, combined with his offhand attitude now, pissed her off. Big time.

“I don’t know what your *other* girlfriends do about the place,” she waved her hand airily. “But I’m not the kind to spend hours making sure my manicure is perfect or keeping up with whatever airheaded reality show is on the television at the moment.”

He stopped in the doorway, one eyebrow arched as he gave her a flat look. “Other girlfriends? I’ve never brought anyone here before.” He sighed and looked at his watch, which only increased her ire. He was treating her like a clingy girlfriend. “I need to get to this meeting. How about you go shopping, get whatever you need to amuse yourself while you’re here. Okay? I’ll send my man up in an hour. He’ll take you wherever you want to go.”

He beckoned her closer and despite herself, she’d taken three steps before she realized what she’d done. He closed the rest of the gap when she faltered, snagging her around the waist and pulling her against him for a quick, hard kiss.

“Buy yourself something nice. Okay?” He smiled and wound a lock of her hair around his finger. “I want you to be happy here with me.”

She smiled. Shopping to *amuse* herself; she’d show him damn shopping. “Okay, Alex. Now hurry off to your meeting, don’t want you to be late.”

It didn’t take long after Alex had left for her to shower and dress, then ring the bakery and let her staff know she’d be working from home for the week. Whose home, she didn’t say, but it wasn’t unusual for her not to be in the shop when they didn’t have any big orders, like this week.

After that, she took a deep breath and called her mother. Naomi picked up on the third ring.

“Hello?” Her voice sounded breathy and sex-kitten for all of the few seconds it took her to realize Eva was on the other end of the line.

“Mom... how are things?”

“Terrible. How could *both* my children abandon me in my hour of need?” Naomi’s voice turned miserable and tear-filled. Eva sighed and gritted her teeth. Evidently, her mother had run out of gin. She always got maudlin when she was out of drink.

“Davie still hasn’t come home?”

At the sound of the lift door pinging, Eva cradled the phone as she leaned back. One of the big bodyguards who often surrounded Alex like a multitude of rather large satellites stepped through. Spotting her through the kitchen door, he gave a small nod of acknowledgement and walked into the living room.

He was gone before she could return the gesture and she returned her attention to the conversation with her mother. Who had started her usual under-appreciated and trodden-on tirade.

“...really don’t know why I put up with it, you know. You two live under my roof, you should have more respect and obey my rules.”

Her mother’s tone was steadily rising which meant she was working herself into a good mad. The resultant binge and weeks of sulking sure to follow made Eva sigh and rub the bridge of her nose. She could well do without this now.

“Your roof? Mom, you moved in with *me*, remember?” she pointed out, trying to be as kind as she could. It was nothing less than the truth.

For years, Eva had tried to make her break for independence, difficult when she was the sole financial support for the family. Finally, after an argument, Naomi decided to move out with the latest love of her life. It lasted a total of three weeks before she turned up on the doorstep, suitcases around her feet and panda-eyed with mascara and tears.

“Well,” her mother huffed, not put off by a little thing like the truth when she was working up to an argument. “It was *my* roof first, or have you forgotten how I took you both in when the Kingwoods kicked us out?”

“Mom, we were teenagers. You were legally responsible for us.” Ugh, she really didn’t want her mother starting off on her Kingwood rant. They’d be here for hours. Literally hours. “So you haven’t seen or heard from Davie? At all?”

“No, nothing. Do you know where he is?” Naomi demanded, apparently so far into the bottle that she’d forgotten the start of the conversation with her daughter. “Tell him to come home. With you having a good time and abandoning your poor mother, I need him home to take care of me.”

“Yes, Mom. Just as soon as I find him. Talk to you later.” Before her mother could reply, Eva cut the call and closed her eyes. Luckily, her mother thought she was staying with one of her friends, supposedly going through a bad relationship breakup, so she didn’t know where Eva was. If she did—if she knew Eva was with Alex—she’d probably go nuclear. Her hatred for the Kingwoods was as powerful as her desire to return to their fold. No, correction, to go back to their money. Eva had no illusions that her mother harbored any familial feeling for any of the Kingwoods, but she did love pampering.

Looking at her cell again, Eva flicked through her contacts and hit Davie’s number. The phone rang, giving her hope, but then clicked over to voicemail. Crap, he must have gone into hiding or something. Where a person could hide from vampires she didn’t know, but if anyone could do it, Davie could. He was nothing if not inventive.

Her brother’s voice filled her ear. “This is Davie. You know what to do.”

At the beep, she started talking.

“Davie, call me. Please. Getting really worried about you now. I’m not at home, so use my cell. I have it on me all the time. I have everything taken care of, so call me, okay? It’s going to be all right, I promise.”

Clicking the phone off, she slid it into her purse and went to find her bodyguard. Time to do some shopping.

CHAPTER 6



Eva was human. He couldn't keep her. He wanted to, but he couldn't.

Alex groaned, dropped his head back against the mirrored wall of the lift and closed his eyes. From the point they'd returned to his apartment Friday night, he hadn't let her out of his reach all weekend. Hell, he'd hardly let her out of bed, unless it was to take her against the wall, on the bathroom counter, in the shower. God, the shower...he was hard again just thinking about it.

What had the woman done to him? It was like she'd cast a spell and enslaved him. Far from slaking his lust and getting her out from under his skin finally, he'd only made it worse. Now his need for her ran so deep, he was sure it wound around his very soul. Every breath he took was followed by a memory of her in his arms or her delicate touch on his skin. She calmed the beast at the same time she aroused the man, his wolf docile and practically eating out her hand while the man felt primal and powerful.

She was his...all his.

And human.

She wouldn't survive the harshness of pack life.

"Fuck!" The curse burst from him without warning and he was glad he was alone. Raking a shaking hand through his hair, he studied himself in the mirrored wall opposite. Outwardly, he looked the same as he always did. A sharp suit

covered the solid physique he maintained meticulously with a punishing workout regime.

He could lift small cars if he wanted to, but he'd never had to work for his strength. He could just tap up his wolf and pull power from the non-human part of him like most werewolves did. But that wasn't Alex.

Pride filled him. Everything he had, he'd worked for... earned through blood, sweat, and tears. Well, mostly blood and sweat. And it made a difference. His human abilities were impressive, and backed up by his wolf, gave him the advantage over a were who relied only on his beast for strength.

That didn't mean jack with his current situation though. To think, he'd been congratulating himself on dealing with the Eva situation last week. One weekend of sex and he'd let her go, or so he'd thought. Things hadn't turned out quite to plan. Three nights of passion and sensuality and he was no closer to being able to let her go than he had when she walked into his office last week.

Fuck as a curse didn't cover it.

He looked into his reflection's eyes and saw the struggle reflected there. She made him think dangerous thoughts about keeping her. Thoughts he couldn't have. She was human and nothing could change that. Nothing could alter the fact that his sweet, delicate little Eva was too fragile for pack life.

Rage filled him, his lips curling back from his teeth and the next instant a spider web of cracks appeared over his reflection.

He'd punched the glass. No conscious thought, just explosive violence.

Shit, he had it bad.

Pulling his hand back, he looked at his cut knuckles with little interest. Already the skin started to heal over, nothing compared to the turmoil raging within him. Eva was human. The only way he could keep her was to turn her.

Yes! His wolf howled with approval. If he turned her, he could keep her at his side forever. Images filled his mind of their life together. Waking to her in the morning, every morning. Her wearing his shirt and nothing else in the kitchen. Their wedding...lifting her veil to claim her lips as she became his wife. His woman, his mate...mother of his pups. The thought of her, belly swollen with his child, almost brought him to his knees as a wave of longing hit.

But then reality crashed over him and he rejected the dark thread of temptation. If he turned her, he risked destroying her. Conversion was a dangerous business and not everyone survived. If they did, they weren't always the same on the other side. Everything he loved about her, her sweetness, her gentle nature...could be scoured away or twisted if he made her lycan.

He gritted his teeth, amber flaring in his eyes, reflected at him myriad times in the cracked mirror. He couldn't turn her. He had to let her go. Before the temptation to take away her choices and keep her with him grew too great.

The lift reached the last stop and pinged as the door opened. He started to take a step forward, then froze as the most delicious scents wrapped around him emanating from the kitchen. It smelled like...baking? Eva had been baking?

He strode the short length of the corridor and paused in the doorway to survey the scene. His kitchen was large, and for the most part, barely used. He cooked, after a fashion. Steak mostly, which he seared in a pan and threw on a plate with some salad if he was feeling fancy. If not, he ate it raw, using sharp lycan teeth to tear the meat. Half the time, it wasn't about presentation but getting enough protein in his body to fuel his wolf.

Now though, the room felt small. Almost every counter was full. A stack of cupcakes with what looked like butterflies covering them inhabited one counter while the next had rows of cakes with roses dotted over them. Yet another housed a big mixer, scales, and what looked like bags of ingredients. In the middle of it all was Eva, her hair pulled up into a messy bun,

and a white apron highlighting her generous curves as she bent over to pull a tray out of the lower oven.

He bit back a groan as he was presented with a view of her ass that instantly brought his body to attention. At the same time though, his stomach growled at the scent of cupcakes.

Heavens, it had been years since he'd eaten a cake. Childhood memories assailed him, of his mother in the big kitchens at the manor. He barely remembered her, she'd died when he was a child, but he remembered cupcakes and hugs. Flitting forwards, he snagged a cake off the rack, peeled the case, and took a bite. The small morsel was utter heaven. Sweet and soft and... This time his groan escaped his lips.

Eva whirled at the sound, a smile on her lips. "Alex! I didn't know you were back. Hey, no eating my samples!"

She lunged forward as he stole another cake from the cooling rack and he ended up with an armful of curvy, flour-covered woman. He smiled and held the cake aloft, out of her reach, quite happy to stay that way as she wriggled in the most delightful way against him.

"Give it back," she demanded, peering over his shoulder at the rack. "I don't have any spares, I'll make more for you in a minute, but these need icing for the Rowe wedding."

He lifted an eyebrow. "You're catering for a wedding in my kitchen?"

Amazing. He'd told her to go shopping, expecting an endless parade of clothing and jewelry, but apparently she'd bought baking supplies instead.

She rolled her eyes at him. "Not an *entire* wedding, this place is far too small for that. Just the samples to see what designs they want. Harry from the shop is coming here and delivering them for me."

She was working. Alex was forced to shake his head in surprised approval. Rather than lounge around, she'd worked around his rules and managed to get her own way regardless. Ruthless and determined, she'd make a hell of an alpha's mate.

Not. Happening.

He waved the cupcake just out of reach. “So, you need this? What will you give me for it? Because they are rather delicious. I might just eat it instead. Call it...payment for using my facilities.”

“Payment? What type of payment would you be interested in?” A curious expression on her face, she tilted her head to the side and derailed most of his thought processes. Damn woman, she knew exactly what that did to him.

The growl slipped from his throat before he could stop it. Dropping the cake on the rack, he scooped her in his arms and strode to the one counter without baking paraphernalia spread over it. “How about a taste of a different kind?”

She squeaked as he laid her on the hard surface, then again as he shoved her skirt and apron up. Silencing her with a kiss, he pried her lips apart and thrust his tongue into her sweetness as he pushed his way between her thighs

Stroking the satin skin, he shoved his hands higher over her hip until he found the lace of her panties. With one yank, he snapped both sides of the lace and tore the tattered remains free. Fuck finesse, he needed her too much.

She broke away to protest. “Alex...not in here. Your clothes...the flour!”

“Fuck the flour.”

He reached between them to tear at his zipper. His cock pressed hard and insistent against the fabric, desperate to be buried within her. The zipper gave and his cock sprang free, slapping against the juncture between her thigh and body. Not wasting a moment, he gripped the base of his shaft and guided the head into place.

His entire body ached with the need to take her, as though the fact he couldn't brand her with his bite on her shoulder drove him to claim her body again and again. To ensure she craved no other but him, ever.

He didn't give her a chance to argue. Pushing forward, he entered her, sliding his thumb over her clit as her body enclosed the head of his cock in its slippery, silken grip. She

cried out, her back arching. He paid attention to her clit as he filled her. She felt like heaven, hot and wet. Ready for him with just a kiss.

He braced himself with a hand on the counter by her waist, hand spread over her mons as his thumb worked her. Bottoming out, he closed his eyes to stop them crossing at the sheer pleasure of being inside her and drew back. She whimpered, laid out like an offering in front of him, her lips pursed as he pulled out of her almost all the way. He had a reason though, slipping his thumb down to collect her nectar and smooth it back up over her clit. Making it slick and wetter than before.

This time his thrust was quick, as though his cock couldn't wait to be buried in her heat again. His balls slapped against her ass as he fucked her, hard and fast, his pace almost desperate. He worked her all the time, playing her body as he took her. He needed her to come, needed her pleasure to fuel his own. And it didn't take long. All too soon he felt the familiar tightening of her sweet pussy around his cock. Her breathing shortened, and her hips rocked. Her head thrashed side to side on the counter, her hair a dark halo around her head. Then...she stilled, hand gripping his wrist where he braced himself, fingers digging into the skin. The bite of her nails made him growl, fighting the climax built up behind his balls, drawing them up and tightening them.

“Oh...I'm...”

She came, hot and wet, all over his cock. Her cunt gripped him hard, milking him as he loosed his control and drove into her. His fangs dropped, the need to bite and claim her almost overwhelming, but he fought it. Channeled the need down to his cock.

He lasted three more thrusts before his release hit him like a bullet. His ass drove forward, burying his cock to the hilt in her softness as he came, bathing her inner walls with his white-hot seed. His climax felt like forever, his cock jerking and pulsing, and he gasped, his vision gray at the edges. Slamming both hands onto the counter either side of her hips, he panted as the waves of pleasure receded. He opened his

eyes to find her watching him, her eyes dark with sated passion. Her lips curved into a small, satisfied smile.

“I need to bake more often if it gets that kind of reaction.”

* * *

“*Y*eah, just slide those in there at the back. Careful, they’re delicate.”

Eva hovered behind the hulking brute of a bodyguard Alex had assigned to her as he loaded the tray of completed cupcakes into the back of her van. Satisfied that, leaning halfway inside the tiny, retro-styled van, with its windowless sides, he couldn’t see her, she flicked a glance up to the cab. Harry, her employee doing the delivery, sat in the front, checking the address and the paperwork.

Neither had eyes on her, which was good. Exactly what she needed when she’d insisted on coming down to the street at the front of the fortress-like Kingwood building. Because escaping from a single lycan on the street was a hell of a lot easier than escaping a cell-like penthouse with a secured lift she didn’t have a damn keycard to.

“Make sure the covers are on properly,” she ordered the werewolf, holding back her smile at his big hands fiddling with the delicate covers for the cakes. Talk about a bull in a china shop.

Actually, from what she’d seen of shifted lycans during her time living on the Kingwood estate all those years ago, some were almost as big as bulls. It was hard to tell as it had always been night and she’d been forced to sneak glances out her bedroom window when they ran during the full moon.

There had always been one wolf lurking around the cottage during those times, like a guard to make sure they stayed inside. As if she was stupid enough to go out with a forest full of hot to trot werewolves. But she’d never forget how beautiful the creature looked. It was always the same brown/gray wolf with a white stripe from the tip of his nose to its brow and fur that look so soft under the moonlight. She felt

silly admitting it, but she'd fallen in love with the animal. She'd wondered what he'd done to get guard duty, always sacrificing the call to nature.

Just the same as she'd always wondered what Alex looked like shifted...

Snapping her thoughts back to the present, she worked on keeping her heart rate level as she backed away from the van. Wolves could sense just about everything with those damn sensitive noses of theirs and she didn't need to give her bodyguard/jailor a heads up of what she planned. She needed to act now before the bodyguard deposited the last box and stood back.

Reaching the edge of the plaza in front of the building, she turned and slipped into the crowds going about their business. They were kept from the foyer of the building by aversion wards, and the fact that everyone knew the security team at Kingwood were all lycan. But the street...like everywhere in the central part of the city, was packed with people.

Holding her breath, she slid deeper into the crowds, letting them carry her along as she moved at the same pace. Reaching up, she pulled her hair down from its jaunty high ponytail to spill over her shoulders and slipped out of the light jacket she wore over a sundress. One appearance change, easy. She looped the jacket, weighted down on one side by her wallet and keys in the pocket, over her arm and darted to the curbside to call a cab.

Please, be quick. She resisted looking over her shoulder, knowing that only the throng of humanity separated her from the bodyguard and discovery. The mass of bodies and scents should be enough to fool the lycan's sense of smell for a few minutes, but that wouldn't obscure his vision. If he got a good look at her, even a fleeting glimpse as she looked over her shoulder, then her great escape would be foiled.

She let out a sigh of relief as a cab pulled up, and scrambled into the back.

"Hey. I need 1146 Henson Avenue, please. Quickly."

The driver nodded and Eva leaned back, closing her eyes as it pulled away. Alex would be *so* pissed when he realized she'd given his guy the slip, but she didn't care. She had to find Davie. Sure, Alex had dealt with the vampires, she knew that, but the fact no one had actually seen or spoken to her brother since last week really worried her now.

Alex said he had his men out looking but as badass trackers as the lycans no doubt were, they didn't know her brother. No one knew him as well as she did. There were things Davie did that defied logic. And if he'd been running with vampires, then it stood to reason he'd found ways to keep lycans off his scent.

“Along here okay?”

The driver pulled the car to a stop just outside Davie's studio. Tucked away down a little side street, foot traffic was minimal and she noticed with relief that Alex didn't have any men stationed here. Good. She hadn't thought of that when she'd left, but it would have been a bummer to get this far and get caught.

“Yeah, here's fine. How much?”

She paid the fare and slipped from the cab, looking up at the building as the car pulled away in search of another fare. The structure was an older brownstone, once a three story residence, now split into three units. She'd rented the top because of its excellent light for use as a studio. She just hadn't expected Davie to put it to use pedaling drugs.

Heart heavy, she trudged up the steps and into the building. No lift, just three flights of stairs and she was in the studio. Thankfully, Alex hadn't had the locks changed after his men had searched the place, so her key still worked, even if she had to jiggle the old style lock. Stepping through the door, she stopped abruptly, her hand covering her mouth.

The place had been trashed. Utterly trashed.

Paint, now dried, splashed up the walls and over the floor in a chaotic jumble of color. Paper and sketches were strewn over the floor, paint boot marks tracking through and over

them and all the canvases, even the blank ones, had been slashed. At first her human mind wanted to put the damage down to knives. But there were four slashes equal distance apart.

Claws. Vampire claws. She'd seen the same marks on Alex's skin when he'd come home that night. Alex had said the studio was untouched, which meant the vampires had been here after. Looking for what? Davie? The faery dust?

She moved farther into the room, eyes wide as she looked for something, anything that might give her a clue as to her brother's whereabouts. Because if the vampires were still looking for him...

She had to find him first.

CHAPTER 7



“**Y**ou mean to tell me *one* little human woman gave you the slip?”

Alex was pissed and didn't care who knew as his voice boomed around the high-ceilinged foyer of the Kingwood building. He'd returned from another meeting to find the security team running around like headless chickens rather than the werewolves they actually were. And so they should because Eva had managed to outwit them all. Idiots.

“Yes, Alpha.” Frank, the guy he'd left in charge, wouldn't meet his eyes. Daren't, more like. Alex was known to have a temper, especially when people fucked up. “She had me loading cakes into the back of her van, and disappeared into the crowds on the street.”

“So, why didn't you call me immediately?” he demanded, arms crossed over his chest.

The fact that Eva had run rings around his team both impressed and frustrated the hell out of him. Impressed him because his woman was as smart as hell to hoodwink lycans and scared him because not only was there a vampire threat in the city, but also pixies and the usual lowlife human scum. None of which Eva was equipped to handle.

He ran a hand through his hair. He should have tied her to the bloody bed, then none of this would have happened. The thought of her tied up quickly morphed into something hotter. His imagination dressed her in the black lace and satin lingerie he'd picked up after his meeting, her dark hair spread around

her on the bed as she looked up at him with desire in her eyes...

Dammit. Just the thought of her had him harder than a freaking tent pole.

He snapped his mind back to the current situation, glaring at the wolves clustered around him.

“Find her,” he roared, his wolf at full strength in his voice.

Some of the wolves flinched. Good. They needed the reminder there were consequences for failure. He was a benevolent alpha, relaxing the draconian rules his more traditional father had ruled the pack with.

Like fraternization with other species. He'd never understood why his father had a hard-on for ensuring wolves only married or fucked other wolves. Not like the Kingwoods could be uptight about pure bloodlines, not with their mixed lycan/gargoyle heritage. At some point, somewhere, there had been some mixed species loving going on to create the stone-wolf lines.

That one had been the first rule he'd overturned when he'd taken on the mantle of pack alpha, something he'd been itching to do for years. Because of Eva. Every six months, he'd petitioned his father to change his mind, even citing his uncle's marriage to a human. Correction, humans. After his marriage to Eva's mother had broken down and he'd been allowed to return to the pack proper, he still hadn't learnt his lesson and married another human within the year. An act that exiled him from the pack.

Not that it seemed to bother him. The last Alex heard, his uncle was sailing around the Caribbean with his new, young, human wife. For most wolves, exile from the pack would be the worst fate imaginable, but Charles had always been the runt of the litter, lycan wise. He barely even counted as a beta, and as far as Alex knew, had only shifted twice in his life. It was a wonder he hadn't been killed at birth, as most runts were. Lycan society was brutal that way.

But all his entreaties had fallen on deaf ears. If they hadn't though, if his father had relaxed that one rule, Alex wouldn't have let Charles's marriage to Eva's mother stand in his way. He'd have stormed right into the cottage they'd lived in on the Kingwood estate—for their own safety—and claimed her as his own. Had she realized how many nights during the full moon he'd kept watch over them, ensuring the rest of the pack stayed away?

The guards filtered away as his cell rang. Exhaling to drain his body of anger, he answered it.

“Kingwood.”

“*Dobriy den,*” a heavily accented voice spoke, deep and gravelly. “Iz this Kingwood Alpha?”

Alex blinked in surprise and switched the phone to the other ear. “It is. And you are?”

The speaker was Russian, that much he was certain, but his grasp of the language was rusty. Still, Russian and a voice like two cliffs rubbing together meant one thing. Gargoyle. Specifically, a Kovalev gargoyle. Of which there were only a handful in the city.

“Misha Kovalev. I live opposite studio you wanted me to *smahtryeht*...uhm...to watch?”

Misha Kovalev was a bigass bastard of a gargoyle, a stone-bear from what his contacts had been able to uncover, from a gargoyle family a couple of cities away. He was only here to wind up family business, personal family as opposed to *family* family, and then he'd be on his way.

Suited Alex down to the ground. The Kovalevs were dangerous and had their fingers in all kinds of pies that could make things difficult for the lycans should they decide to move into the city. Only the fact that a Kovalev ancestor had donated the stone part of the Kingwood DNA had meant most gargoyles kept a wide berth. That and the fact Veyr decreed the instant any gargoyle family tried to set up shop in his city, he'd crack out the sledgehammers and destroy any caught in their stone forms. Not a threat to be made lightly.

“Indeed. You have something for me?”

“*Da*. A woman is here. Small, pretty...like you said.”

Alex paused mid-pace. Eva was at her brother’s studio. He clicked his fingers, getting Frank’s attention and strode toward the lift and the car park beneath the building.

“Excellent. Thank you, Misha.”

“No problem. Just... You may want to hurry.” There was the sound of a curtain being pulled back, rings rattling on the pole. “Zere is a pixie gang outside waiting for her.”

* * *

*T*he instant Eva stepped out the front door of the Brownstone, she knew she was in trouble. All the hairs on the back of her neck stood on end and her survival instincts screamed at her to run.

“Well, well, well...what do we have here?” A voice, male and smug, made her turn slowly to find herself surrounded by what looked like refugees from 80s punk rock. All male, they sported a variety of fluorescent hair colors in mohawks or spikes. Black leather and chains or cut-off denim and heavy boots seemed to be the dress code. They lounged around, some leaning on the stonewalls of the steps, some crouched on them.

The speaker was three steps down from her, his bright violet eyes assessing as he smiled. It was like looking at a smiling shark, there was nothing pleasant going on behind those oddly colored eyes.

They weren’t human. The only race she knew with hair like that were pixies. Rather than being the cutesy sort that sat on toadstools, real pixies were less cute and more dangerous, with bad-boy sex appeal oozing from their very pores.

Good thing she was immune. Her poison these days was lycan and they paled in comparison to Alex.

“Don’t mind me,” she said cheerily, resisting the urge to back up. Pixies were pack animals and she knew better than to

show fear to a pack animal. “I was just leaving.”

She tried to walk down the steps, picking her way between the pixies, but the leader side stepped. Only as far away as the step below her now, she realized how big he was. Although lean, he was tall, with that half-starved but muscular look greyhounds had.

“Oh, we can’t have that. The party’s just getting started, and you, my lovely, are the guest of honor.”

A low growl just on the edge of hearing was the only warning they got. The next second, the air filled with fur, the glint of claws and screams as pixies were torn away from the steps. Eva screamed, stumbling up the steps until her back hit the door.

Lycans swarmed over the steps, tearing and slashing with sharp claws and sharper teeth. With bellows and curses, the pixies fought back, batons and knives appearing from nowhere as they attacked the lycans. The occasional lupine yelp of pain joined the cacophony.

One lycan stood head and shoulders above the others. Although she should run, get the door between her and the fight, she couldn’t tear her gaze from him. Caught somewhere between man and beast, he walked on two legs, slashing the air about him with the lethal looking talons that sprouted from the ends of his fingers. He was bigger than the rest, and only partially furred. A thick pelt covered his muzzled face and flowed down his neck and over his shoulders, but the rest of his body looked more like living stone. As though a gargoyle had come to life.

Stone Wolf.

Alex. It had to be, but as she’d never seen him before.

He looked over his shoulder. Their gazes met and she knew. It was Alex, his eyes were unmistakable. The white line down the middle of his face brought tears to her eyes. It had been him, all those years ago. He hadn’t been standing guard to make sure they didn’t leave the cottage. He’d been protecting them...

As she watched, a pixie charged him from behind, machetes in either hand. She started and cried out a warning. He'd be shredded. But he turned faster than she'd ever thought possible, his arm extended. The claws slashed across the pixie's stomach, spilling blood and other things onto the steps at his feet.

She felt the blood leave her face, bile rising in her throat at the violence. People were dying right there in front of her. Unable to watch, she squeezed her eyes shut, knowing she was a damn coward for doing so. But this wasn't her world, this was Alex's. For years, she'd wanted to see at least a small part of Alex's other life, the part away from the boardrooms and suits. Now she had, she really wished she hadn't.

The sounds of combat died down, bellows and growls indicating some of the pixies fled until there were only whimpers and other sounds of pain left. She felt a presence in front of her, Alex, but refused to open her eyes. She didn't want this. Didn't want people to have gotten hurt because of her. Logic kicked in and told her the pixies were assholes anyway, but it didn't matter. If they hadn't been hassling her when Alex showed up, then half of them would still be alive.

“What the hell did you think you were doing, Eva?”

Alex's angry voice made her eyes snap open and she looked up to find him towering over her. He was human again, even if his eyes were maxed out with his wolf, and bare-chested. She recoiled from the rage that burned in his eyes.

“You see this?” He grabbed her arm and hauled her upright, no mercy in his grip.

Taking a couple of steps, he pulled her in front of the gutted pixie. His pastel-blue eyes gazed at the sky, focus fixed on something the living couldn't see. Blood splattered his mostly smooth chin, just a little stubble in the center and a shudder rolled through her as she realized how young he was. Had been. Now he was lying dead on some stranger's steps with his stomach ripped open.

“This is what happens in my world. This is why I wanted you in the apartment, safe. Understand? This world Davie's

tumbled into isn't safe, not even for non-humans.”

She nodded, not sure what she could say. The bodies littered around her made her feel sick and she looked up at Alex, flinching from his anger. There were a couple of lycans among the casualties. All her fault.

“I'm sorry, I didn't think—”

“No, you didn't.” He cut her off, marching her down the steps and onto the street. She was forced to trot to keep up with him as he strode toward a waiting limo. The door was open and he practically threw her inside, snarling. “Wait here while I deal with the police.”

* * *

It was at least an hour later when Alex yanked open the door and slid into the backseat of the limo next to her. Worn out emotionally, she stayed curled up in the corner, watching him warily as they were driven back to the Kingwood building. He didn't look at her once, not once, and the set of his jaw told her he was still furious.

The silent treatment continued as they headed inside, Eva forced to trail after Alex like a puppy who'd disappointed its owner. No one in the foyer looked at her, not even the uppity receptionist. Anger and grief hung so heavily in the air that she, a mere human, could practically taste it. How many of them were related to the wolves who'd died?

She followed Alex into the lift, her throat thick with tears as the doors closed behind them. Somehow, she had to make this right.

“Alex,” she started, reaching out to touch his arm. “I'm s—”

“No,” he snarled. Knocking her hand aside, he shoved her against the wall, his big hand closing around her throat. She gasped, caught by his furious, full-amber gaze. In front of her eyes, he grew a couple of inches and his shoulders broadened. The skin of his fingers became harder, more like stone, and his

voice filled with granite. “You don’t get to say sorry, not until you mean it. Not after today.”

His anger was an electrical charge in the air, pressing against her skin. She bit back her whimper at the heat that rolled through her body in response to his rough treatment. Color hit her cheeks, making them burn. She shouldn’t be turned on by this, not after what had happened, not with him being so angry with her... Especially not with him being so angry with her. Her pussy clenched, liquid heat slipping from her to dampen her panties, and her flush burned hotter. She was hot and wet for him and all he’d done was snarl at her. It was official, she was a pervert.

“You—” he growled, shaking her a little, then suddenly stopped. His nostrils flared, eyes widening as a familiar darkness leeches into the amber. The stroke of his thumb over her jaw weakened her knees, and she trembled when he stroked her bottom lip.

“Open.”

Held captive more by his heated gaze than his hand, she obeyed, parting her lips and accepting his thumb. Unable to help herself, she flicked her tongue over the rough pad then closed her lips around the digit and sucked.

He growled, the sound in the back of his throat almost like a purr and crowded her closer against the mirrored wall. His focus was so intent on her, she was surprised the air between them didn’t spontaneously combust. Hell, she was surprised *she* didn’t with the hot, hard-muscled strength of his body pressed against her abundance of curves. He was bigger, much bigger than normal and her eyes widened when he pressed his hips against hers urgently. Larger south of the belt as well.

Pulling his thumb free, he covered her mouth with his own. His lips claimed hers, hot and passionate as he slid his tongue past them. Sought the softer recesses of her mouth and demanded her response. She whimpered, the sound soft between them and clung to him. His skin was hot and almost as hard to the touch as the knee he shoved between her legs to part them.

Tearing his mouth from hers, he blazed a trail along her throat, his breath rasping against her skin like a second caress. Awareness and need held her in thrall as surely as he caged her against the wall with his hard body and his arms either side of her. The sound of her soft moans and his deeper growls filled the small space.

He pressed harder, rocked his hips and her eyes rolled back in sheer pleasure. How did he do that? How could one hard touch, one hard kiss that should have her slapping his face, get her so hot? It shouldn't, but it did. All she could think about was wrapping her legs around his hips as he drove into her.

An ache tore through her. She needed him filling her. Needed his thick, hard cock stretching her needy pussy as he took her, fast and furious, against the wall. She needed to touch him, to feel close. Craved his touch and the connection between them despite the fact he was pissed with her. And, heaven help her, she was desperate enough, or screwed in the morals department enough, to use sex to get what she needed.

Sliding her hands between them, she pushed at his stomach. Her fingers pressed against the rock hard abs and she almost lost her train of thought as the need to explore beckoned. With an effort, she kept her focus and managed to put some space between them. He nipped at her neck, the small pain from his human-blunt teeth making her gasp as she eased her hand between their bodies to stroke him through his pants.

He stilled, hands flat on the mirrors either side of her head and his lips millimeters from the skin of her throat. Not waiting for her next move but a primal force barely restrained. Tension and anticipation thickened the air, making it difficult to breathe. She found the button in his waistband and rolled the tip of her forefinger around it, stretching out the moment. Then she flicked it free, her movements speeding to yank the zipper of his fly down with a harsh metallic rasp. She needed to touch him and instinct told her that she didn't have long to do it.

His cock sprang free as though eager to get into her hand and she stroked his shaft. So long and thick, it was like heated

velvet over steel to the touch. Apprehension and excitement made her quiver with need. Would she be able to take it all like this? Pulling her hand up, she reached the broad head and swirled a bead of pre-cum over it.

The movement broke the dam of his control. He snarled and her hand was snatched away. In three movements he had her pressed against the wall, her dress around her waist and her legs wrapped around his hips.

“Mine,” he growled, tangling strong fingers in the sides of her panties and tearing them away. She gasped as the straps bit into the sides of her hips, then again as her pussy was exposed.

“Yours...oh!” Her breath punched out of her lungs when he bent his knees, fit his cock against her and thrust into her with one hard shove.

Arching back, her head bumped against the mirrored wall behind her as she tried to process the overload of sensation. The feel of his hard chest against hers, his hips between her legs and his cock buried deep inside, stretching her almost to the point of pain, was nearly too much.

He growled, more like an animal than a man, and bit her neck. A hard, punishing love bite with human teeth, not lycan. He moved, holding her still to pull back and drive into her again, and she realized what this was: punishment not pleasure.

But it was hot, the way he held her and took what he wanted. Primal. Anger-fueled. She was being owned. She loved it though. Clinging to him, she fought the rising tide of her release. Her hands drove into his hair and she held him to her. His skin was rougher, harder, and the friction where their bodies joined was indescribable.

She arched into him, riding his cock as he drove into her. Screw being a passive participant, she wanted this just as much as he did.

He bit and kissed up her neck, the caresses hard enough to leave marks but she didn't care. Let him mark her. She'd

brought him to the edge of his control, and she wanted everyone to see that.

He didn't let up, driving into her, a hot, wild ride against the wall. She raked her nails over his back, catching a glimpse of them in the mirror opposite. Her legs wrapped around him. His broad back, muscles clenching and moving as he thrust his hips up and forward, burying his thick cock in her again and again. His head was bowed, lips against her throat, his hands still pressed against the wall. Caging her.

Her climax rolled up out of nowhere, stiffening her body and clamping her pussy tightly around his cock. She moaned, the pleasure of her release ripping through her compounded when he snarled and upped his pace. Near feral, he slammed into her, using her body even as the roughness fed the ecstasy within. She couldn't stop the whimpers that escaped her throat, nor the way her body clamped around his, hips jerking reflexively. All she could do was hold on, and feel.

The door pinged open at the same moment he drove into her a last time and stiffened. Throwing back his head, he howled as he came, his cock buried deep in the embrace of her body. Jerked and pulsed as he filled her, jets of his hot semen bathing her inner walls.

Their breathing rasped in the silence of the lift as they both came down from what had to be the best sex Eva had ever experienced. She held him, fingers running through the short strands of his hair, resting her head against his shoulder as they both recovered.

She closed her eyes and savored the moment, wanting it to last forever.

CHAPTER 8



She'd fucked up, good and proper. Wolves, people, had died because of her, and she'd lost Alex's trust.

He'd left her in the lift. Just walked away, leaving her to trail after him, but it was no good. He'd shut the en-suite door on her as he'd showered. When he'd dressed, he'd thrown a keycard on the bed.

“So you don't play any more games with my people. Frank blames himself, you know? One of the dead wolves was his nephew.”

Misery clogged her throat as she stood by the door, arms wrapped around her waist. As if it couldn't get any worse, now she had a face to put to those who mourned. When Alex left, she dragged herself through the motions of showering and dressing. Stretchy, comfortable clothes with her hair dragged up into a messy bun. She didn't plan on going anywhere but the sofa, after a trip to the kitchen to raid the freezer for ice-cream. Rocky road, chocolate, hell, plain old vanilla would do. She needed something sweet to gorge on before the tears collected in a lump at the back of her throat made an appearance, and unlike her mother, alcohol just didn't cut it for her.

Opening Alex's freezer she peered inside and...stopped.

There was no ice-cream. Like, any, at all. The drawers were mostly empty. Which made sense, she knew Alex preferred to eat fresh, but all she could find was a couple of

lumps of frozen steak and some vegetables. Mostly he seemed to use his freezer for ice.

What kind of sick weirdo didn't have ice-cream? How could she cry into her ice-cream without any to actually cry into?

In desperation, she whirled around the kitchen making up a batch of cake mixture. She didn't bother to turn on the oven to heat it up, this lot wasn't intended to end up in cases. No, she was going to eat the damn stuff right out of the bowl. It wasn't as good as ice-cream but in a pinch it would do.

The jaunty ring tone of her cell split the air and silenced her mutterings. With irritation, she put down the beaters and picked it up. Huh, the number was one she didn't recognize. That didn't mean much though. Could be Alex. She'd never given him her number but a man with his drive, determination, and resources would be able to find out whatever he wanted. State secrets or something. A simple phone number would be no problem.

“Hello?”

Instead of Alex's deep, gravelly voice as she'd been expecting, her query met silence.

“Hello? Alex?” Anger surged. “Alex...look, I'm sorry. I know what I did was out of line, but there's no need to play silly games.”

More silence was her answer, then there was a rasp. Like someone had filled an old accordion or bagpipes that had been left to dust and ruin. She opened her mouth to give him a piece of her mind.

“Eva...”

Her name was a soft whisper. So soft, she barely heard it, but at the sound every cell in her body froze. That wasn't Alex's voice.

“Oh my god, Davie?”

“Help me, Eva.” The voice was weak, but she could hear it clearer now.

“Davie, where are you?”

Cake mix forgotten now, she tore through the apartment, grabbing her purse and snatching the keycard off the bed. For a moment she paused with it in her hand. Alex’s face filled her mind and her heart ached...

“Studio...” He rasped again as if his throat didn’t work properly, and there was a clatter, like he’d fallen. “I’m so cold, Eva. Why am I cold?”

Oh hell, he didn’t sound with it at all. She sped through the apartment and shoved the card in the reader to the call the lift. “Just keep talking, Davie, I’m on my way now.”

She tapped her foot, reassuring her brother as the lift made its swift way to the ground floor. It opened onto the lobby and she hurried across, head down so she didn’t have to make eye contact with anyone. Instead, she concentrated on the sound of Davie’s breathing. It sounded wrong...like he was injured.

“Hold on, Davie. Please,” she begged as she flagged down a cab.

Keeping her cell plastered to her ear, she watched the streets flash by. It seemed to take forever to reach the studio, but it could only have been a few minutes before she was paying the driver and racing up the steps of the brownstone.

“Davie! Davie, where are you?” she called out, shouldering her way through the open door to the studio with her heart in her throat. Her gaze scanned the floor, still paint-splattered, expecting to see the tall form of her brother stretched out on the floor unconscious, or worse.

Nothing. She moved farther into the room, craning her neck to check the corners and between the easels in case he’d fallen and the debris from the place being ransacked had fallen over him.

The door clicked shut behind her and the lock turned. Frowning, she straightened. The door had been open when she’d walked through.

“Hello, Eva.”

She whirled around to find Davie standing with his back to the door and a smirk on his lips. Rather than the injured, close to death state she'd expected, he looked good. Better than good. In fact, he looked fantastic. His skin, always pale, all but glowed and his eyes, the deep blue of their mother's, were mesmerizing.

Shaking her head, she realized that she'd taken a couple of steps forward.

"I thought you were injured."

He wasn't, that much was evident. A chill of dread inched down her spine. What was going on?

"I was, in a way." He sauntered forward, a new grace and elegance in his movements. She gasped, hand over her mouth. That was so not Davie. He was clumsy, like an overgrown puppy apt to fall over his own feet if there was nothing else on the floor to fall over, not this lean-limbed man who walked like a dancer.

No, not a dancer. It wasn't a walk, it was the stalk of a predator who had spotted his prey.

"Now I'm not. I never will be again."

He smiled and revealed the hint of a fang at the corner of his lips. Her heart stuttered, all the blood draining from her face.

"I can see. When?"

Voice calm, she tried not to give into the panic attempting to overwhelm her. Everything she'd done had been for nothing. Davie hadn't been killed, but far worse than that. He was a vampire. Her little brother had been turned into a vampire.

He paused for a moment, between one step and the next, and frowned. "After your dog boyfriend got involved. You should have just given them the money, Eva. You didn't need to get the lycans involved. The earl didn't like that, didn't like that at all."

“Earl?” She shook her head, using the movement to take a step backward. He smiled, noting her retreat and stalked her. “No, don’t worry. I don’t need to know. I didn’t have the money, Davie. Not how much they wanted, and they said they’d send back a body if I didn’t pay.”

This creature walked and talked like her brother, but she knew the score. Davie was gone and something else had taken his place. It might be able to use his body and his voice, but it wasn’t really her brother, not anymore.

“So you whored yourself out to a fucking wolf instead?” he snarled, the handsome mask twisting into a face of fury as he batted aside a small table.

Before she could answer, he launched himself across the gap between them. She didn’t stand a chance, no speed she could muster would be enough to escape a vampire, but she tried, screaming as she ran, trying to get the door to the bathroom between her and him.

Reaching the bathroom was easy, but before she could shut the door, he hit it. The wood slammed into her and splintered, a large chunk slamming into the side of her head hard enough that she saw stars. Blood filled her mouth and nose as she slid down the wall. Davie crashed through the remains of the door, hand hard around her throat as he lifted her.

“Davie, I did it for you.”

The last thing she saw as she slipped into darkness was the flash of his fangs.

* * *

Alex crashed through the door to Davie’s studio with more brute force than finesse. Knocking the splintered wood out of the way, he strode into the open-plan space. It was still as trashed as the first time he’d seen it, but instead of the smell of drying paint, the smell of blood and fear crawled into his nostrils.

A bellow of rage exploded from his throat and he launched himself across the studio, following the distinctive feminine scent that hung in the air.

Eva's scent.

He'd been called as soon as she'd left the apartment and thanks to an eagle-eyed guard, they'd managed to call to the right cab firm to get the address she'd been taken to. They might as well have saved themselves the call. He should have guessed she'd come back here.

Reaching the destroyed door to the bathroom, he braced himself against the door frame as the scent of blood became almost overwhelming. Eva's blood, he realized, as his keen gaze picked out the slumped figure in the bathtub. A moan rattled in his chest and up into his throat.

"Oh god, no. Eva!"

Without being aware of moving, he was in the tub gathering her into his arms. The smell of blood was so strong, he almost gagged. Normally, he wouldn't. On an ordinary day, the smell of blood got his wolf in the mood and they needed to hunt. When it was the blood of the woman they loved though, it was a different matter.

The thought barely made him pause. He loved Eva, probably always had. Fact of life. He accepted that the same way he'd accepted the knowledge he was lycan when he was old enough to know being lycan meant being different. It was just part of him.

"Eva. Wake up, darling."

She was covered in blood from the neck down, her clothes soaked. He shook her limp form. She was cold, too cold, no spark of life in her lax body. Hardly daring to breathe, he pushed two fingers against her throat. Her pulse flickered faintly, growing weaker with each pulse.

He was losing her.

He turned her head, limp on her neck, to reveal two jagged wounds on the other side of her throat. Vampire. She'd been fed on by a vampire. A new one by the ferocity of the bites.

In the movies, it was all neat and tidy. The victims had two little puncture wounds and pale skin to show they'd been drained of blood, but that was it. Real life didn't work that way. Vampires were messy, bloody eaters at the best of times, and the newly turned ravaged their food so badly, vampire kills were often mistaken for animal attacks. Rather than the blood loss, it was usually the horrendous injuries they inflicted that killed their victims.

New vampire. As soon as the thought rolled through his head, Alex knew who had done this.

"Find him," he ordered the wolves crowded in the doorway, knowing they'd pick up the scent of vampire as easily as he had. "Bring him to me. I don't care if you have to go through their fucking earl to do it. *No-one* touches my woman."

They nodded and disappeared, leaving Alex with his dying lover in his arms. His throat thickened with tears as he gathered her closer, cradling her in his lap.

Shit, he should have told her how he felt, rather than storming out earlier. But he'd been so scared when she disappeared, then so angry when she'd nearly fallen prey to those pixies that he couldn't see straight, let alone think. He'd taken her in anger, used her body and their joining to punish them both because he couldn't figure out the hold she had over him.

A hold which was now clear. He loved her.

He slammed his head against the tiles. And in a stunning stroke of genius, he'd figured that out just as he was losing her.

"Eva, love?" He stroked her hair back from her face.

Her eyelashes fluttered, but he knew she couldn't hear him. She'd lost too much blood. Only two things could bring her back, but neither would mean she'd be the same as before. Neither would mean she would be human. She was too far gone for that.

Opening his eyes, he released a shuddering breath. Three choices were clear. He could let her die in his arms, pass away peacefully as the sweet, gentle woman he knew, retaining her humanity. It would break his heart and he knew in that instant he would never love again. Never marry. Never have children. The pack would pass onto someone else when he died.

The second choice would be to find a vampire and force the blood out of the accursed thing so she could drink and rise as a vampire. The low growl that filled the room was entirely independent of the man, driven by his wolf.

Not. Happening.

If she became a vampire, she was as lost to him as if he'd put her six feet under himself, without the benefit of a place to mourn her. Wolves and vampires did not mix in any way, shape, or form. He couldn't do that. He'd rather have a grave to visit in the years between her death and his, then be buried beside her, to lie together for eternity.

The final choice was the hardest.

He could bite her. *Really* bite her, not the play bites during foreplay he had been giving her up to now. If he did, buried his lycan fangs in her flesh, he'd infect her with the same virus he'd been born with. But in doing so, he could be condemning her to a far more painful death than the one she was currently slipping into.

Not everyone survived conversion, not of the stone-wolf variety. Some suffered terribly and died in agony. Some—women particularly—came through it, but weren't the same on the other side. They couldn't handle taking on a wolf, their minds fractured beyond repair.

It would be kinder to let her die.

Could he live with himself if he changed her? Could he survive in a world without her if he didn't?

He felt her slipping away. No time left, she was almost gone. His muscles bunched reflexively as he crushed her to him. He had to choose. Now.

He bent his head and sank his fangs into the unmarked side of her neck. The sweet taste of her blood exploded on his tongue and her body jerked as the virus hit her system like a bullet.

A tear rolled down his cheek.

He'd saved her life...

And possibly damned his own.

CHAPTER 9



Death wasn't all it was cracked up to be. There was a distinct lack of bright lights and absolutely no sign of the pearly gates or, thankfully, the other place.

Death was...quiet. Peaceful. Comfortable.

Too comfortable.

Expensive feather bed kind of comfortable.

She was pretty sure the afterlife was more harps and clouds than feather beds, so what gave? The more she thought, the more sensation slipped through the blackness. Her body on the soft surface beneath, the pressure of a warm duvet above. Perhaps this was Heaven 2.0, a version never reported in near-death experiences. Anything was possible, right?

That didn't explain the voices that filtered through the fog to reach her ears.

"Should've left her to die," a sharp female voice said. Instantly, Eva disliked it and its owner. The whiny, petulant tone said *bitch*. "There's no way the pack will accept her. She's a bitten. She will never be anything more than a beta. And hell knows, we have enough of them."

Pack. Bitten. Beta. The words slammed into Eva's consciousness, dragging her higher and higher until she became aware that she lay on a bed, in a warm room, with someone in the corridor outside.

How many people, and who were they? Who were they discussing? A deep breath in rolled over her tongue, and

something new within informed her there were two of them. One male, one female, both lycan.

Holy shit. Her eyes snapped open in sheer surprise. How the hell had she known that? On the coattails of that realization came others. Working out who was in the corridor wasn't exactly a human ability. There was no one else in the room... Which meant they were discussing her.

"You don't know that," the male replied. "It's not unknown for a bitten wolf to become an alpha. Rare, I admit, but not unknown."

The woman laughed, the sound high and derisive. "*Really?* Come on, Ethan, you've seen her. Like the rest of the humans, pathetic and weak-willed. Good enough to fuck, but Alex needs a stronger woman to mate. Besides, a bitten wolf hasn't become an alpha for generations."

Okay, Eva had disliked her before, now she up rated the bitch to *cow-bitch-from-hell*.

Instead of the ceiling she'd expected, there was fabric. Blue material tucked into folds to create a swirl. What kind of person had material all over their ceiling? She followed the swirl with her gaze to the corner and a heavy wooden post. One of four that surrounded her and belonged to a heavy, antique-looking four-poster bed.

"Stronger?" Ethan laughed. "Since you happen to be the highest ranked female in the pack, it doesn't take a genius to work out who *you* think Alex should mate, does it, Isabella?"

Eva practically heard the shrug she gave. "Well, if the cap fits... why not? The alpha female of a pack needs to be strong, capable in a fight and able to enforce discipline in the pack."

Eva snorted as she sat up. Even with her limited knowledge of the lycan world, she could tell the woman didn't know jack about true leadership. It wasn't just about power, but obligation and duty; things which seemed to have totally bypassed the lycan woman.

Her head was a little fuzzy. Eva sat on the edge of the bed and checked over herself. She wore a long white nightdress

covering her from neck to ankle. It wasn't hers and a faint flush covered her cheeks as she wondered who had dressed her.

That question woke other inquiries and they crowded into her brain at once. Where was she? What had happened? Where was Alex? Why could she *see* smells, like an aura that left streaks of light in the air?

"Welcome back to the land of the living, Eva." A man, presumably Ethan, stood in the doorway, a careful smile on his lips. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and if she hadn't met Alex already, she'd have thought him the most handsome man she'd ever seen. But she had, so Ethan here took second place.

"No, don't get up." He started forward at her movement, a hand on her shoulder to push her down. For all his size, and the ring of amber in his eyes, his touch was gentle. "You were injured and out of it for a couple of days, so you need to take it easy."

Her head had begun to swim at the attempt for freedom anyway, so Eva sat back with a bump. "Uh-huh. Yeah, sitting sounds good."

"Yeah, it might take a while for your strength to return. I'm Ethan, by the way, the Kingwood pack medic. Do you mind if I take a look at you, make sure everything's okay?"

Medic. Shouldn't that be *vet* if he was dealing with lycans? Eva managed to keep the thought safely in her head and nodded.

"Thank you." Ethan produced a small flashlight, which he shone in her eyes a couple of times, then examined her neck carefully.

His touch wasn't familiar and something inside her cringed, a wave of anger rising. She pulled away in relief as soon as he finished. He seemed a nice guy, but she didn't like him touching her. Like *tear his hand off* didn't like him touching her.

He noted her backward movement with a small smile and pulled a chair by the bed to sit opposite her rather than next to

her. His expression was grave and her heart did a little flutter in her chest. He opened his mouth to speak, but she beat him to it.

“Alex bit me, didn’t he? He turned me into a werewolf.”

* * *

Alex had been born into money, old lycan money, and from the moment of his birth only the best had been good enough. The most expensive toys, the finest clothes, and the most prestigious schools, were all things that were his simply by the happy accident of being who he was. His food had been prepared by a Michelin starred chef and his tennis coach had been a former champion... Nothing was too good for the Kingwood heir.

Looks had followed. Puberty changed angelic boyhood features into something harder and more masculine. His body once gangly, feeling not quite his as he navigated with all the hapless manner of a teenager, filled out and brought the gargoyle genes into play. Add in the animal magnetism of his newly emerging wolf and he’d never had a problem getting women.

Instead, it was more a problem getting rid of them. They’d thrown themselves at him even back then, a situation his teenaged self had reveled in. Girls, women... Hell, his first time had been with a middle-aged business friend of his father, a stunning woman who exuded sensuality and experience. In the space of a few short hours, she’d turned him from a boy into a man, and he never looked back.

But it hadn’t been easy. With privilege came responsibility. He’d had that refrain hammered into him from as far back as he could remember. Despite the trappings of the Kingwood life, his father had expected him to work for his rewards. A lesson he learned early and well, and one he applied to the companies and holdings he’d taken over years ago, more than tripling their profits before his father died and left him not only the companies but the pack.

Hard work, perseverance, and the backup of the family fortune meant everything fell at the feet of the Kingwood Alpha.

Everything apart from one small woman.

Alex stood by the picture window of his second-floor office at the Manor and looked into the garden. The long lawn rolled away from the house in a swath of green that would give any English country garden a run for its money. A hammock swayed under a small group of trees halfway down, a small figure reclined comfortably in its embrace.

Eva.

She was asleep, one hand trailing over the rope edge of the hammock and the soft breeze lifting her hair every now and then. Alex leaned against the wall by the bay window and watched her. Dressed in a white lace sundress with her feet bare, she looked so beautiful it took his breath away. But the pale color of her skin made him frown, as did the haunting fragility of her curvy frame. Even if he hadn't already known she'd cheated death by the skin of her teeth only a few nights ago, he would have sensed it anyway.

The wind changed, bringing her scent to him through the open window and he was forced to bite back a groan as it wound around him. Held him prisoner. He'd know her anywhere because of it, be able to track her across continents by smell alone. She'd never be able to outrun him, he'd always find her scent. It was sweet and clean, like wildflowers in the heat of a lazy Indian summer.

She moved, getting more comfortable on the hammock and he sighed. Once more he was left watching her from afar. Story of his damn life. She'd always been out of reach. Years ago, it had been because of her humanity, but even now, even after he'd bitten her to save her life, she'd never been more out of reach. She wasn't out of the woods yet. Not by a long shot.

Conversion madness could still steal her from him, and even if it didn't, there was no way the pack would stand for him mating a beta female. Alex was a realist. He couldn't dare to hope she would survive the conversion madness and

somehow also wind up an alpha female. The fates were not that kind. No, the best he could hope for was to keep her for a little while, until the pack forced him to take an alpha female mate.

Pain lanced his chest, spearing his heart. Then he'd have to let Eva go, because there was no way he would put her through the pain of watching him mate another. *Her*, not the other, as yet unknown female.

It would be kinder to send her away now... To let her establish herself as a lycan.

Hidden within, his wolf gave a sharp bark of anger and his fingers tightened around the handle of the empty coffee mug in his hand. A sharp crack warned him he'd be wearing the dregs if he wasn't careful. One more shitty thing to add to a shitty day. His gaze sought her delicate form again, like a magnet drawn to true north.

He wasn't strong enough to let her go. He couldn't have her, but still he couldn't release her to start a new life without him. Dammit. He closed his eyes, the weakness shaming him. He should send her away, but he couldn't. Not yet.

A presence behind him made him open his eyes and look up. He didn't need to turn. The wolf, always alert, had already picked up the scent of another lycan. Male, with the unmistakable frisson only generated by another alpha, and a familiar scent.

Ethan. His second cousin, or something like that, on his father's side. An alpha himself, he'd joined the army right out of college and returned last year, bringing valuable medical training they sorely needed. Sure, Alex could hire a private doctor, but there was nothing like a battlefield surgeon who understood how the lycan body worked.

"Any signs?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Nothing yet. I have Hannah watching her for any changes."

Ethan joined him at the window. Taller and broader in the shoulder, he was quiet and thoughtful as a man, but not one

Alex would care to take on in a fight. Not all the Kingwood pack were stone wolves, but Ethan was, and his other forms were impressive. There was also the fact the most dangerous fighter was one who understood how the body—human or lycan—worked.

Alex nodded, hand still wrapped around his coffee mug. Hannah was a quiet little beta, a pretty, petite little thing as both a woman and a wolf and Ethan's interest in her was no secret. Why he hadn't made a move on her yet, Alex didn't know.

There was a darkness in Ethan, carefully hidden, that Alex didn't remember being there before he'd left to join up, so perhaps that was it. He didn't plan on saying anything; the man's sex life and personal demons were his own to sort out.

"I guess in this case, no news is good news," he commented, although more to himself than Ethan.

The longer the conversion took, the less likely Eva was to succumb to the shifting madness. It was usually when the change hit hard and fast that there was a problem. As though the host body fought the infection, which caused the emerging wolf to become more aggressive. From there it was a destructive cycle downward, the virus trying to overwhelm a body that wouldn't accept it until the mind broke or the heart gave out. Neither was pretty.

But nearly a week with no sign?

Some wolves could be shy, particularly betas, as though they had to be coaxed from within their human halves, but he'd never heard of one taking so long to appear.

"Is there any chance she might not be infected?"

She'd been on the verge of death when he'd bitten her, so he knew his bite had taken. If it hadn't, then she wouldn't still be breathing. Could her body somehow have used the infection to heal, but then eliminated it from her system before she'd fallen prey to it?

Ethan's brow furrowed.

"It's possible. Under certain circumstances—"

“What sort of circumstances?”

Alex didn't want a debate or medical history lesson. He wanted answers. Yesterday.

“Well, if she had something non-human in her family tree somewhere, then that could block the infection.” He rubbed at his jaw, expression thoughtful. “It would have to be something like a Morrigan or a Succubus, maybe even Valkyrie, but definitely something with a feminine bias.”

“Feminine? Why's that?” Alex raised an eyebrow in curiosity. It wasn't that he didn't trust Ethan, the man had practically put one of the pack wolves back together after he'd run into a warlock's silver-laced trap a couple months ago, so he obviously knew what he was doing, but he was curious as to the man's reasoning.

“Well, we know she and her brother are full siblings, so they share similar genetics.” Ethan's voice was calm and measured as he explained. “But Davie fell prey to the *vampirus* infection, whereas Eva hasn't succumbed to the Lycanthrope virus which means whatever non human DNA they have, has to be favoring the female side... hence one of those three. They're the only races which are predominantly female and in which the bloodline can lie dormant for generations. Don't worry though, she won't turn out to be any of them. It just affords the bloodline some protection from infection.”

“Okay...” It all began to make sense now and Alex looked out the window at his little human. Wolf or not, only time would tell...

CHAPTER 10



E va couldn't be a werewolf. No way, no how.

Sure, she'd woken up after her near death experience with abilities she hadn't had before. Things like seeing smells, vision like a hawk, and hearing so accurate she could pinpoint a mouse farting three rooms away. So far though, there had been no hint of fur (apart from her legs, which were in desperate need of a shave after a week of inattention).

New abilities though, didn't mean she was a werewolf. She'd read somewhere that people who suffered head trauma sometimes gained completely new skills—like being able to speak a new language, play an instrument, or suddenly became an uber-smart math whiz. Acquired Savant Syndrome or something.

Yeah, that had to be it. The accident that had nearly killed her had obviously left her with some side effects. A frown creased her brow. No one would tell her much about the accident either. All they would say was that she was lucky to be alive, and if she wanted more details then she needed to speak to Alex.

A feat easier said than done since the Lord of the Manor seemed to be mostly absent from his own home. Until now. She'd heard his voice while she'd been dozing in the garden and now that she was back in the house, his scent was everywhere. It was stronger than it had been for days; the immediacy of it telling her he'd recently passed this way.

Tracking him through the house was easy and within a minute she found herself outside the door of his office, hand raised to knock. Her knuckles didn't make contact with the wood, her hand stilled mid-air. Anger hit hard and fast. What did she plan to do? Knock and wait for permission to enter like a good little girl?

Screw. That.

She'd almost been killed, Alex had bitten her and apparently turned her into a werewolf, a defective one since she didn't feel much different, and to add insult to injury, he hadn't even come to see her when she was lying at death's door.

Asshole needed a lesson in manners.

Her hand hit the painted wood hard, shoving the door inward so hard, it hit the plaster with a crash. The crack of splintering wood said she'd broken either the frame or the door, but she didn't care, already storming across the room.

Alex sat behind the desk, looking up as she slammed her hands down on the surface in front of him.

"Some pack fucking alpha you are," she snarled, trying to hide the hurt she felt inside at him abandoning her when she needed him the most. "I thought you were supposed to care for all the wolves in your pack, not leave them high and dry when they're mortally ill."

Alex didn't move, gaze locked with hers. As she watched, amber flared in his eyes, shooting out from the central ring like solar flares until just a thin circle of blue remained at the edges. His nostrils flared, features tight. He was pissed at her accusation, but she didn't care.

"And just who brought you here?" he asked, his voice tight with control. "Who made sure you got medical attention... The *right* medical attention, not some damn human hospital who haven't a clue how to deal with a werewolf? Do you know how many people survive a lycan bite?"

He rose, movements controlled. An aura of danger surrounded him, one she'd seen before and been attracted to,

but now was ramped up to the max. The veneer of the civilized billionaire businessman cracked more than she'd ever seen, revealing the maelstrom beneath. Alex Kingwood was the poster boy for what a lycan could be; handsome, sophisticated elegance dressed in designer suits with a ruthless streak humans couldn't help but be attracted to.

But that ruthless streak was wider, more than just a streak or personality attribute. It was part of his very core, part of the very feralness and primal nature that drove him.

The scales fell from her eyes. Alex Kingwood wasn't a good man with a ruthless streak. He was a ruthless predator who wore the man like a suit. And that made a shiver go down her spine.

"No, how the hell should I know how many can take a bite?" she admitted. And she didn't have a clue. She knew lycans carefully controlled who they bit, that they had to have permission from the pack alpha.

Her mother, wanting to sink her claws deeper into the Kingwood fortune, had petitioned Charles to turn them. All of them. She hadn't even thought to ask her children whether they wanted to be lycan or not. All she'd seen was a way to ensure she kept her place and access to the money she liked so much.

Eva would have; she knew that without thinking. Anything to learn more about lycans, and perhaps get closer to Alex. But the request had been denied by his father. Repeatedly. Eventually even Naomi had gotten the message. They weren't good enough to be lycan. A message which had been driven home hard and fast, and she still felt the sting of today.

If she wasn't good enough, why had Alex turned her?

"Why?"

Even standing on the other side of the desk, he towered over her. He hadn't shifted, even a little... But seeing all that anger contained in his human form made her stomach quiver with instinctive fear. Which was ridiculous. She knew Alex, he would never hurt... When she'd been human.

Now she wasn't and the friction between them had changed.

"Why what? Why don't some people survive a lycan bite?" He rounded the desk as he spoke, gaze latched onto hers. It wasn't a walk; it was far more dangerous.

Always before, she'd seen Alex playing human, now she realized it was just that, playing. A mask to conceal the creature within. The beast she poked with a stick.

Shit, she'd never been very good at self-preservation.

Even though her instincts clamored at her to run, she held her ground. Something deep within wouldn't give ground, wouldn't let her back even a half step. If she did, then she'd lose somehow. Instead, she held his gaze, a challenge in itself, but she didn't care.

"The infection overwhelms them. It rips into the body, into each cell, tearing it apart to change to something else." His voice was mesmerizing, deep and low, the rich tones sliding over her senses like thick chocolate sauce over hot cake. "Taking them, cell by cell, from plain old human to something far more dangerous. Some people can't take it. Their bodies give out, or worse, fight the infection... which fights back, creating an ever escalating feud on the cellular level until the body gives up. End game."

"No. That's not what I meant."

She tilted her head as he came to a stop in front of her, so close she felt the heat of his body through his shirt and her dress. Layers of fabric separated them, but all she wanted was to tear them away and rub herself against him. Skin to skin.

Heat flared. Crawled through her veins, and shivered along her skin. Unbidden, unwanted, her core ached and her pussy clenched. Liquid heat dampened her panties and his nostrils flared a response.

Her cheeks burned but she held his gaze, daring him to mention it. He'd always been able to make her react, sometimes just with a look, but she'd be damned if she was going to be a slave to her own responses.

His eyebrow quirked, just a little, in curiosity. “What did you mean then?”

“Why did you do what you did? Why did you bite me? What happened? Was this some kind of accident?” Soon as her mouth was open, and she’d started, the questions tumbled out over each other in a hurried jumble.

“What kind of accident would be so bad that you need to bite me? Make me into a werewolf... Whatever the hell kind of werewolf I am. Because, I don’t know about you,” she motioned to herself, “but I’m not seeing a whole lot of furry shit going on here.”

“You were dying. What would you expect I do... Leave you there?” His expression was hard, like a whip. “Give me some credit, Eva. I wouldn’t let you die. Not while you’re in my care.”

He hadn’t answered her question. His expression said he wasn’t going to. Anger flared and a snarl rumbled in the back of her throat. It wasn’t a human sound; that made no sense, but she was too pissed off to care.

“Dammit, Alex.” She slammed her hands into his broad chest and shoved. It was like trying to shove a cliff but he rocked back on his feet, surprise in his eyes. “Just give me a straight fucking answer.”

He grabbed her wrists, yanked her up against him as he turned, pinning her between him and broad desk. The heat simmering through her veins turned volcanic, supercharged, and shot through her veins. Her body went pliant in his grasp, her curves against the hard muscled planes of his larger form. Damn traitorous thing.

“Answer?” His voice was no less a snarl than hers had been. “I’ll give you an answer.”

His lips crashed down on hers. Hard. Demanding. Ruthless.

The dominating manner had always done it for her, sending her up in flames in his arms, but that had been before. This was something else. The same as she realized he wore his

human appearance like a mask, she tasted the true depth of his feral masculinity.

His lips parted hers, tongue shoved past to gain possession of her mouth. She whimpered, fingers clutching at his shirt. The sound of tearing fabric filled the room, ignored by both. His tongue found hers, slid against it, back and forth in a primal rhythm.

Hands hard on her waist, he caged her, held her. One slid around and down, large fingers spread to cup the globe of her ass. With a hard yank, pulled against him, and she felt the thick bar of his cock pressing into her soft belly.

Her gasp of need was smothered beneath his lips as he took hers. Claimed them. Branded them with the heat of his own. It wasn't the same as before. At his apartment, he'd been dominant and assertive. Firm with her as he took what he wanted, there had always been a measure of gentleness. An awareness and reference she hadn't realized.

Until now, when it was gone.

But this... this was something else. His near rough manner, the way he held her as though he owned her, triggered primal instincts she didn't know she had. She slid her tongue against his, fighting to get closer. All she wanted, all she could think of, was getting closer... Skin to skin. Him pushing her back on the desk, shoving that dress up and getting between her thighs.

Her core pulsed, an ache so savage she broke away with a whimper of distress.

She needed him. Needed this. Damn what the hell had happened.

"God, Eva..." His voice was ragged, his lips against her temple as she fought for breath. Instinctively, she nestled against him, pressed her mouth against his throat and he jerked, shoving her away from him so fast, she stumbled against the desk.

"We can't." He backed away, the lines of his body so tight with tension, the air virtually vibrated around him.

“Why not?” She took a step forward, not understanding. “Sure as hell wanted to in the city.”

He took a breath, obviously gathering himself, and his expression blanked. This was the alpha she knew instinctively, even though she’d never seen that look before.

“Things are different now. This is pack law.”

Pack law meant he couldn’t kiss her? Pack law meant that now she was bitten, they were done? She didn’t need to ask the question, seeing it in his expression.

“Well, *screw* pack law,” she snarled and ran from the room.

* * *

*O*f all the screwed-up, shitty situations to find herself in. Still fuming, Eva stormed through the manor like all the hounds of hell marched at her heels. She had no real idea where she was going, and to be honest, she really didn’t care. All she wanted was to get as far from Alex as physically possible.

Her expression was like thunder, so dark and ominous that the staff scattered before her, even though they were full lycan and she, apparently, was not. At the moment, though, she really didn’t care. One more asshole mentioned pack law and she’d tear them a new one, lycan or frigging not.

By the time she’d worked her way down to the kitchens, her usual refuge in times of stress, her anger had turned to misery and a hard knot formed in the back of her throat.

Hearing voices ahead, she ducked into a storeroom and pulled the door shut. Leaning against it, she closed her eyes. As a human she hadn’t been good enough for Alex, she’d known that... accepted that. But to find out she wasn’t good enough when she was a werewolf either...

She swallowed. Hard. She wouldn’t cry.

Her eyes didn't seem to have gotten that memo. Tears built and prickled hot needles into the back of them. Breathing deeply, she fought them. Not happening. She was done crying over Alex.

"...says she's not changed yet."

"Really? Like at all?"

Eva opened her eyes at the sound of voices on the other side of the door. Great. Even the staff were talking about her. Not that she should have expected anything else. They were all lycan and therefore part of the pack. Probably a higher level than she was since most were born wolves, and she was a bitten wolf who hadn't even got enough juice to prove she *had* an inner wolf.

"Nope. No fur, no hint of amber when she's stressed. Kevin said that only happens with the weakest of wolves. Like well below beta level."

"Oh my word. Well, if her bite came from the alpha and she's still that weak... Alex isn't going to take her to mate, is he?"

"Fuck no, he can't. An alpha needs a strong mate."

Eva turned against the door, jamming her foot against the bottom of it when the voices stopped just outside. Shit. If they found her in here, they'd know she'd been listening to their gossip. Panic started to overwhelm her, then she stopped. Frowned. What the fuck did she have to be ashamed of? *They* were talking about *her*... so fuck them.

Still, she wanted to hear the rest of the conversation so she pressed her ear closer to the door.

"Yeah, but the Master of the City mated that Trevais woman... the one they all said was nearer to human than lycan."

The other woman snorted in amusement. "He's the Master of the City. Would *you* argue with Veyr?"

"Do I look suicidal to you? I like my throat the way it is, thank you very much, not shredded from ear to ear."

“Exactly. Veyr is a different matter. Alex? Not so much, he still has to adhere to pack law.”

Eva’s lips curled back from her teeth, and with supreme effort, she kept the snarl in the back of her throat a silent one. Pack law, pack law, everyone was so freaking worried about pack bloody law. Assholes. All of them.

“Hey, is this all the linen we have? We’re missing some towels and at least two tablecloths.”

“I think we’re due a delivery from the laundry service later.”

“Well... it does explain one thing.”

“About the tablecloths?”

“No... about Alex’s little pet.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“She’s not exactly svelte-like, is she? My cousin married a bitten woman, emigrated to England where she was from. She was well, rather large when she was bitten, but the weight dropped off her when her wolf took hold. So that would make sense, because doesn’t look like this one lost any.”

“Yeah, you’ve got a point. Like *any* wolf woman would be that... curvy.” She spat the word like it was distasteful and the snarl in the back of Eva’s throat rose to just below audible. Anger burned within her. Rose from the depths of her soul to scorch the inside of her veins as her blood boiled through them. Her nails flexed, biting into the wood as she fought the need to tear the door open and launch herself at the lycan woman, her rage so intense and complete she shook.

“Yeah. Good point... Hey, did you hear about the deal tonight with the vamps?”

The words stopped Eva’s anger dead in its tracks. The vampires had Davie.

“Yeah. Not a moment too soon either.”

The voices grew quieter as the women walked away up the corridor. Eva cracked the door open a notch to hear better.

“Too true. Have you had to take a blood bag down to that one in the basement yet? Fucking thing freaks me out. The sooner it’s gone, the better.”

Eva blinked slowly, absorbing this new information. Alex had a vampire prisoner, and a deal with the vampires going down tonight? Hope filled her heart. He’d sworn he’d help her and he was making deals with vampires, with what sounded like a prisoner exchange. And there was only person she could think of for Alex to exchange a captured vamp for.

Davie.

CHAPTER 11



Eva managed to avoid Alex for most of the day by escaping to the library. Not hard when he also appeared to be doing his best to avoid her. Probably didn't want reminded of his mistake.

The more she thought about it, the more she became convinced what they'd had was just a bit of fun for him. That she was just a human plaything to be put aside when his duty to mate for the pack came calling.

Asshole. She'd thought that about him so often in the last few hours, she should really append it as a prefix to his name. Scowling, she realized she'd re-read the same six sentences of her book for the last hour or so.

With a sigh, she closed it and stood. It was a new one by her favorite author, one she hadn't gotten around to reading yet, so to find it on the shelves of Alex's library had been a surprise. In fact, there was a whole shelf dedicated to romance, so someone in the house must be a fan.

Not Alex though, she couldn't see him reading anything so frivolous. Perhaps something dry about the history of lycans or war amongst the paranormal race... that seemed more his style, not romance even if he did totally fit the mold of *asshole-alpha-male-who-needed-bringing-down-a-peg-or-two* perfectly.

Her lips quirked as she headed for the door. There was that word again. Asshole. It just seemed to slide so perfectly through the mind when she thought of him. Unfortunately, her

over-active imagination didn't stop there. Oh, no. Once it had latched onto him, it rifled through her memories and raided them, presenting her with images of Alex naked, his gloriously muscled form stripped for her perusal... the way his eyes flared with amber and darkness when he was aroused. The way his cock felt when he drove int...

Shit. No. Hissing in anger at herself, she shut down the thought before it could get any further. She was not a bitch in heat to be panting after the pack alpha. There would be no more nights wrapped around his heavily-muscled form, or him moving over her as he drove into her again and again. Not now. Even if he wanted to, her pride wouldn't allow it. She refused to be good enough to screw, but not good enough to mate.

Fuck that.

Or in this case, not.

Voices on the other side of the library door made her pause, her hand on the doorframe. Every cell in her body went on alert as she froze in place. Male voices.

"I'll be gone until nightfall. Make sure our guests are fed and watered," Alex said, his voice more familiar to her than her own. Yearning filled her heart for a second at the deep tones, but she chased it aside with a spurt of anger.

"Yes, boss."

The second voice she also recognized. Frank. She still wasn't sure how rankings in the pack worked, but if Alex had a right-hand man, Frank was it. A wash of guilt hit her hard and fast. And he'd lost his nephew because of her so if she was looking for help, it wasn't going to come from that quarter.

She pressed a little closer to the door, her breathing shallow as they stopped nearby.

"Get someone to clean thoroughly in here. Smells like half the damn pack have set up camp. And before I forget, make sure Eva gets a little something 'extra' to help her rest. I don't want anything to go wrong tonight."

Eva's eyes widened. He planned to drug her? Of all the low down, asshole things to do. Her lips curled back again as anger surged, almost overwhelming her. A small crack under her hand warned she needed to get a handle on her temper.

Even from the other side of the door, she felt him pause. Heard the rasp of his breath as he turned. She squeezed her eyes shut, clearly seeing in her mind's eye the frown she knew marred his brow. Any moment now the door would be flung open. Alex had to know she was there.

A deep scent filtered through the closed door. Wild and male, it reminded her of dark forests and forbidden places. Her body ached with the need to run, to escape. To feel her heart pound and the dirt beneath her feet—

“Sure thing, boss. I'll make sure it happens.”

Eva blinked, yanked back to reality by Frank's voice. Shit, what had that all been about. She'd never had a smell affect her so strongly. Sucking in a deep breath as quietly as she could, she tried to calm her racing heart.

“Good. And make sure everything is in place for the exchange. I can't stand the Earl at the best of times, so I want this done and him off our land as soon as possible.” He turned and walked away as he spoke, his voice receding at the same pace as his footsteps.

She sagged against the door, resting her forehead against the cool wood as all her senses extended, following the distant sounds of Alex and Frank's conversation. Finally, a door opened and shut near the front of the manor and she heard the deep, throaty sound of Alex's car as he drove away.

He was gone.

Opening her eyes, she looked down to find her fingertips buried into the wood of the door frame as though it had no more consistency than cheese. Fuck. She snatched her hand back and looked at the imprints. Perfect impressions of her nails marked the painted surface.

Shit. How the hell had she managed that? She didn't need to add property damage to her list of werewolfy sins. Biting

her lip, she tried to smooth them over, but it was no good. The wood was hard and immovable.

Realizing there was nothing she could do about it, she opened the door and checked the corridor before slipping out and heading to her room.

They couldn't prove anything because she wasn't a werewolf.

Right?

* * *

Evva had never been in the forest that surrounded the Kingwood family estate on her own. Not at night. Or during the full moon. *Especially* not during the full moon.

Oh no, she smiled to herself as she slipped out a side door and into the shadows of the garden. When she'd lived here, all the humans were locked up nice and tight during the full moon with a guard patrolling to ensure they didn't leave. Wouldn't want to tempt some poor schmuck of a lycan into biting them.

She shook her head and crouched in the deeper shadows by the rose bushes. They moved slightly when she brushed against them and she was enveloped by their sweet, heady scent. For a moment she was caught, transfixed by the fragrance wrapping her in its coils. They smelled amazing. How had she not noticed before how wonderful roses smelled? Like a complex symphony for her olfactory senses, the perfume cascaded over and through her, holding her in thrall before it ebbed away. Shaking herself, she took a deep breath and brought her attention back to the task in hand.

Alex was trading a vampire somewhere in the forest and she intended to be there to find out what the hell was going on. The possibility that he was trading the vampire for Davie still wouldn't leave her.

She chewed on her lower lip. If that was the case, why hadn't he told her? Perhaps he wasn't... perhaps there was

some other deal going on with the vampires. But, if that was true, why had he wanted her drugged?

Feigning feeling sick earlier, she'd managed to get a tray sent up to her room. The chicken soup and its accompanying sparkling water had been easy to ditch in the en suite. Her stomach had growled, complaining at her because the soup smelled so good, but she couldn't risk eating or drinking anything Frank brought her. She didn't know which he'd slipped the drugs into and she wasn't taking any chances.

Besides, she had a real craving for steak recently which was weird. She was normally a chicken person, maybe lamb for a rare change. Not steak unless it was grilled to boot leather. But now she was craving steak, blood red and juicy.

Huh, she might not be a werewolf, but it seemed her appetite was. She should've figured her stomach would get in on the act. It usually did.

Crouched in her hiding place, she watched the house for movement. Most of the wolves had left earlier, alone or in pairs, until there were only a few left. Frank appeared to be the last to leave, cracking her bedroom door open a little to check on her. She'd pretended to be asleep, sprawled across the bed like she usually did.

He hadn't entered the room, simply closed the door and shortly after the house had gone quiet. Her cue to get dressed in the darkest clothes she had and do her best ninja impression.

A rosebush hugging ninja, that was. She'd never get anywhere sitting here. Confident she hadn't tripped any silent alarms, Eva made her way to the edge of the garden and slipped into the forest. There was no boundary wall to mark the separation between the garden and the wilderness beyond. For a manor house belonging to a werewolf family, there didn't need to be...

She broke into a light jog. For all of three point four seconds before she remembered why she didn't jog without wearing a sports bra with structural steel support. Slowing to a pace the girls would sustain without threatening to black her eye, she followed the path deeper into the forest.

Which then petered out...

Well, shit.

She stopped in the middle of the non-path and looked around. She tried her best to ignore her heart hammering against the inside of her ribs. The trees loomed threateningly and the darkness closed in.

“Nothing is going to happen,” she muttered to herself, clamping her eyes shut. “They can’t have just disappeared. Not even lycans can vanish into thin air.”

With her eyes closed, something strange happened. A slight breeze on her cheek pulled her to the left and without thinking, she turned that way. Opening her eyes revealed the path ahead, barely more than a parting of the undergrowth but a path nonetheless. She’d just needed to look at the problem a different way to find it.

A good lesson for life. She should put that on a mug.

Her footsteps hastened and she sped down the path. She didn’t know where she was going, not consciously, but something inside her did. Since it had more of an idea than she did and it beat freaking out and primal screaming, she got with the program and followed it.

That same instinct warned her to slow down as she reached a small rise, and by the time she neared the top, she was on her hands and knees, her belly near the ground. Not a moment too soon either.

She peeked over the top and found herself looking down into a clearing. Obviously well used, it had logs and boulders set around a central ring like seats, all occupied by lycans, some in human form and some not.

Her breath caught on a gasp and she started to duck into her hiding place before she realized they weren’t looking at her. In fact, no one had even noticed she was there. Instead, all their attention was on the center of the clearing and the two men who stood there.

Alex she recognized and her heart leaped, body instantly feeling the pull toward him. She reminded herself he wasn’t

hers, not anymore... if he ever had been to start with. She forced her attention to the other man and her breathing hitched.

The snarl rose again in the back of her throat as everything within her rejected the sight of the man standing in front of Alex. Tall, tanned, and blond, he looked the archetype rich-boy jock, but he wasn't.

Everything about him was fake, she could see it in the way he moved... like something that was playing human, but wasn't anything near. Admittedly, he was good at it, but some of his movements were just too fluid and controlled.

Humans didn't move like that. They were an uncoordinated mess, a jumble of body parts under the control of an erratic brain that looped commands together and somehow got all the bones, muscles, and sinews moving together at roughly the same time.

Vampire.

The snarl rumbled in the back of her throat, unheard over the distance. She watched as two lycans dragged in a hooded figure, whipping the bag off his head to reveal another vampire. He looked a little worse for wear, but she couldn't find it in her heart to feel sorry for him.

These assholes threatened to kill Davie. For all she knew they had, unless...

The blond vampire took one look at the lycan's vampire prisoner and nodded. Two men behind him, also vampires from the way their eyes and fingernails glittered a bit too much in the moonlight, shoved a figure forward. He stumbled, going to hands and knees in the dirt in front of Alex.

Eva caught her breath, something familiar about the boy catching her attention. Then he looked up and she was on her feet, racing down the slope between the seated lycans to throw her arms around his neck.

“Davie! Oh my god, Davie. You're alive!”

CHAPTER 12



Like lycans, vampires had rules and a command structure. Unlike lycans, they ran in packs and like pixies, inhabited the underworld of the city. They stuck to back alleys and bars no one went into alone. Not if they planned to be breathing by the end of the night. If there was anything illegal going on, be it drugs, vice, murder, or any combination of the three. All controlled in some way or another by their leader, the Earl.

Given that they were all pathological liars with homicidal tendencies at the best of times, the Vampire Earl was a person most people avoided like the bubonic plague. And with good reason. Tall, blond, and with the kind of looks that had both men and women falling at his feet, Zane was not as wholesome as he looked.

Ruthless, single-minded, and vicious, he was spoken about on the backstreets with the same kind of awe Veyr was in more civilized circles. Alex had cooperated in a few... business deals with him. As few as he could get away with because the guy definitely had more than a few screws loose.

Word on the street said he was the bastard love child of a vampire and a captured valkyrie. Which was utter bullshit as far as Alex was concerned. Valkyries weren't known to be cuddly. They'd sooner tear out a man's throat just for standing in the way. And that was human males... so something as close to dead as a vampire? They'd eviscerate it on the spot, not get into bed with it.

No, the only way a vamp could get a child on a valkyrie was if she was near dead. And what sort of life would such a

half-breed have? A child whose two halves were in constant opposition. Half valkyrie, a creature born to dispatch the dead to the afterlife, and half vampire, a creature essentially dead. It would be in permanent agony.

Which explained a lot about Zane.

Which made the fact he was in bed with the guy now really not a good idea. Half-breeds were inherently unstable. There was no way around it. Zane had something Alex wanted, so he had no choice but to play the vampire's game.

His lycan enforcers brought their prisoner forward and whipped the hood off his head. The captured vamp winced in the bright moonlight and hissed. Alex ignored him, his attention on Zane.

“We good?” Alex asked when the vampire didn't move, not a flicker of anything crossing his features.

After all the trouble he'd gone through get hold of the blood sucker—a deal with another pack alpha who had links with another city's Mistress and her hellhound lover—if it was the wrong guy he was going to be *pissed*.

“Zane?”

The other man blinked, his eyes black as pitch. For a moment Alex was sucked in, the dark pools twin maelstroms of seething hatred and rage. Then Zane blinked and his expression settled back into one of amused blandness.

“Yeah, we're good.”

He motioned and two vamps dragged a hooded figure forward to dump him on the ground at Alex's feet. The hood was whipped off to reveal Davie's youthful features.

Alex blinked, taken back years, remembering that same face alight with joyful amusement at some game he'd concocted to keep the child Davie amused. He'd liked the kid... he'd had a lot of potential. But that all died when the vampire's blood slid down his throat. Now he was just another bloodsucker.

One who tried to kill Eva.

Before Alex could make a move, Eva's voice sliced across the clearing.

“Davie! Oh my god, Davie. You're alive!”

Alex spun on his heel to see her racing down the slope toward them. For a moment his jaw dropped in surprise. How the hell was she here? She should have been out for the count with the sedative Frank slipped into her soup. He slid a glance at his second in command, whose jaw ground in frustration.

Somehow Eva had outwitted them. Fuck. That didn't look good in front of the vampires.

She reached them, panting with effort and launched herself at her brother, wrapping him in a bear hug.

“Eva. Step away from him.”

Everything in Alex stilled, his wolf snarling at the vampire so close to the woman they loved. The beast rushed to the surface, trying to break his hold so it could tear into the vampire. Rip it limb from limb so it could never threaten their woman again.

Eva turned, her arms still wrapped protectively around Da—the vampire. Alex wouldn't even think of him using that name. He wasn't Davie. He was a dead thing. One about to be even deader if he got his way.

“Alex, it's Davie!”

Alex ground his teeth as the vampire smirked. Oh, he was good, keeping his fangs carefully hidden in case the sight of them triggered a flashback for Eva. Most vamp victims didn't remember an attack, *if* they survived, but Eva wasn't entirely human. She couldn't be. No human could have found this clearing, not with the aversion wards through the forest. A human would have been forced back, fleeing the place to suffer weeks of nightmares that would ensure they never returned.

“Eva,” he moved forward, his hand outstretched to call her to him. “He's not what you think he is.”

“Please don’t let them hurt me, Eva!” Davie clung to his sister, a sob in the back of his throat and Alex’s lips curled back from his teeth in a snarl.

Vampires were excellent actors. Which was great because he planned on seeing how well the asshole did flopping around like a fish out of water with his throat torn out. And that was just for starters. After that, they could move onto the disembowelment blues. Vampires were hardy creatures. It could take days for it to die. Every pain filled moment would be worth it for what he’d done to Eva.

“Eva, please!” the vampire wearing Davie’s face squeaked when Alex and Frank closed in threateningly.

“We done here, Kingwood?” Zane sighed and rolled his eyes, his hand firmly around the neck of the vampire Alex had tracked down.

“Yeah, we’re done. Have fun with your little friend.” He ignored the fact Zane’s claws were buried almost up to the first knuckle in the kneeling man’s throat, blood flowing freely down his neck. It was up to him what he did with his... subjects. Although, to be honest, he really wouldn’t want to be in that one’s shoes.

Zane grinned and yanked the captured vamp up to his feet. His expression was pure malevolence as he held the trembling guy in front of him in a loose embrace. Not a sexual one, although all the reports said Zane swung both ways, but still an intimate one. Zane was apparently a master of torture, though, and there was something about torture that created a link between the torturer and his or her victim.

“Oh, I intend to. Have fun with yours.”

And with a laugh, a cold wind blew through the clearing and the vampires were gone as though they’d never been there.

Alex returned his attention to Eva.

“You shut your mouth,” he glared at Davie. “Eva,” his voice was firmer this time as he injected a healthy dose of dominance from his wolf into it. “Step away from him. Now.”

“No.” Her chin shot up, lips set in a hard line as she challenged him with her gaze. “I won’t let you hurt him.”

Alex ignored the gasps that rolled around the clearing and stepped forward. To her credit, Eva didn’t back down, just glared right back. Curling his lips back from his teeth, he growled.

The sound started off low, but grew in intensity as he pushed more and more of his wolf into it. Her eyes widened and her lip quivered, but she still held her ground against him. Which shouldn’t be possible. He was alpha here and she was barely even lycan.

Their eyes locked in a battle of wills. Stepping forward, he loomed over her, deepening his growl to make her yield to him. She *would* yield to him. New wolf she might be, kind of, and his body might burn for her, but he couldn’t let her challenge go unanswered.

“Back down, Eva...” he warned, knowing his wolf flared in his eyes. “Before this gets serious.”

With his words, he brought the full force of his dominance to bear. She gasped, her entire body trembling. Head bowed, she stepped away from Davie, her body fought every step of the way.

“Take him,” Alex ordered, motioning to Frank. Instantly two enforcers swooped in to drag the vampire away kicking and screaming. Alex didn’t bother to watch. His attention focused on Eva in front of him.

Shit. She had defied him.

In front of the entire pack.

“We are not human, Eva. Don’t ever make the mistake of thinking we are.” He didn’t reveal his inner turmoil, even though the need to take her into his arms and tell her it was going to be okay ate away at him.

It wasn’t going to be okay. She had challenged him

He had to punish her.

“She challenged a higher ranking wolf,” Isabella declared from the slopes. Grumbles of agreement followed her words, making Alex curse mentally. “Or is your ‘pet’ exempt, Alex?”

He shot a hard look toward the female, warning her to keep her mouth shut. But as bitchy as Isabella was, she was right. He couldn’t afford to have Eva relegated to ‘pet’ in the pack. That would lay her open to use by all... she’d be everyone’s bitch, literally.

And he would be forced to kill to protect her.

Frank stepped up to his side, a constant, reassuring presence. Coiled in his hand was the pack’s one instrument of discipline: a silver tipped, leather whip. Not designed for pleasure, it was an ugly thing, and Alex knew only too well its bite.

He sighed, stepping back.

“Ten lashes, and left until sunrise,” he ordered, turning away as Frank and the enforcers stepped toward Eva.

He couldn’t watch. Not with her.

Her screams rang in his ears as he walked away, tears falling unheeded down his cheeks.

Cruel to be kind.

He just hoped she forgave him.

* * *

*T*he blood drained from Eva’s face as she watched Alex walk away. Every detail of the scene engraved itself in her memory. The moonlight playing over Alex’s dark hair, the tension in his shoulders as he walked, Davie screaming her name as two burly werewolves dragged him away. The wind picked up, howling through the branches of the trees overhead, an eerie whisper that set the hairs on the back of her neck to rising.

“Alex, please...” she called after him, trying to follow, but finding her way blocked by Frank and two of the biggest

lycans she'd ever seen in human form. Their hard expressions made her shiver. Shit. She was in so much trouble now.

"Please," she begged, locking her gaze with Frank's. "I apologize, I was out of line. There's no need for all this."

Their hard expressions didn't waver and she backed up. Fast. But each way she tried, left or right, more lycans blocked her path, their faces sickly eager for... what? Her gaze dropped to the whip in Frank's hand and she swallowed. Hard.

"You're..." She lost her voice for a second, but then regained it. She couldn't do anything about the quiver of fear when she spoke again and hated herself for it. "That's barbaric."

A flash of sympathy lit Frank's eyes as he loomed over her. "It's nothing personal, Miss Eva."

The big lycans grabbed her arms and she squeaked, struggling against their hold. Although she seemed to be stronger now than she had before, it was no match for their full lycan strength and within a minute she hung, defeated in their hold.

Frank leaned in. "This is the best way, honestly. You don't want to be named as a pet."

Confusion rolled through her and she lifted her head. Frank must have seen the question in her eyes because he spoke again,

"A pet is the lowest of the low in the pack. Anyone can use a pet, however they want, and with you not being able to shift to protect yourself..." He uncoiled the whip with strong hands. "Take the lashes, I'll be gentle. Believe me, you don't want the alternative."

The lycans turned her bodily, her feet dragging the ground and laid her over the big boulder in the center of the clearing. Her heart pounded, so hard and fast she felt lightheaded. They were really going to do this, really going to whip her for arguing with Alex.

Crap, she'd argued with him loads back in the city. She wouldn't have if she'd known this was the likely outcome.

Hell, she wouldn't have walked into the bloody building and asked for his help in the first place. Screw that, she'd have found some other way... even made a deal with the vampires. They couldn't be any crueller than this. Whipping someone for an honest mistake.

Fear and her pounding heart turned the scene into something surreal. Lycan faces, human and wolf, swam in front of her eyes as the guards lashed her down. A woman screamed "make her bleed": in the background and somewhere in the distance she heard a wolf howling with pain and anger. Or was that her? She couldn't tell the difference.

The whip cracked and a line of fire raced across her back. It bit deep, so deeply she was sure it had scored her to the bone, her back laid open. Wet heat washed over her sides, making her top cling to her skin. She didn't want to think about what it was.

The whip cracked twice in quick succession and she gasped. She'd never felt pain like it. Her body arched backward, her spine in a hard arc as she tried to process the overload of sensation. She couldn't, it was just too much. Gray crept into the edges of her vision, the wolf faces turned into something from a nightmare.

"More, harder!" a woman screamed and Eva wondered if it was the one who thought she was the one strong enough for Alex. Perhaps that was her plan, to kill Eva and clear the path.

She started to laugh as the whip cracked again and again, so many times that she lost count. The other bitch needn't worry, if she survived, no way she was hanging about the pack. Not when she wasn't even a wolf. Why should she be subject to their fucking archaic rules when she got nothing out of it, not even a wolf form so she could shift and rip that bitch's throat out?

The gray turned black, the fire muted to dull agony as her body refused to process any more pain. The scent of blood, her own, filled her nostrils as she slumped over the rock and fell into blessed darkness.

When she woke again, the clearing around her had emptied. Not a soul left to either help her or witness her humiliation. Lifting her head, she couldn't hold in the cry as agony sliced through her back. It felt red-raw, as though she had no skin left.

Panting for breath through the pain she closed her eyes and rest her forehead against the cool stone beneath her. She lay still where they'd whipped her, like a broken rag doll. And she felt broken. Thrown into a new world she didn't understand, and punished when she put a foot down.

Tears welled up again and she let them fall. Who cared if she cried? The pack hated her and Alex had walked away and let them... She gasped, choking up at the memory. Misery crowded in, wrapping around the pain every time she took a breath. Even the cool breeze that washed through the clearing, rustling the leaves of the trees overhead was only a momentary relief before the pain set in again.

Turning with effort, she slid off the boulder and into a little ball. The movement opened the wounds across her back, the scent of blood blossoming in the air as it ran warm and wet down her back. Her soft whimper rasped in her ears as consciousness came and went. Each time she opened her eyes, the night sky had changed and she prayed to any deity that might be listening to pass out completely.

Or worse. She was alone and in the world she didn't know anything about, with no one who cared if she lived or died. Her heart shattered, and she turned her face against the rock.

Perhaps it would be better if she let go...

“Shhhh...shhhh...”

A deep male voice brought her back to consciousness. She opened her eyes to find Alex crouched in front of her. Concern wreathed his features as he tucked strong fingers under her chin and lifted it so she had to meet his gaze.

“Get the fuck away from me.”

She tried to pull from his grasp. He was the last person she wanted to see, even in this state. *Especially* in this state. Had

he come to gloat? To tell her *I told you so*? She'd finally gotten what she wanted, access to the lycan world, and it had all fallen to shit around her.

He didn't speak, but neither did he let go forcing her to hold his gaze. He was so beautiful to look at, the moon emerging from behind cloud cover to bathe him in silver light that highlighted every line and ripple of muscle in his hard frame. Tears filled her eyes. Here she was, cold, tired and in pain, and very firmly put in her place in the pack.

Sure, he'd saved her from what amounted to sanctioned abuse, but neither could she aspire to a place by his side. Her heart shattered. She'd been good enough as a human to share his bed, but as a wolf, she was less than nothing. What did that say about her?

"You should have let me die," she whispered and closed her eyes, shutting herself away from him in the only way she could.

CHAPTER 13



The soft words almost broke Alex.

He closed his eyes for a moment and fought to contain the howl of rage from his wolf. The last few hours had been agony, wanting to come and fetch her and not being able to. If he had stopped the punishment, or come out here earlier, Eva's status in the pack would have been compromised.

"I couldn't." The admission was torn from him as he tilted her head up.

No longer quite human, she could survive a whipping, but she wouldn't survive what lay in store for her had the pack seen her as his pet. Physically, maybe, wolves were hardy creatures, but mentally it would shatter her. It would shatter anyone.

He hoped he hadn't broken her to save her.

Increasing his grip on her chin, he pulled power from his wolf to surround them. Every moment since he'd walked away had been agony and he'd run faster than he'd ever thought possible to get back to her.

Seeing her huddled against the boulder, her back still bleeding had nearly killed him. Her scent was still mostly human, but there was a note in it that screamed wolf. Deep, primal, and female, it made both the man and the wolf sit up and take notice. So why hadn't she tapped into it to heal herself?

Opening the door between himself and his wolf, he pulled power from it, power the wolf happily gave up to heal their

mate.

No, not their mate. He could have taken her as a human wife, but unless she could shift, the pack would never stand for him to mate her. The wolf inside howled at being denied. It wanted Eva. Wanted her however they could get her and it let him know its displeasure.

“I couldn’t let you die, Eva. Not now, not then.” He gripped her chin and used the dominance of his wolf to charge the air around them. “Look at me.”

She shook her head, her lips pursed into a stubborn little pout he wanted to kiss away.

“Eva, look at me. Now.”

The order was backed up by a push of compulsions from his wolf and her eyelids fluttered. A little. Her eyes still didn’t open. A hiss of frustration escaped his lips. Even hurt, she was as stubborn as hell. “Fuck. You.”

“Eva...” This time he growled, and sliding his claws free, pressed them against her skin almost hard enough to puncture. She gasped, her eyes snapping open. Her expression of pain and misery speared him to the core.

“Shhh,” he murmured, smoothing his fingertips over her cheek. “Don’t think. Just let me help you.”

Reaching out with his other senses, he wrapped her in the power of his wolf and called to hers. She sighed, swaying toward him as amber leeches slowly into her dark eyes. He murmured sweet nothings in a low voice as he stroked her cheek and pushed more power into the link between them. More and more until he felt it shiver over her skin.

She whimpered in pain, and he kicked himself. Weak from blood loss, this had to be hurting her. He couldn’t stop though. She couldn’t heal herself, he had to do it for her. Her eyes fluttered closed and he felt her body go slack. She’d passed out.

Pulling her into his arms, he cradled her against his chest, still pushing power into and over her. The scent of fresh blood from her back faded as the skin closed over. Perfect, she might

not think herself a wolf but her body was reacting to an alpha command to heal.

A soft growl warned him she was more awake than he'd thought and he looked down.

Her eyes glowed amber, her wolf watching him through her eyes. Assessing. Wary.

Triumph surged through him.

“So there you are.” His hand slid into her hair, sliding through the silken strands. “You’re a shy little thing, aren’t you?”

Her lip curled back but her body remained slack, tucked in safely against his harder form. Where she should be. Where she belonged.

“Less of that,” he chided, rubbing his thumb against her full lower lip. “You don’t need to hide in there. She needs you. Needs you to be strong. *I* need you to be strong, for both of you. Understand?”

She blinked, an unreadable expression crossing the amber. Whether it understood or not, he didn’t know, but didn’t get a chance to question as the wolf slid within and her eyes returned to normal.

Deep within, his beast howled at the loss of its mate, demanding that Alex bring her back. But he couldn’t. Some people’s wolves never manifested more than a flare of amber in the eyes. Hers couldn’t be like that. She just needed time, he told himself and leaned down to brush his lips over hers.

Her lips were still, impassive under his. Cold. His heart sank. She really was lost to him. But just as he was about to pull away, they parted. It was the smallest of movements, but he registered it. Froze with his lips against hers. Hoping beyond hope.

Her lips moved against his. Clung softly.

The groan rattled in the back of his throat and he claimed her lips. Covering them with his, he stroked his tongue against her lower lip and requested entry. She held out for a moment,

her body unmoving, then relaxed, parting her mouth more to let him in.

He didn't question, just kissed her. Long, soft and deep. A seduction of all her senses as he tried to put everything he felt into the caress. His cheeks were wet, but he didn't care. She was his, even if only for this one night and he refused to give her up.

“Eva...”

She murmured in pleasure when he said her name, turning her head to seek his lips blindly. He stopped her. “No, Eva. I need to know you know where you are...” *And who with.*

“I know where I am.” Her soft whisper was aware, no hint of slurring in the words. “Take me home, Alex. I don't want to be here anymore.”

He didn't say a word, merely lifted her into his arms. Through the forest and back toward the house, his footsteps measured and his precious cargo in his arms. Instead of taking her to the main building, he turned left at the boundary and headed toward the small cottage tucked away at the back of the manor.

Silently, he let them in and walked through the dark corridors until they reached her old bedroom. The door creaked as he pushed it open with one broad shoulder.

She murmured softly, lifting her head. “You didn't change anything.”

He shook his head, setting her on her feet by the side of the bed. “Spent too many years thinking of you in here. Imagining... fantasizing... about claiming you as my own.”

She shook her head, eyes dark even in the dimness of the room, and opened her mouth to speak but he stopped her with a finger over her lips. “No, please. No words. Let me have this, even if you walk away tomorrow. I'll arrange a transfer to another pack if you want, or the Master has offered you a place at court if you wish, as lady in waiting for his mate. It's a good offer. You should take it.”

It would kill him to let her go, but if it was what she wanted. If it was what was best for her. He didn't know that he deserved what he wanted anymore. If he ever had.

This time it was her to shush him with a finger over his lips. She had to reach up to do it, the move accentuating the difference in their sizes.

“Less talk, more action,” she said and pressed her lips against his.

He growled, heat igniting in his body like a chain of explosive charges, and caught her to him.

* * *

Alex's lips parted under hers, allowing access to her questing tongue and Eva murmured in pleasure. His body was hers to explore, and since she had no idea what tomorrow would bring, she intended to make the most of the opportunity. For tonight. Tomorrow she'd walk away, never see him again. Ever.

She whimpered as they fell to the bed, Alex twisting to cushion her from even the gentle impact. He'd healed her, the presence of his wolf's magic still whispering over her skin, but for some reason she'd still expected pain. There was none and her body relaxed.

She took control of the kiss, hiding her smile at his grunt of surprise. He lay back and let her, his big, powerful body leashed as she lay sprawled over it. His abs rippled at her touch and immediately she realized one advantage of dating a shifter; he was completely naked.

Her touch ventured down, over his lower stomach and the stubble of his pubic hair. Unlike most shifters she'd seen (which was a little too much, given they had been naked in the clearing), Alex preferred to shave. She liked it, a lot. His cock was already hard, arched proudly as if desperate for her touch. A touch she was happy to give.

She wrapped her hand around the base of his cock and slowly stroked upward. He broke away from the kiss to swear against her lips but didn't stop her. Didn't move. A willing slave to her sensual punishment. Still stroking, she nibbled and licked at his lower lip, ignoring his repeated attempts to catch her in a kiss. When he lifted his hands to drive into her hair and control the kiss, she stopped the motion of her hand in a silent warning.

He got the message. His hands dropped to the sheets and she made a soft sound of approval, picking up her stroking again. Before she was content to let him be dominant and take charge, but now things had changed. How much yet, she didn't know, but she was no longer content to be the submissive partner. Now she wanted her alpha wolf to submit to *her*.

He strained as she stroked, muscles tight and the chords popping in his neck. That he fought for control, that he fought to stay still on the bed under her touch, was obvious. She didn't make it easy for him though. Her fingertip found the groove at the tip of his cock, and spread the beads of precum she found over the broad head.

Her mouth watered, and she made to move. She had to taste him. Needed to feel his thick cock slide past her lips.

But he moved like lightning, one hand hard against the small of her back as the other gripped her hair.

"Put your mouth on me, and this will be the quickest, dirtiest fuck you've ever known," he promised, his eyes blazing amber.

She paused for a moment, reading the truth of his intentions in his eyes. After all she'd been though she should crave soft and gentle. Tender seduction. But she didn't. Something deep inside her, the same part of her that wanted to howl at the moon and tear the sheets to bind him to the bed, wanted hard and fast.

Wanted... no, *needed* to feel alive. To prove that she hadn't given up back in the clearing and died. That this wasn't all a dream and she really was here with him one last time.

Holding his gaze with hers, she pulled out of his grasp and slid down his body.

“*Fuck!*” the word exploded from his lips as she moved, and his head dropped back. For a moment he was frozen, every muscle and sinew taut at just the thought of what she was about to do to him, a perfect statue of masculine anticipation and caged power.

Then he looked up again, his expression tight and the look in his human-dark eyes feral as she settled herself. Grasping his cock at the base, she bent her head and flicked her tongue over the tip. His taste exploded on her tongue: musky, salty-sweet and hot... A taste uniquely his and brought a moan up from the depths of her soul.

Unable to help herself, she licked him again, root to tip. His barked curse shattered the silence in the room as his cock pulsed in her grip. She pumped, using her saliva to make his shaft wet and slick until her hand moved easily.

“Harder,” he begged, voice hoarse, and his hand slid into her hair. Not hard, but... there.

She ignored him and bent her head instead.

“Holy shit, Eva. You’re going to kill me...” He gasped as she wrapped her lips around the head of his cock.

She slid him deeper in reply.

“...*ugghhh*...”

His hand tightened in her hair, not controlling her movements, but more like he needed the connection to ground himself. That was cool with her, this whole thing felt surreal to her as well.

His cock was long and thick. So wide she wouldn’t be able to do this long without her jaw aching. She wouldn’t need to though. The restless shift of his hips, like he was controlling the urge to drive upward into her mouth, told her that he’d be done before she was. *Long* before.

“Yeah, that’s it. Christ, it’s so sexy to see your lips wrapped around my cock like that.”

She looked up to find his gaze riveted on her mouth. A devil of mischief filled her and she took him as deep as she could. And sucked.

His head thudded back against the bed, his body taut as his cock throbbed in her mouth. Then all bets were off. She attacked his shaft with hard sucks, bobbing her head to work the length in the warm cavern of her mouth, or swirling her tongue around the sensitive head. His body got tighter and tighter, his breathing more ragged. She knew she was running out of time. Any minute now, he'd break... and she wanted that. Wanted him to lose control. Be as helpless as she'd always been in his arms.

Taking him deep again, she brought her nails down the sides of his thighs, both sides, in a light scratch.

The snarl burst from him without warning and the next moment, she found herself lifted off him and flipped to her back. He was over her in a heartbeat, but rather than parting her thighs and driving into her as she expected, he turned her over onto her hands and knees.

"You want to play with the big, bad wolf, Eva, you play the way I want," he breathed against her hair.

A hard knee shoved hers apart even as his hand snaked around her hip and down between her legs. A cry of surprise, then pleasure, startled from her lips as his fingers swept through her folds.

"Wet already. Good."

He found her clit and rubbed. She arched against him, need pulsing through her like a second heartbeat. She didn't get time to beg. The next second the broad head of his cock fit against the slick entrance to her pussy.

No more teasing. With one fast thrust, he was inside her, balls deep.

She cried out, body stretched to its limits by his hard penetration. It burned and stretched, the pleasure bordering on pain, but so, *so* good. So addictive. Mewling soundlessly, she gripped his wrist where his hand was between his legs. He

stroked her clit in fast, ruthless strokes, as though determined to punish her as she'd punished him.

"I want you to come," he growled in her ear. "Come all over my cock, little wolf."

As he spoke, he began to move, and she realized it wouldn't be long for either of them. Her pussy throbbed around his length. In and out, hard and fast, she barely had time to process all the sensations as he took her. Overwhelmed her. Dominated her. Who had she been kidding, thinking she was in control of this?

Her release rose out of nowhere to steal her breath and threaten to topple her over the edge. With a gasp, she arched away, desperate to slow things down, but it was no good. He realized she was about to come.

"Now," he ordered, moving his free hand to palm her breast. "I want to feel it over my cock, hot and wet. Now, Eva. Come *now*."

He pinched her clit and nipple at the same time, and the sharp pleasure shattered her control. Pleasure exploded, filling her core and spinning outward in hot, pulsing waves. Ecstasy filled each cell, sending it spinning to crash into the next. A never ending chain reaction that overwhelmed her.

She cried out in pleasure. Whimpered his name. He growled in response, his thrusts harder now as he gripped her hips. Hands tangled in the sheets, she arched back against him. Wanted to get him as deep as she could.

Two more thrusts, so deep she didn't know where she ended and he began, and he stiffened, cock buried deeply inside her. It pulsed, bathing her inner walls with his white-hot release.

"You're mine, Eva," he growled, his voice more animal than man as his teeth grazed her shoulder. "Never forget that. Because, believe me, I never will."

CHAPTER 14



Hunger woke Eva.

Not the normal kind of hunger either. She was used to the midnight munchies, where her body craved chocolate or that leftover cream cake from the bakery down the road (she made cupcakes, cream cakes were a whole different level of decadence), but this was different.

She'd never felt this kind of gut-wrenching *ache* for food. Groaning, she turned on her side and tried not to wake Alex. On his back, sprawled over the bed, he'd finally let them both rest after the... fourth, or was it fifth time he'd claimed her? Whichever, she'd lost count. Her body was pleasantly sore in places she had no clue existed and she felt... yeah, thoroughly fucked.

She would be sound asleep, like he was, but for the hunger that clawed at her stomach like something inside determined to rip its way out through her ribcage.

"Ugh," she moaned, easing herself to the side of the bed to sit up.

Upright was no better. In fact, it was worse. The room spun, the dead roses on the bedside table wandering in and out of darkness. She frowned and focused on them. Her senses were far more acute since the accident. Before she would have been mostly blind in the darkness, but now she saw pretty much perfectly. Well enough to decide those roses, long dead and dried, really needed replacing.

But that was the least of her worries as her stomach cramped again, almost toppling her off the bed. She clutched at it and grimaced. It felt like period cramps, but higher and a thousand times worse. Even now she could feel her body starting to shake. A warning. She needed to eat or she'd pass out.

Pushing herself to her feet, she staggered to the closet. Her old clothes were still there. Alex really hadn't been kidding when he'd said he'd kept the place as it was. Good, perhaps that meant the kitchen would be stocked. At least, she hoped it wasn't all old food in there... that would suck, big time. Grabbing a robe, she slipped it on and made her faltering way downstairs.

Not bothering to turn on the lights, she stumbled to the fridge. Cake, she needed cake. Or chocolate. Anything to fill the gaping hole where her stomach was. Yanking the door open, she practically fell inside, the smell of the food within making her growl with need.

Alex had kept the fridge well stocked. Thank god. She reached for a chocolate cake, her favorite, and her stomach rumbled. As she lifted it, the sickly-sweet smell of chocolate turned her stomach.

Eyes wide, she shoved the cake back and just looked at it. A world where she couldn't eat chocolate cake had never occurred to her. Leaning forward, she tried another experimental sniff.

“Ack!” Her stomach threatened to turn itself inside out.

Well... shit. Looked like chocolate was off the menu.

Scanning the fridge, she spotted a platter of cold meats on the bottom. Before she could think, it was out the fridge and she had three slices of ham in her mouth.

“*Omhhpfhmygod!*” she exclaimed as she chewed.

It tasted so good. Three more slices and chicken followed as she practically inhaled the cold cuts. Was this some kind of gourmet platter or something? She'd never had cold meats that tasted so awesome.

The plate clattered in the sink, already forgotten as she went back for more. She stripped the substance from a meat pie, leaving the pastry and dissected scotch eggs the same way. Slices of roast chicken lasted all of a minute until, finally, there was nothing savory left in the fridge.

She looked at the pile of empty plates in dismay.

She wasn't a wolf, she was a damn pig.

A small sound, like the scuff of a shoe on the floor, brought her head snapping up. Her hackles rose. There was someone outside. Reaching out, she plucked a knife from the block. A cleaver, it was nice and weighty in her hand. Padding toward the door, her bare feet were silent and she plastered herself against the wall. Her ears strained for any sound beyond the wood and glass.

There. Again. Just the slightest sound, like someone trying to be stealthy.

Cleaver raised, she yanked the door open then flicked the light switch. "Hold it right there, you son of a bitch!"

The light poured out the door, catching the culprit red-handed.

"Hey! No need for that," the tall blonde stumbled backward, arm raised to protect her eyes from the light.

Eva dropped her arm. "Isabella? What are you doing out there?"

"I saw the light and was checking for burglars." The lycan woman straightened, squinting in the stream of light until she adjusted to it.

Eva had to stop her lip curling back. She hadn't liked Isabella from the moment she'd met her, but overnight that dislike had strengthened. All she wanted to do was launch at the woman with the cleaver, hit her again and again until blood ran and the anger inside her was sated.

Obviously not being able to eat chocolate had affected her more than she realized. She wasn't normally a violent or

confrontational person, but right now, she'd argue with her own fingernails.

"As you can see, there's no burglar. So you can go, bye." She'd already started to close the door on the woman when Isabella shoved her foot in the gap.

"What?" She glared at the lycan woman. "In case you hadn't noticed, it's the middle of the freaking night and some of us want to sleep."

A strange expression crossed Isabella's face. She flicked a glance behind Eva, then moved closer and lowered her voice. "Is Alex here?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but yeah. Why?" Eva frowned, something in the woman's manner not sitting right. Rather than arrogant and full of herself as she had been, Isabella seemed scared.

"Listen, I know where he has your brother."

"Brother?"

Eva blinked. Holy shit, she'd forgotten about Davie. Like completely and totally forgotten. How the hell had she done that? How *could* she do that?

"You'd forgotten, hadn't you?" Isabella smiled tightly. As Eva let go of the door, she pushed it open more, a wary eye still on the door that led deeper into the house. Eva shivered a little in the cool air, chilled in the thin robe.

"Yeah... I don't know how."

Isabella snorted, but the sound held bitter amusement. "He's the alpha. He can make you forget stuff. And make you do stuff you wouldn't normally do. Why do you think no one argues with him?" She bit her lip. "Sorry, you already saw that bit. Pack justice."

"Yeah. You all saw me take my licks for disobedience." Her mood soured. A woman had called for more. Had that been Isabella?

She shook her head. "Not me. I've been on guard all evening, but I heard the others talking. I can't believe he did

that to you. Especially when you haven't manifested a wolf."

Eva folded her arms, keeping hold of the cleaver. Sure, Isabella might have been a full lycan with the ability to have fangs in her throat within seconds, but there was no way she would make it easy.

"Well, if it had killed me, it's no great issue, is it? According to you, I'll never be more than a beta anyway and the pack has enough of those."

Isabella's face flushed bright red. "That was ill done of me, I apologize. But you aren't a beta. You haven't manifested a wolf at all so Alex should have let you go back to your life. You shouldn't be subject to pack law *or* punishment."

"Run that by me again?"

"You're not a wolf if you don't manifest," Isabella said softly, her expression concerned. "Alex shouldn't have punished you like you were."

The world ground to a halt for Eva. That sneaky, lying fucking asshole. He'd lied to her and had her whipped for disobeying him, all under the guise of protecting her. What kind of man did that? Her back ached in memory of the whipping she shouldn't have had.

Her jaw set. "Where is Davie?"

Isabella shook her head, backing up, her face pale. "He'll kill me if he finds out."

Eva snarled, stepping forward. "Not so fast. You'll take me to Davie, or I'll tell Alex you told me all this, and tried to turn me against him. Him. *Your* alpha. I should think that counts as dissent and treason, wouldn't you?"

The lycan staggered back, and as Eva watched, all fight drained out of her.

"Okay, follow me. But please, for both our sakes, you *have* to be quiet."

Eva nodded, slipping out the door after the blonde woman. Her heart pounded in her chest as she shut the door behind them, expecting Alex to charge through it at any moment and

grab her. Stop their rescue/escape attempt before it even started.

Alex. Her heart ached at the thought of him. She couldn't believe she'd bought his lies hook, line, and sinker. Did she have idiot written across her forehead or something, because he'd played her from the moment she'd walked into his office just over a week ago. Back then she'd been an independent woman with her life firmly on track. Seven days. That's all it had taken to reduce her to this... a pathetic creature scared of her own shadow skulking through the darkness.

No, not pathetic, she told herself firmly, following silently on Isabella's heels as she darted across the open garden. She was a strong woman with a healthy understanding of the obstacles and adversaries between her and what she wanted. Alex was an alpha werewolf, only an idiot would discount him as a threat.

It seemed an infinity before they reached the relative safety of the tree line. Eva breathed a small sigh of relief as the shadows wrapped around her. At least now Alex wouldn't see them if he should happen to look out of the window.

Please don't look out of the window, she prayed silently. If they were lucky, they could find Davie, free him and be off Kingwood land before Alex woke. She'd never have to see him again. And after all the lies he'd told her, if she saw him again in this lifetime it would be too soon.

Liar, the little voice in the back of her head whispered as her heart ached and something within her, perhaps her soul, whimpered. Head ruled the heart, she told herself firmly, dashing at her eyes with the back of her hand. She wasn't crying. It was the cold out here that was making her eyes water. Yeah, and if she could make herself believe that...

"Shh, down!" Isabella hissed softly, shoving her against the trunk of a tree. "Patrol."

Eva crouched in the undergrowth behind Isabella. They were a little way off the path, but as she watched, two men materialized out of the darkness to walk toward them. She swallowed, suddenly thankful for the other woman's more

acute senses. She'd have blundered onto the path and been caught in minutes.

At least now they had a chance. As long as the lycans didn't spot them crouched behind the trees. Thankfully the robe she wore was black so it merged into the shadows, but her legs were so pale they practically glowed in the little moonlight. There was no way anyone looking toward them would miss her. She tried to fold them beneath her without making a sound, but she must have because Isabella whipped her head around and bared her teeth in warning.

Eva stopped moving instantly, eyes closed as she began to pray again. Shivers hit her, the cold breeze that had been pleasant when it reached tendrils into a warm house was less so now she was out in the wild. Resisting the urge to rub her hands up and down her arms in case the movement attracted the attention of the two men walking silently down the path a few feet away. She closed her eyes.

Something made her concentrate on her breathing and her heartbeat, her consciousness reaching inside... where it touched something. Something she hadn't noticed before. A quietness like a deep pool in the middle of the forest, its surface serene and untainted by ripples. It reached up and enveloped her. Warmth followed and she was no longer cold. Instead, she felt like she was wrapped in her very own fur coat. So real was the feeling that she had to open her eyes and look down to make sure all she wore was the same robe she'd left the house in.

Yeah, definitely the same one.

"Come on, we need to move before they come back." Taking her hand, Isabella pulled her to her feet and then they were running again.

"I thought you were on guard?" Eva asked, hard pushed to keep up with the woman's fast pace. "Where did they come from?"

"I was, but we work in shifts. They were from the takeover shift."

There was no further chance for conversation. They worked their way deeper into the forest. As the trees became more closely packed and the shadows got deeper, Eva's apprehension grew. She had left the safety of the house and was now in the forest with a female wolf who if not hated her, actively disliked her. How dumb was that?

A bird screeched overhead and she jumped, squeaking. Isabella slowed the pace with a chuckle. "Relax. It's just a bird. There are some owl shifters in the local area."

Eva nodded, looking back the way they'd come. She couldn't see any sign of the house now, but instead of feeling bereft and cut off from civilization, she felt connected to nature in a way she never had before. If she closed her eyes, she could feel everything around her: the branches of the trees swaying gently above her in the breeze, the grass growing under her feet... smell rain in the air and the shampoo Isabella used last. Strawberry. The slight breeze lifted the edge of the robe and ruffled her fur... wait, what?

Her eyes snapped open, bringing her back to reality with a bump. Buildings rose out of the darkness ahead and Isabella's pace slowed. They looked like garages, but there was no drive wide enough for cars leading up to them. Just the single path through the trees they'd used. Eva frowned, she didn't remember any mention of garages out here, but the buildings looked new so it was possible they'd been built after she and her family left the estate.

"Who's there?" A shadow detached itself from the shadows of the buildings and Eva's heart nearly stopped. There was a guard here as well.

Isabella dropped her hand with a snarl and leaped for the guard. He managed a strangled cry as the female hit him in the middle of the chest and he fell backward. The back of his head hit the wall with a sickening crunch, but that was nothing compared to the wet, meaty sound of fangs tearing through skin as Isabella tore his throat out. Eva looked away, her hand over her mouth. She was going to be sick.

Movement registered in the corner of her eye and she swung around. Davie stepped around the corner. "Hello, Eva."

She froze. A chill rolled from the top of her head down her spine. She should be pleased to see her brother, but every instinct she had screamed at her to run. A memory of Davie saying the exact same flickered across her mind, but it hadn't been here. They'd been inside somewhere... Then it was gone and she refocused on Davie.

But not Davie. There was something odd about him. Something off. He was as dirty as she'd expect after being a prisoner of the vampires, then held by the lycans, but it was like the dirt was a layer above his skin, which seemed too smooth, too clean somehow.

He turned to Isabella, who rose to her feet. "You took your time."

She shrugged, wiping the blood from her mouth.

"Not my fault she was slow on the uptake. Took some convincing."

Davie sighed. "She never was the sharpest tool in the box."

Eva looked from one to the other, realizing the situation wasn't exactly as Isabella had painted it. The sense of wrongness hit so hard it almost stole her breath. What wasn't she seeing here? What didn't she know?

"What's going on? How did you get out Davie?"

The scared act had disappeared and the female lycan shot her a look of hatred and irritation. She turned back to Davie. "Get it over with, then our deal is done."

Shit. Her instincts howled at her and Eva began to back away. This was wrong, very, *very* wrong. "Do what?"

Before she'd finished her sentence, Davie moved and was behind her. Thin arms with the strength of steel cable caught her in a tight embrace.

"Kill you, sister dearest. And perhaps this time, you'll fucking stay dead."

* * *

Alex jerked awake, going from deep sleep to total consciousness in a heartbeat, his wolf on alert. Something woke him. Everything was dark and silent. Turning his head, he scanned the room. This late at night, it was in almost perfect darkness, but that made no difference. He could see perfectly well. Lycans were nocturnal predators. They might walk and talk human, but they were nothing of the sort.

The same bedroom he'd brought Eva into earlier met his eyes. The feminine décor, the frills on every available surface and more cushions than one person could possibly use in a lifetime the same as always. Nothing was out of place, but the sense of wrongness remained. His wolf paced and snarled within him. Alex frowned. He'd never felt the creature so agitated, but why?

Eva wasn't in bed next to him. He reached a hand across the sheets. The spot next to him was cool, her scent fading slightly. She'd been out of bed a while.

Taking a breath, he calmed himself. He'd spent so long wanting her, and they'd been through so much shit, that now he finally had her, a certain amount of anxiety about losing her again was natural.

"Eva?" he called out, expecting an answer from the bathroom.

There was no light on, but she never turned the light on at night even if it meant she tripped over anything and everything on her way to the bathroom. Something about not wanting to burn the sleep out of her brain with the light. It was one of the adorable yet frustrating things he loved about her.

She had to be in the bathroom. Any moment now she'd answer him, then emerge to walk across the room with that sexy little hip wiggle of hers. Slide into bed with him...

His wolf snarled and snapped his attention back to reality. Although he knew Eva wasn't in the bathroom, he still called out again.

“Eva. Are you in there?”

A small breeze fluttered the curtain at the window as if to answer him. The current brought a wolf’s scent. One he knew. Strong. Close. Female.

His lip curled back in a low snarl.

Isabella.

Launching himself out of bed, he was across the room in a heartbeat to check the en suite. He skidded the last few feet, his shoulder slamming into the wooden doorframe.

The en suite was empty.

“Shit.”

He knew Isabella had an issue with him turning Eva, but she wouldn’t actually *do* anything, surely? A laugh broke unbidden from his lips.

Hell *yes*, she would. Isabella was an alpha, just, and she had ideas above her station. She wanted to be the pack alpha female. She’d do anything to achieve that goal. Up to and including removing a rival for his attention. Never mind the fact he had absolutely no interest in the woman and had made that clear on the several attempts she’d made to get into his bed.

The house rushed by in a blur. He hit the kitchen and his bare feet gave way to claws that clacked over the tiles. The back door crashed open and he burst out of the house onto the lawn, massive paws digging into the soft turf. Fully shifted, he paused for a moment to breathe deeply. Two females had been here, then headed for the forest. Throwing his head back, he gave voice to his fury.

The howl ripped through the night air. Deepened and swelled. It was both a declaration that the pack alpha was pissed, and a summons, a command to all wolves within hearing to attend him.

The night filled with answering howls, and as he watched, wolves emerged and raced across the grass toward him from all directions.

Approval and deep visceral pride filled him. This was his pack—his family—and they were his to command. His wolf took over and he ran. Followed the scent of his mate and the lycan who had taken her. Forget the ride of the valkyrie, this was the run of the wolf; death written in fur carried on four paws times a hundred.

God help Isabella if she'd hurt Eva, because they sure wouldn't. If she'd touched a hair on his mate's head, her time in this pack was done.

She was a dead wolf walking. He'd make sure of that.

Personally.

CHAPTER 15



Eva's head swam as the clues started to make terrible sense. She looked at Isabella.

"You lied to me. About Alex."

Isabella laughed, shaking her head. "God, you're slow. Of course, I lied. How else was I going to get you out here away from him?"

Nausea rose, bile and acid sharp in the back of Eva's throat. Her body was full of aches, like she was running a fever. Just perfect. Normal people got an adrenaline rush and could lift cars off people. What did she get? The frigging flu. Figured.

"But why?" She couldn't help the question. What had she ever done to Isabella?

The lycan woman stalked forward, amber eyes fixed on Eva. Her wolf was so close to the surface, fur played peekaboo through the pores of her skin.

"Sorry, honey, it's nothing personal. Really. There's only room for one top bitch in this pack and let's just say, that isn't going to be you."

"Alex will kill you for this!" Eva struggled against Davie's hold, trying to get free, but he held her firm.

A wall. White tiles. A thick spray of crimson.

What the fuck was that? She shook her head to clear the sudden vision.

“Really?” Isabella arched her eyebrow. “I highly doubt that when he thinks you’ve gone against him and let your brother out.”

She sighed sadly as she looked down at the body of the lycan. Her face was smeared in blood. The blood of a wolf from her own pack. A wolf she’d killed in cold blood. Eva shivered. Lycans were often called monsters by the human media, but Eva never believed of any of them. Until now.

“Of course, then poor Alfie here discovered you and you ripped his throat out for his troubles. I found the body...” She sobbed. “He was my first lover and now he’s dead.”

Blood dripped down the tiles, to the edge of the bathtub. An arm, pale and lifeless.

“My god,” Eva gasped. “You really are a monster. Alex will never believe a cock and bull story like that!”

“He’ll believe whatever he’s told. Who will be there to argue with me?” Isabella shrugged. “Through the ages, history has been written by the victor. And in this particular battle, *I* will be the victor.”

She looked Eva up and down. Sneered.

“How could you think this could possibly go any other way? A pathetic creature like you? No wolf. Hell, even as a human how can *you* compare to *me*?” She smoothed her hands down her neat figure, then looked at Davie. “Make sure you get her off the estate before you do it. Then dump the body where it won’t be found.”

A face above hers. Mouth wide, fangs covered in blood...

Eva gasped and drew back, trying to look over her shoulder at Davie.

“You. You killed me. That’s why Alex had to turn me—”

She’d thought it was a car accident. Her world tilted. Alex *had* lied to her, just not in the way she’d thought. He’d lied to protect her from the truth that her own brother, her baby brother, had left her for dead.

“Why? I’m your sister...”

Davie laughed and there was nothing human left in the sound. Instead, it was harsh and brittle. The amusement of a creature that didn't value any form of life. A dead creature.

“Correction. You were the sister of the weak, inferior creature I was. *I* have no sister. Fuck it, I'm doing it now. I'm fed up with her damn whining.”

Eva sucked in a breath as he bent his head, waiting for the sharp slice of teeth as he ripped her throat out.

The pain didn't arrive. Before Davie could get his fangs into her, there was a snarl, then something heavy hit them like a freight train. A scream ripped from her throat as they sprawled across the hard dirt of the forest floor.

She rolled head over heels, sky and ground whirling around each other. Her tumble was cut short and pain exploded on the side of her head. Blinking, she tried to clear her vision of stars and pushed herself shakily up. A rock explained her abrupt stop, blood splattered across it. She lifted a hand to her head, and her fingers came away wet with blood. Her blood then.

A snarl behind her got her attention. Davie stood in the middle of a circle of silent wolves. A big brown/gray wolf with a white stripe from the tip of his nose to his brow stepped forward.

Her hand covered her mouth, tears hot in her eyes. Alex. Her heart leaped. He'd come for her.

Davie snarled and ran backward, away from Alex toward the buildings. She knew vampires were fast, but she'd never expected them to be *that* fast. Frustration filled her as she realized he was about to escape. If he got onto the roof, he could easily attain the treetops and would be gone.

After three steps, he launched himself at the wall, but instead of jumping to the roof of the building, he sprang back from it and landed on Alex's back. She screamed as he attacked. He was no longer recognizable as human. Instead, he was a caricature. Jaws opened wider than any living creature could manage and his fangs jutting forward like a shark, he

struck on the side of Alex's neck, trying to get purchase through the thick fur.

The big wolf howled and shifted. The sharp crack of bone echoed through the air as he spun, changing form on the fly to throw Davie over a newly formed hip. Alex slammed the vampire into the ground hard enough to make him bounce. Before he could muster a response, Alex had him pinned, a huge hand around his throat.

Davie's eyes bulged, almost popping out of his skull. He scrabbled at Alex's arms with sharp fingernails. No, they weren't nails...they were the sharpened ends of his finger bones, elongated until they burst from the ends of his fingers. The insidious smells of rot and decay oozed through the air as his glamor faded. The elegant façade disappeared to reveal the rotting corpse beneath.

Gagging, she turned to the side and lost everything she'd eaten.

Snarling, Alex lifted Davie over his head and threw him against the wall. He hit with a sickening thud. She held her breath as he hit the ground. Was he dead? She shook her head at her own thought. Idiot. He was already dead. So... was he more dead, for good now?

A rattling sound filled the air, emanating from the crumpled figure of the vampire and he lifted his head. He was laughing.

“You really think you can kill me that easily?”

Davie rose to his feet unsteadily. His head was tilted at an odd angle, but his eyes were filled with malevolence as he glared at Alex. His face twisted into a snarl and he launched himself at the big wolf.

She screamed, fear and worry holding her prisoner. How could he fight something that was already dead?

Alex was back in his half form. Casually he reached out and batted the attacking vampire to the ground. It was easy to see he was done playing and the fight was to the death. Before Davie could get back up, Alex dropped onto his back. His

claws glimmered in what little light there was and he raked them down Davies back, opening his spine to the bone. The stench of decay bloomed twofold on the air.

Davie screamed in agony. Lifting his head, he reached out to her.

“Eva, please...”

The hand... her hand... slid down the blood splattered tub. Davie's face got farther away as he stood and turned. Leaving her to die...

She met his pleading gaze levelly. “Rest in peace, little brother.”

Looking up, she met Alex's solid amber gaze and nodded. “Make it quick.”

The werewolf reached down and took hold of either side of Davie's head in massive paws. With a sharp twist, he snapped the vampire's neck, but that didn't stop the screaming. The only way to keep a vampire down was decapitation.

She looked away as he continued to twist. The dry, breaking sound reminded her of a bunch of twigs being broken. Twigs worked. She didn't want to think about what it actually was.

“Get that out of here. Bury them separately.” Alex's deep voice was a welcome sound. “Eva, sweetheart, are you okay?”

With a cry, she bolted across the clearing and threw herself into his arms.

He folded her in his embrace, strong arms around her. Relief flooded her, the feeling so complete that she sagged against him. She never thought she'd be here again, hold him again. Reaction set in, and tremors raced all through her body. She couldn't stop them.

“Oh god, Eva. I thought I'd lost you.”

Alex's lips were in her hair, kissing her, his words muttered against the top of her head. His big hands drove into her hair and pulled her head back gently so he could look into

her eyes. His were dark with worry. “Don’t you ever do that to me again. I love you. I can’t lose you.”

The words blindsided her. She gaped like a goldfish as he crushed her against him, the same tremors she couldn’t get rid of rolling through his bigger body.

He what... he loved her? Hope raised a tentative head, then burst through like a supernova. No. She had to have heard him wrong.

She pushed at his shoulders to make him look at her. “You... what did you say?”

He met her gaze levelly. “Eva, I love you. Always have, always will.”

Oh. My. God.

She squeaked and wrapped her arms around his neck. Tightly. Probably tight enough that he couldn’t breathe, but he didn’t complain. Instead, he pulled her against him.

“I love you too, Alex,” she whispered, kissing his neck between the words.

Thank god, it was all ove—

“Well, isn’t this sickeningly cute.” Isabella’s caustic tone broke through their happy little reconciliation.

Blinking in surprise, Eva turned in Alex’s arms. She’d expected the woman to have made her escape during Alex and Davie’s fight, not hang around after what she’d done. But no, the lycan female stood behind them, hands on her hips.

“Alex, she was working with Davie. Wanted me out of the way so she could be alpha female of the pack,” she said quickly, before Isabella could say anything else.

Alex’s face darkened with anger.

“Is this true?” he demanded of the other woman.

Isabella’s expression was hard.

“Was I working with the vampire? Yes, but only to remove a threat to the stability of the pack. As our *alpha* has always

taught us, pack comes first. Always. She..." she hissed, glaring at Eva, "is weak."

Alex's arm tightened around Eva's waist. So tight she nearly squeaked, but kept silent, not wanting to make a wrong move in what could turn out to be a volatile situation.

"She is... will be my mate," he growled. "And *will* be your alpha female."

Isabella smiled, baring her teeth. "Over my dead body. I call challenge."

"Challenge? What is that?" From the silence that rippled around the assembled wolves, Eva knew it was a serious thing. "Can she do that? Alex?"

His jaw was set, a small muscle jumping in the corner, and his large body was suddenly tight lethal power ready to burst free. He shoved Eva behind him with an abrupt movement that made her stumble and clutch at his shoulders for balance.

"I accept the challenge on behalf of my mate."

Isabella chuckled, shaking her head. "No can do, handsome. You're not mated. She's not wearing your mark."

"That can easily be remedied," Alex snarled, dragging Eva out in front of him so quickly her head spun. Hand on her neck, he tilted her head to the side. His hot breath fanned over her throat. She had to bite her lip, and fight the wave of heat that wanted to roll through her body. Now was *so* not the time or place.

"That's not how it works, Alpha, and you know it." Isabella wagged her finger and clucked her tongue chidingly.

"You have to bite her during climax." She looked Eva up and down. "And unless she's kinkier than I thought, I doubt she's anywhere near."

Anger surged, almost choking Eva where she stood. The need to launch herself across the gap between them and rip that damn finger off almost got the better of her. Perhaps the sight of the bloody stump would wipe that smug smile right off the bitch's face.

Alex bared his teeth and moved Eva to the side to take a step forward. The movement was packed with violent intent; leashed, but only just. His shoulders widened as she watched, his height increasing until he loomed over the lycan woman.

For a split second, Eva caught the slight widening of Isabella's eyes and the fear in the back before she locked her expression down. Her face was bland, almost seeming bored when she looked up at the part-shifted alpha.

"You *dare* to correct me? I am alpha of this pack!" Alex all but roared, the bellow making Eva wince.

"You are alpha, I agree."

Somehow Isabella kept her composure. Whatever else she was, Eva had to admit she had balls of steel.

"And as such, you are as bound by the laws of the pack as the rest of us. I challenge Eva, a pack female, for the right to share your bed and to be your female. As. Is. My. Right."

"She is correct, Alpha." Frank stepped forward from the shadows. The fact that he was completely naked didn't make Eva bat an eyelid. She had bigger concerns at the moment than Frank's lack of clothing. "She has the right. If Eva does not meet the challenge..."

"Then what?"

There was so much of this she didn't understand. Someone needed to get her a copy of *Pack Rules 101*. Stat.

"Then you will be exiled... Packless."

The veiled resignation in Frank's voice and the way he refused to look at her said they'd all made up their minds about how this would go. They expected her to refuse Isabella's challenge and walk away.

Fuck. That.

This bitch needed to be taught a lesson.

"If I fight?"

Frank looked up, surprise and perhaps the beginnings of new found respect in his eyes. "If you win, Isabella becomes

subordinate to you in the pack. As alpha female, you reserve the right to exile her or arrange transfer to another pack.”

Behind her, Isabella snorted. “Yeah, as if she’s gonna win.”

Frank shot her an annoyed look. “*If* you’ll let me finish.”

He returned his attention to Eva. “If you lose, exile is most probable. I can’t see Isabella letting you remain in the pack.”

“Too fucking right,” Isabella butted in again. “I don’t want her anywhere near my man.”

Alex snarled, the low sound a warning. “In your dreams, lady. That’s never going to happen. In fact, this fucking travesty of a challenge isn’t going to happen. As alpha, I’m exiling you right no—”

“Challenge accepted.”

Alex’s head whipped around at her soft words, total and utter surprise written across his features. “No, Eva. She’ll kill you.”

His words echoed the voice in her head.

Are you fucking stupid, suicidal, or out of your freaking mind? She’ll kill you in a heartbeat.

But another voice, one softer and closer to her soul whispered. *We got this. Let’s teach her a lesson.*

“You heard her. She accepted. We fight,” Isabella crowed, her voice full of triumph.

Alex stepped in front of her. “Eva you don’t have to do this. We’ll leave the pack. I don’t care, I can’t lose you.”

She put her fingers over his lips, and smiled.

“Have a little faith, okay?”

Stepping away from Alex, she motioned to Isabella. “Come on, let’s get this over with.”

The lycan woman grinned, baring her teeth. “I’m going to make you *bleed*.”

“Yeah, yeah... all I hear so far is talk.”

Isabella's first blow came out of nowhere—a heavy right hook that almost knocked Eva off her feet. Staggering backward, she wiped blood from the corner of her lips. That Isabella had punched her and not used claws took her by surprise.

“That all you got?” she taunted. “Really? After all your talk, I expected worse.”

The lycan woman hissed and charged.

Eva might not have been either lycan or athletic, but she was, or had been, human. No natural weaponry meant she'd had to learn to defend herself the hard way. In a textbook self-defense move, she flipped her opponent over her hip to sprawl over the ground.

Several small cheers from the wolves around them was proof Isabella wasn't that well liked.

“Bitch,” she spat, climbing back to her feet. “You'll pay for that.”

The fight was fast and furious. Within three blows, Eva had run through her entire repertoire of blocks and punches. Desperately she dodged and weaved, trying to find some sort of angle against the other woman. But Isabella was fast, and resilient. Even when Eva scored a direct punch to her face, she just blinked and shook her head, going instantly on the attack.

Eva's bravado deserted her as she blocked another punch aimed for her face, but missed the one that hit her ribs. Something cracked in her side and she went down on one knee, trying to catch her breath. She was in serious trouble here.

Isabella kicked out, her booted foot catching Eva across the jaw. Pain exploded in her face to match her side and the next thing she knew, she was on the ground, Isabella's knee in between her shoulder blades.

“Told you, you'd pay,” she whispered, one hand in Eva's hair to yank her head back.

She froze as the sharp edges of Isabella's claws stroked across her throat. The world narrowed down to two things.

The delicate whisper of death across her skin, just above her jugular and the look of terror and pain on Alex's face as four wolves held him back.

No, the quiet presence inside her said. It doesn't end this way.

It started in the center of her soul and rumbled outward. Part growl, part... something else. Eva closed her eyes and let go, letting it sweep through her. Let it change her. Her body convulsed, like an all over body sneeze. With an almighty crack, her bones broke and reformed, fur burst from her pores and raced to cover her skin. For a moment her body seemed to pause, as if deciding what shape to be, then clicked into place.

"Holy shit!"

"Never seen a bitten change that fast."

She didn't notice who spoke, too busy pushing upward and flipping over in Isabella's hold. A muzzle punched out of her face, vicious fangs ripping from her gums. She lunged upward, mouth gaping. She got a brief glimpse of surprise on the woman's face before her jaws snapped shut, tearing out the other woman's throat.

Blood filled her mouth, covered her face, but the creature that had been Eva didn't care. She struck again and again, until the prey above her went limp. With a grunt, she heaved it away with her paws and rose to sniff at the corpse. Cooling, but definitely dead. She spat the mouthful of flesh onto its chest, ignoring the sightless eyes to turn and look around her.

"Look at her eyes..."

"An alpha for sure."

The massed pack gawked, wonder and fear in their eyes. Several backed away, others whimpered and bent their heads. She probed the stillness in her soul and felt the rightness of their words. She was wolf and she was other too...

Alpha. Now she had a name for it and smiled.

Eva folded her wolf form back inside herself with a neat pop and turned to meet each and every pair of eyes.

“Anyone else want to challenge me for the alpha female position?” she asked, power raging through her, ready to fight again. And again. As many times as it took.

“No? Didn’t think so.”

The End

If you enjoyed the book, please consider leaving a review, even if it’s only a line or two; it would make all the difference and would be very much appreciated.

Thank you!

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EPILOGUE



She ran under the moonlight, exhilaration and power surging through her veins. Her new body was lithe and packed with power. A predator in every sense of the word. The night breeze flowed through her white fur, the dirt and undergrowth a blur beneath her paws as she ran for the sheer joy of being alive.

A presence beside her made her turn her head. A big brown/gray wolf with a stripe down his face ran beside her. An alpha. Her mate. She wuffed softly in recognition, then dug deep to speed ahead of him. With a small yip, he sped up until they ran side by side. Equals.

She barreled ahead of him into a clearing. And stopped dead. The view was familiar, she'd seen it before somewhere.

Folding the wolf within, she walked forward on human feet to get a better look.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Alex's voice sounded behind her, his body heat against her back.

She nodded, then her eyes widened as she realized where she'd seen it. "It's the painting in your bedroom."

He nodded, big hands sliding down her arms before turning her around. The amber faded from his eyes as she watched, leaving behind a very human heat.

"It's my favorite place. Which is why I thought it would be perfect for tonight."

"Tonight?" She tilted her head, flashing her neck at him. He growled in response, crowding her backward onto the

blanket spread over the grass. “Why, alpha mine, did you have something in mind?”

She squealed in delight as he tumbled her down onto the soft surface, and within seconds she found herself beneath him. His knee nudged hers apart so he could settle between them. The long, hard length of his cock slid between her pussy lips, rubbing against her clit.

“You know I do, mate of mine.”

“Not yet,” she reminded him, wrapping her legs around his hips and rubbing against his cock.

Pleasure made her eyes roll back in her head. Her body was so sensitive after a change, it wouldn't take her long. Him either, apparently, as their groans mingled to fill the small clearing.

“As I've said before, we can remedy that easily.”

His voice was lower than human, and ragged as though he fought for control. Pulling away, he flipped her over in an easy display of strength that sent a shiver of awareness through her. Only now as lycan could she appreciate how much he'd controlled his great strength with her before, and delight in the fact he didn't have to now.

On her hands and knees, with him behind her, she dropped her shoulders and arched her back, silently begging for his touch.

“The moonlight kisses your skin,” he whispered, big hands sliding over the twin globes of her ass. “I've waited so long for this moment. I can't believe it's finally here.”

His fingers swept through her folds and she moaned. Finding her clit, he circled and rubbed, no hesitation in his touch. There was no drawing the pleasure out or teasing her. They were here for a purpose and every touch built toward it.

She gasped and moaned, savoring the pleasure he brought her. But it wasn't enough; her body craved more. Craved something else.

“Please, Alex...”

He heard her, moving his hand and settling into position behind her. The broad head of his cock pressed against her entrance and with one slick, wet thrust, he claimed her. She sucked in a breath as her body stretched, forced to accommodate his thick length.

He reached around, finding her clit again and then started to move. Coordinating his thrusts with his strokes over the small bundle of nerves, he ruthlessly took her higher and higher, until...

“Oh fuck, I’m going to come...”

“Good,” he nuzzled behind her ear, making her pussy clench hard around him. “Come for me, and be mine.”

A final rub of her clit was all it took. She cried out, shattering in his arms as she came in hot, liquid spurts over his cock buried deep inside her.

He growled and struck, driving his fangs deeply into the fleshy part between her neck and shoulder. If she’d thought she’d known ecstasy before, it was nothing to the feelings that flooded her now. Complete and utter pleasure rolled through every cell in her body as her soul meshed with his.

Mates finally.

For life.

Thank you so much for reading **Blackmailed by the Billionaire Werewolf!**

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IN DEBT TO THE LION FIGHTER

Her debt means the King owns her body... her heart is a different matter. Or is it?

In order to pay off her debt, Zara shares cagefighter Logan Reese's bed...or rather a wall in the locker rooms or the back seat of the alpha werelion's limo, since actual beds don't feature large in their arrangement. She tells herself it's just business, that she's not his property, not really. It's just a short term arrangement. She doesn't want more. Honest...

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mina Carter is a *New York Times* & *USA Today* bestselling author of romance in many genres. She lives in the UK with her husband, daughter, a tank of a Staffordshire Bull Terrier and a bossy cat.

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