



BLACK
ROCK
GUARDIANS



JHAVOO

— UNDER THE —

HUNTER'S
MOON

SUSANNA STROM

HAVOC
— UNDER THE —
HUNTER'S
MOON



SUSANNA STROM

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CHAPTER ONE



ZANE

Small, grubby hands splayed against the curved glass front of the pastry case, the same case I'd buffed within an inch of its life before Freya's Bake Shop opened this morning. The kid leaned forward and squashed his face against the clear surface. His nostrils flared into gaping black holes. His lips smooshed flat like a pair of giant pink worms. He exhaled and his breath fogged the surface. Poking out his tongue, he licked a circle on the glass.

From behind the counter, I cut him an exasperated look.

Thanks, kid. There's nothing I like better than cleaning up slobber.

Annika caught me midscowl. Without missing a beat in her conversation with the boy's mother, she kicked me. Not hard. Annika didn't have it in her to willingly hurt anybody. It was a gentle tap of her foot against my lower leg, meant to remind me of my manners.

I knew better than to attempt a smile. Liv told me I was likely to send customers running for the hills when I flashed my teeth. Instead of smiling, I wiped the sour expression from my face and shaped my features into a less terrifying grimace.

"You want a cookie?" I ground out. Annika and Liv gave free chocolate chip cookies to children.

The kid shook his head back and forth but kept his wet tongue plastered against the glass, smearing spit a good five inches.

If patience is a virtue, I'm a fucking saint.

Under the best of circumstances, nobody would ever accuse me of being a people person. Still, I prided myself on doing the right thing. Disposition and druthers be damned. When the alpha gave an order, I complied, even when it meant playing bodyguard to his mate's human cousins and helping out at their fancy-ass bakeshop.

Hauling supplies? Sure. Refilling the coffee urns and carrying trays of pastries to the display case? No problem. Cleaning up? Why not? Making nice with human customers, especially customers who dithered while deciding between a brownie and an éclair—or kids who smudged the glass I'd *just* cleaned—that taxed my patience.

Annika called me an introverted pussycat. Adorable, but dead wrong. Liv said I was grumpy and antisocial. Of the two sisters, Liv's opinion honed more closely to the truth. And Annika's generous assessment? Wishful thinking combined with an inclination to see the best in everybody.

Humph.

Beneath my skin, my shadow brother stirred, restless and agitated. The thread that held my temper in check stretched taut and frayed. I rolled my shoulders, my limbs stiff. I really needed to shift and run, but I didn't dare assume my wolf form. As long as Annika and Liv were in danger, I had to stick close. Besides, the citizens of Belle Reve were up in arms about a killer wolf on the prowl. If I shifted in town—trotted through the park or along the riverbank—I might come face-to-face with some hothead. They might pull a weapon and take a shot. Once upon a time, I could've risked it. I could've trusted my wolf to slink away and avoid conflict.

Not anymore.

When I needed it most, my self-control was slipping, and didn't that just bite?

The shopkeeper's bell jingled. I looked up. Wasn't likely a coyote or one of their grizzly allies would launch an attack in public in the middle of the day, but I had to keep my eyes peeled for trouble.

I groaned as trouble of a different sort walked through the door. Three teenaged girls made straight for the counter, their eyes glued on me. Third time they'd been in this week, and each time they made a beeline toward me. Settling my stance, I braced myself.

“Hi,” the tallest and boldest of the three girls said. She tossed her head, sending blond hair sliding over her shoulders. The cloying fake scent of strawberry bodywash assailed my nose. Nostrils twitching, I fought back a sneeze.

I grunted a greeting.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Annika frown. I was not on script. Two weeks working at Freya’s Bake Shop and “How may I help you?” still didn’t come naturally to my lips.

I tried again. “See anything you want?”

The tall girl’s friend poked an elbow into her side. They giggled. Pressing her mouth against the blond’s ear, the friend whispered, “Dare you to say ‘him.’”

The girl probably thought I couldn’t make out the words. With my souped-up shifter hearing, she might as well have shouted. I lowered my brows and raised my chin, silently eyeballing the trio with the same stern pose that always quelled rowdy teenage packmates during training.

No such luck with these tittering adolescents.

The blond blushed, but held her own, elbowing her friend back before looking at me. “As a matter of fact, I *do* see something I want.”

I shot a desperate glance at Annika, who was busy ringing up the mother’s order. No help there. I gritted my teeth.

Be nice. Be nice. Be nice.

Liv emerged from the back of the shop, carrying a tray of chocolate croissants. Her gaze skated from me to the three teenagers. A smart-aleck grin tipped her lips. She slid the tray into the pastry case, hip-bumped me out of the way, then turned a bright smile on the girls.

“You’re back! Can’t resist a fresh chocolate croissant, huh?”

“Zane was helping us.” The blond pointed at the cupcake-shaped plastic name tag pinned to the chest of my black apron.

“I’m helping you now.” Liv’s professional smile didn’t falter.

The shopkeeper’s bell rang again. I glanced at the door.

An elderly woman with orange-red hair marched into the bakeshop, preceded by a Pomeranian on a leash. The dog wore a polka-dotted raincoat that matched the woman’s plastic bonnet. He shook water droplets off himself, then stilled, no doubt sensing the presence of a predator. His bushy orange tail shot straight up into the air. A growl rumbled from his chest. His head pivoted from side to side, his gaze scanning the shop. When his eyes settled on me, he bared his teeth. Frenzied yips erupted from his throat.

Well, hell. A dominance challenge from a lapdog. Wasn’t that just the icing on the shit cake of my day? My shoulders crawled up toward my ears.

“Buttercup, what in the world got into you?” the woman admonished. Buttercup strained on his leash, yapping and snapping his teeth, ready to take me on.

Annika slid a bag of pastries across the counter to the boy’s mother. “Have a nice day.” She raised her voice to be heard over the barking.

At the commotion, the kid finally yanked his face away from the glass, leaving behind a slimy smear that looked like a slug trail.

“Doggy,” he cried.

The mother snatched up the pink bag, took her son’s hand, and made toward the exit.

The old woman scooped up the dog, clearing the path to the door. She turned her eyes to the counter. “I’m sorry, girls. I need to pick up a dozen Danish for my coffee klatch, then this little rascal and I will get out of your hair.”

“No problem, Mrs. M.,” Annika called out.

The young mother and little boy stopped to talk with Mrs. M., who apparently knew the pair.

Annika sidled close to me and tilted her head toward mine. Her sweet scent infiltrated my senses, sugar, cinnamon, coconut, and the tantalizing natural fragrance of woman.

Ours, the wolf sighed with pleasure.

Knock it off, I shot back.

Annika laid a hand on my forearm. At the skin-on-skin contact, my muscles locked and a shiver raced from my fingers to my elbow.

My wolf—the asshole—perked up and wagged his tail like a happy puppy.

She lifted up on her toes and brought her mouth to my ear.

“I have the best idea,” she whispered, so close that her warm breath tickled my skin and raised goose bumps on my shoulders. “A real moneymaker.”

“What’s that?” I grumbled.

“Freya’s Bake Shop T-shirts in our signature pink. We’ll have a picture of you holding a tray of cupcakes silk-screened on the front.” She shot a pointed look at the teenaged girls. “Bet we could sell dozens of ’em to your fans. Maybe *hundreds*.”

My jaw dropped. That had to be the most horrific idea ever.

Annika slow-blinked, wearing an expression of exaggerated innocence. “What? Don’t you want to be the face of Freya’s Bake Shop?”

Was she... was she teasing me? Nobody teased me. Nobody dared yank my chain.

A low growl escaped my chest.

“C’mon.” She squeezed my arm. “I bet a lot of women would like to have your face on their chests.”

Suspicion narrowed my eyes. The woman was definitely yanking my chain. “Somebody needs a spanking,” I warned.

Annika rocked back on her heels, her eyes sparkling. “Maybe somebody does.”

What did she say?

My turn to blink.

She looked away from me, her gaze fixing on the old woman and squirming dog.

“How about you take Buttercup out front so Mrs. M. can pick out her Danish in peace?”

“Works for me,” I agreed. A few minutes away from Annika might give me time to recover my equilibrium. I strode around the counter and approached the elderly woman.

Buttercup wrinkled his muzzle and showed his teeth as I approached. Nose to nose with a predator who could eat him for lunch, the purebred pooch showed spirit. Inside me, my wolf nodded with admiration. Oh, he'd force Buttercup to submit, but he admired the small dog's pluck.

I dipped my chin and allowed the wolf to flash in my eyes.

Buttercup fell silent, his aggression snuffed out.

“Good boy.” I held out my hand, and the dog gave it a sniff.

“Oh, my.” Mrs. M.'s gaze fell on my wrist, where a leather bracelet held a wire-wrapped nugget of black rock.

Every member of my pack wore a chunk of the meteorite, its unearthly powers imbuing the wearers with extra speed and strength. As long as the stone touched our skin, we could assume our animal forms faster and more often than other shifters. No wonder our coyote and grizzly enemies were determined to get their hands on the pack's prized Black Rock.

She laid a finger on the stone and offered a knowing smile. “I'm Dorrie Mittelmann. It's nice to meet you, young man.”

I recognized the name. Our new alpha, my cousin Adam, had declared Dorrie Mittelmann a friend of the pack. We recently discovered that she'd kept our existence a secret since the 1960s, her discretion more than earning our trust.

“Ma'am.” I nodded. “Zane Hunter. Nice to meet you, too.”

See? Despite what Annika and Adam thought, I could remember my manners without being prodded or kicked.

“Adam’s cousin,” she cried. “I’ve heard all about you from the girls.” Mischief lit her face.

I had no idea what the Hagen women could have told Mrs. M. about me, except that I was a surly cuss with little patience for the social niceties. Nothing to warrant the delighted expression that crossed her face.

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other and pointed at the dog. “Annika suggested I take him out front while you shop.”

“That would be lovely.” Mrs. M. held him out to me. “I’m sure Buttercup will behave himself with you.” Her eyes glittered, like we shared a secret, which, I guess, we did.

“We’ll get along fine.” I looked down at the now-docile mutt and scratched under his chin. “Won’t we, boy?”

Buttercup sniffed, as if agreeing with me, then settled into my arms. Dogs always came around quickly when confronted with a wolf. Cats—well, cats were a different matter.

“I won’t be two shakes of a lamb’s tail.” Mrs. M. bustled toward the counter.

Holding the dog in one arm, I pushed the door open and stepped onto the sidewalk. Overhead, the bakeshop’s pink-and-white striped awnings sheltered us from the drizzle. The dog’s silly raincoat should keep him warm. The cold, rainy weather didn’t bother me one bit. Whether in wolf or human form, I ran hot.

A few minutes later, the door swung open and the three girls exited the shop. Glancing my way, they paused. I heaved a sigh. My polite veneer had worn paper thin. Hoped to hell they’d move along and cut out the foolish flirting.

“Goodbye,” the blond said hesitantly.

“Bye,” I grunted without making eye contact.

The girls took the hint—thank fuck—and walked away without another word.

Buttercup yipped once at their retreating backs then angled his head and studied me. Now that we’d made our peace,

curiosity filled his dark-brown eyes, curiosity without a lick of fear.

“What do you want?” I demanded, liking the plucky mutt despite myself.

He barked again, then wriggled deeper into the crook of my arm.

“Babysitting a damned lapdog,” I muttered.

Biting back a grin, I turned my attention to my surroundings. On a Saturday afternoon in early October, the streets and sidewalks were emptier than they’d been in months. Now that the sunny summer weather had given way to a wet fall, tourists had mostly abandoned the riverside resort town. Fine by me. The fewer strangers milling about, the better.

A loud crash shattered the silence, the sound of metal on metal. Brakes squealed. I turned my head toward the sound. A white luxury SUV peeled out of the alley next to the bakeshop. The vehicle took a hard left and careened past me, flying hell-for-leather down the street. It clipped the side mirror from a parked car then blew through a red light, forcing the three teenage girls to jump out of the crosswalk.

“You okay?” I called to them.

Clutching each other, they nodded.

Uneasiness ticked up my spine, an inexplicable conviction that something was very wrong. I pulled open the door and rushed inside.

Mrs. M. stood at the pastry case, deep in conversation with Liv, a big pink bakery box on the counter between them. At my abrupt entrance, they stopped talking and looked my way.

My gaze traveled back and forth across the room, my pulse picking up speed.

“Where’s Annika?” I demanded.

CHAPTER TWO



ANNIKA

“H mm...” Deep in thought, Mrs. M. tapped a finger against her pursed lips. Her fingernail was painted the same vivid shade as her lipstick—cherry red. She loved bright colors as much as Grandma Freya used to. No wonder they’d been such close friends. Birds of feather and all.

“The raspberry Danish are my favorite.” I smiled, so she’d know I wasn’t trying to hurry her along. Never rush customers. Selecting just the right pastry was part of the fun.

“Four raspberry it is.” Her gaze moved back and forth across the tray. “Four apricot, too. And four cheese.”

“Excellent choices.” I slid a cheese Danish into the pink pastry box.

She tilted her head to one side, studying me with a quizzical expression as I filled the box. “How have you been, sweet girl? Since the fire, I mean.”

Since the previous wolf alpha’s crazed and bitter wife, Olga, had attempted to kill me, my sister, and our cousin, Marit, while we slept in Grandma’s lakeside cabin six weeks ago. That’s what Mrs. M. meant.

Life can turn on a dime.

Grandma Freya used to quote that old idiom.

In the space of a few months, my safe, ordinary life had upended, and everything I thought I knew about the world turned upside down. Supernatural beings walked among us. Some were wonderful, like Adam and Zane. Others? Not so much.

How have I been since the fire, Mrs. M. asked?

“I’m okay.” I didn’t like the tremble in my voice.

“If only Freya were still alive. She’d be so happy to see that her granddaughters have found a place with the pack.”

“I’m sure she would,” I agreed.

“Although she’d be desperately sorry about all the terrible things you girls have gone through.” Sympathy filled Mrs. M.’s brown eyes. “Especially you.”

Especially me? Oh, lord. Marit must have told Mrs. M. *everything* that happened. Not just about the fire, but... but the rest of it, too.

Months after the incident, I still startled awake at night, seeing blood, tasting its coppery taint in the air.

Nope.

My lungs constricted and I squeezed shut my eyes, pushing away the memories.

Back in the box. Not now.

“Sweetheart.” Mrs. M. touched my hand. “I’m sorry if I upset you.”

Forcing my eyes open, I tipped my lips into a half-hearted smile. “I’m fine.”

“You saved your sister’s life,” she reminded me, her voice gentle.

“Yes.” I swallowed. “Liv is alive. Marit’s living her happily ever after with Adam. And business is thriving at Freya’s Bake Shop. It’s all good, Mrs. M.”

It’s all good except for the nightmares.

And a certain stubborn wolf who keeps pushing me away.

The smallest of white lies.

She patted my hand. “Freya would be so proud of you all.”

“Hey, Annika.” Our bakery assistant, Julia, called from the back of the shop.

Liv sidled over to me. “Go see what Julia wants. I’ll ring up Mrs. M.”

“It was lovely to see you again, Annika,” the elderly woman said. “Stop by and visit Buttercup and me sometime.”

“Will do.” With a wave, I retreated to the back of the shop. We’d be closing in ninety minutes, and Julia had already

cleaned the ovens and was now sanitizing the mixing bowls and cookie sheets. “What’s up?” I demanded.

She pointed toward the door that opened onto the side alley. “Somebody asked for you. She said there’s a problem with a delivery order.”

A problem with an order? That made no sense. The bakeshop was closed for the next two days, and we weren’t expecting any deliveries this late on a Saturday afternoon.

“I’ll take care of it.”

I peeled the disposable gloves off my hands, slipped them into my apron pocket, and opened the door to the alley. A tall figure sporting a yellow polyester poncho stood on the stoop. Raindrops slid down the poncho’s wide sleeves and shapeless front and dripped from the hood’s built-in visor.

“You look like a drowned rat.” I stepped back. “You wanna come inside out of the rain?”

She shook her head, sending raindrops flying.

“Who sent you?” I glanced at the rear end of a white SUV that had backed into the alley. “Was it Mrs. O’Brien?”

Last week, I’d asked Mrs. O’Brien for another twenty jars of her seedless raspberry jam. I’ve been tweaking Grandma’s recipe for Linzer torte, so we could add it to the bakeshop’s rotation. Mrs. O’Brien had promised to get the jam to me as soon as she could. This wet delivery person was probably one of her college-aged daughters.

“Yes. Give me a hand, will you?” The young woman gestured for me to come outside.

I snagged a hoodie from a hook by the door then stepped into the alley, pausing to lower the kick-down doorstopper so I wouldn’t get locked out. The heavy door slammed against the metal stop. We slogged through puddles of standing water as we approached the SUV. Instead of stopping to open the tailgate, the young woman strode around the front of the idling vehicle and opened the passenger-side door.

I followed, then peered inside, expecting to see a box full of jelly jars on the front seat. The seat was empty. Frowning, I glanced at the poncho-wearing figure.

Without warning, she pulled a gun from the rain slicker's pocket and pointed it at my chest. Her hand closed around the pistol's bright-pink grip, and she had her finger on the trigger. She meant business.

What the heck? Shock froze me in place.

"Keep your damned mouth shut," she ordered in a low voice. She shoved back her hood, blinking as raindrops spattered her face. Her beautiful, familiar face. Pale blue eyes glared at me with undisguised hostility.

"Courtney?" I whispered.

Sweet Jesus.

The woman had every reason in the world to want me dead.

"Get in the SUV." Courtney shook the gun, giving emphasis to the command. Naked malice danced in her eyes.

No. No. No.

My gaze locked on the weapon. I'd watched enough true crime shows to know that getting into the SUV was the very last thing I wanted to do. I remembered a detective rattling off statistics about survival rates. He said it was better to run from an assailant and risk getting shot than to climb into their car.

Easier said than done with a gun waving in your face. Especially a gun brandished by a coyote shifter out for blood. A human's strength was a paltry thing compared to that of a shifter. How often had I stealthily admired the play of Zane's muscles when he hoisted heavy boxes as if they'd weighed nothing? I was no match for Courtney's strength. If I tried to wrestle the gun away from her, she'd probably laugh and bat my hands away. Or get even more pissed off.

And backed up against the open passenger-side door, I had nowhere to run.

Zane.

Zane was outside in front of the bakery. If I screamed, he'd hear me. He'd come running, but not before Courtney pulled the trigger. She'd shoot me, and maybe him. Zane was fast, strong, and brave, but claws and fangs were no match for a gun.

No crying for help, then.

I drew trembling arms to my chest—as if overcome with fear—then slid my hands down to hug my waist. “What do you want?” The quiver in my voice wasn't entirely for effect.

Courtney smirked. “Silly girl, did you think I'd let you get away with shooting my man? With ruining my life?” She shook her head, answering her own question. “No. It's time for payback.”

“Bryce tried to kill my sister.” I locked eyes with Courtney, willing her not to notice my hand inching toward my apron pocket. Ever since *the incident*, I felt better knowing I could defend myself. Whenever I was away from home, I carried a small canister of pepper spray cleverly disguised as a tube of lipstick.

There. My fingers closed around the small lipstick pepper spray. With my thumb, I nudged off the lid. I sucked in a breath then slowly blew it out.

Keep your cool.

Shifters could smell fear, could hear a racing heart. Maybe they could sense when cornered prey was about to go on the offensive.

Behind Courtney, the bakeshop's back door swung open, the hinges creaking loud enough to wake the dead. Julia walked onto the stoop, bracing the heavy door on her shoulder.

“You guys need any help?” she called.

Oh, crap. No way. No way could I allow Courtney to hurt my young employee.

Courtney's head whipped toward the sound. Taking advantage of the temporary distraction. I blasted her in the face with the pepper spray. If she were a man, I would've

followed up with a kick to the balls. Instead, I raised my foot and stomped hard on the front of her knee. It cracked. I winced, imagining the knee joint dislocating, the ligaments tearing.

“Go,” I shrieked, gesturing for Julia to retreat to the safety of the bakeshop.

Courtney staggered backward, blinded by the pepper spray, and hissing from pain. She reached for me. I ducked under her arm and sprinted for the front of the SUV. Hesitating, I glanced at the bakeshop door. Instead of hurrying inside, Julia had taken a step toward me. Apparently she’d forgotten to kick down the doorstep. The metal door slammed shut, locking her outside.

If Courtney recovered quickly, she now had two targets. No question I was number one on her most wanted list, but I couldn’t take a chance she might turn her rage on a defenseless seventeen-year-old.

“Hey,” I called, waving my arms.

Courtney scrubbed her hands over her streaming, red-rimmed eyes and glowered at me.

“That’s right,” I said, backing down the alley, the opposite direction from Julia.

Muttering under her breath, Courtney limped around the front of the SUV then clambered into the driver’s seat. She gunned the engine, a spiteful smile splitting her face.

I glanced frantically from right to left. Trapped. I was trapped in a narrow alley. Courtney had intended to kidnap me, to take me God-knows-where to do God-knows-what. The woman wouldn’t hesitate to mow me down.

Heart pounding, I turned on my heels and sprinted toward the street.

Behind me, the engine roared as she hit the gas. A few yards ahead, a dumpster hugged the side of a building, its lid propped up and leaning against the wall.

I veered toward it. It was an old steel vessel, with a ladder on the side, not one of the newer plastic ones. Without allowing myself to think about what I was doing, I leapt onto the ladder and vaulted into the dumpster's gaping maw, coming down hard on a pile of wet, squishy garbage bags. My foot slid on a rotten head of lettuce. A garbage bag split open, and a foul-smelling orangey-brown substance oozed out. I recoiled, instinctively scrambling to the side of the metal box. A greasy shard of glass sliced into my palm. Blood welled from the cut. I gaped at the open wound.

If Courtney didn't finish me off, an infection might.

The SUV crashed into the dumpster. My skull thwacked against the wall. Moaning, I clutched my head and braced for a second impact. It took a few seconds for my addled brain to realize that instead of coming at me again, the SUV had sped away. I drew in a deep, shuddering breath, ignoring the wretched stench that swirled around me.

A long moment of silence, broken by the sound of running feet. Julia peered into the dumpster, raindrops mingling with the tears running down her face. "Are you okay?"

I swallowed. "Yes. You?"

She nodded, sobbing. "Who was that? What did they want?"

Like most humans, Julia knew nothing about the supernatural world. I couldn't exactly tell her a vengeful coyote shifter had tried to kidnap me.

I forced out a small laugh. "It was personal. A spoiled little rich girl is mad because I"—I shaped my fingers into air quotes—"stole her man."

"What?" From her incredulous expression, Julia wasn't buying it.

I groped for a plausible story. "She loves big, dramatic gestures. She was trying to scare me."

Julia's brow furrowed. "But she had a gun."

“Yeah, a toy pistol.” I rolled my eyes. “Like I said, a drama queen.”

“But... you... you pepper sprayed her,” Julia faltered.

“I’m tired of her nonsense, so I let her have it.” I lifted my shoulders. “Not my finest moment.”

“She tried to run you over,” Julia said. “Shouldn’t we call the police?”

I made a face. “You heard the part about the spoiled little rich girl? Her daddy always buys her way out of trouble. I’ll call his office and let him know what she did. Her folks will rein her in.”

Julia stared at me, clearly unhappy with my willingness to let Courtney off the hook. “You sure?”

Julia was my employee. It was my responsibility to keep her safe. Too bad it hadn’t occurred to me before now that the happy-go-lucky girl might end up collateral damage in the war brewing between the wolf pack and their enemies.

Maybe we should make up some excuse to let her go.

“Absolutely sure,” I assured her. “And listen, her parents could make trouble for us—for the business—if word of this gets out and embarrasses the family. Can you promise not to tell anybody, please?”

She nodded.

A thunderous boom—probably the back door striking the brick wall—followed by heavy footfalls.

“Annika!”

At the sound of my name on Zane’s lips, the ball of tension coiling in my chest started to unwind.

A breathless Zane appeared next to the dumpster, his normally stoic expression twisted into a mask of concern. “You hurt?” His gaze raked my body from head to foot.

“Bumped my head and got a small cut.” I held up my bleeding hand. “Other than that, I’m fine.”

He stepped onto a rung of the built-in ladder, leaned over the dumpster, and held out his arms. "Come here."

There was nothing on God's green earth I wanted more than to fling myself into Zane's arms. I'd been fantasizing about it since the day I met him. But this wasn't how I imagined it happening. I glanced down at the mystery fluid staining my pants. "I'm covered with stinky crud."

"For fuck's sake." There was the grouchy, impatient Zane I knew and loved.

Shaking his head, he bent over the garbage, slid one arm under my knees and the other around my back. He lifted me up and swung me out of the dumpster as if I weighed nothing. My head filled with the image of this strong man throwing me over his shoulder and carrying me off to have his wicked way with me.

What would my big bad wolf be like in bed?

Get a grip, woman.

I was losing it. I really was. Shock had sent my mind reeling into incongruous places. Or maybe the brush with death highlighted how much I had to lose.

Instead of setting me on my feet, he held me against his chest as he strode toward the bakeshop's back door.

Julia scampered after us.

Rain pelted Zane's shirt, the cotton fabric molding to his muscular shoulders and chest. I trembled, as much from the retreating adrenaline rush as the damp chill.

"I got you," he murmured.

I pressed my cheek against his shoulder and allowed my eyelids to drift shut, burrowing into his warmth and strength. Safe. Zane always made me feel safe.

He carried me inside and gently settled me on top of our round break table.

"Go get the first aid kit," he ordered Julia.

She nodded, then ran to the bathroom.

“What happened?” he asked in a low voice.

“Coyote,” I whispered as Julia jogged back into the room.

Zane’s jaw tightened. His eyes flashed, streaks of silver shooting through the blue of his pupils, the change a sign of strong emotion in a shifter.

I grabbed his hand with my uninjured one. “I’m all right.”

He pulled away and took a step backward, shoving both hands through his blond hair. The usually dispassionate, imperturbable wolf looked on the brink of losing it.

I slipped off the table and slowly walked toward him. Laying my fingertips on his chest, I repeated my assurance. “I’m all right. I promise.”

Glacier-blue eyes fixed on mine, the animal close to the surface. Marit had warned me against staring at a shifter’s face when the wolf was ascendant. She said the primal beast might interpret the sustained eye contact as a challenge, as some kind of provocation. Unless you were its mate, of course. She and Adam were always gazing adoringly into each other’s eyes. My cousin had found true love, and I wasn’t one bit jealous.

It might have been smart to heed Marit’s warning, to look away, but I couldn’t. Barely daring to breathe, I locked eyes with Zane’s wolf.

Rage flickered in the ice-blue depths of his gaze. Rage, and a hunger so raw and potent that it charged the atmosphere with electricity. My lips tingled. My mouth fell open and I drew in a slow breath. Desire rolled off the wolf and clogged the air. Even with my human senses, I tasted it. The wolf wanted me. God knows why the man fought so hard against the attraction, but the wolf... he was all in.

“Zane, please.” I rose up on my toes and pressed a kiss against his stubbly jaw.

His powerful body shuddered. He lowered his head, breaking the connection. With shaking hands, he carefully pried my fingers from his chest. He gently gripped my shoulders and pushed me away.

Regret and pain flashed in the man's eyes.

"I don't understand," I whispered. "Why not?"

Was it possible for a shifter and his wolf to be of two minds? Could the wolf want me, but not the man?

"What's going on?" Liv asked.

I hadn't heard my sister enter the room.

Zane retreated another step.

"I gotta call Adam." Gravel filled his voice. He nodded toward the first aid kit clutched in a wide-eyed Julia's arms. "You need to clean and bandage the cut on Annika's hand."

"What cut?" Liv rushed to my side. "What the hell happened? You look like you've been rolling around in sludge."

Ignoring her, I watched Zane turn on his heels and stride from the room.

Bereft. I felt bereft.

Why had Zane pushed me away?

CHAPTER THREE



ZANE

Annika's safety came first. On that, my pigheaded wolf and I were one hundred percent in agreement.

If I had my way, I would've slapped a closed sign on the bakeshop's door, sent Julia home, hustled Annika and Liv into my truck, and headed straight for pack HQ. The drive from downtown Belle Reve to Shooting Star Lake took an hour. Less than that if I kept my foot heavy on the gas. By 4:30 p.m., Annika and Liv would've been tucked away in the old lodge that served as pack headquarters. Once they took shelter with wolves, they'd be safe.

Wolves protected their own.

My way was the right way, but try telling that to the two stubborn Hagen sisters. Maybe they were in shock. Maybe they were putting on a brave face, whistling in a graveyard so to speak. They flat-out refused to close the bakeshop early. A customer was coming to pick up a child's birthday cake just before the five p.m. closing time. And Annika had promised to drop off leftover pastries at the local food bank.

"We gave our word. We can't disappoint them," she explained. "Besides, we have a resident bodyguard. You'll protect us from Courtney."

She believed that? After my fuckup allowed Courtney to get within spitting distance of dragging her away? Talk about misplaced confidence.

"Some bodyguard." I couldn't keep the bitterness out of my voice. I had *one job*, but instead of keeping Annika safe, I was out front playing nanny to a pampered pooch.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

"You can't seriously be blaming yourself," Annika said. "Nobody expects you to stay glued to our sides twenty-four seven. That's not reasonable."

I snorted, guilt riding me hard. Reasonable or not, sticking by Annika was exactly what I intended to do. Beneath my skin, my wolf huffed in agreement. He wanted to lock Annika down someplace safe, then go hunting. He was champing at the bit, eager to track down the coyote enemy, to sink his teeth into her throat and end the threat to Annika once and for all.

I shuddered, the wolf's violent fantasies shoving aside all rational thought. God, I could almost taste the imaginary blood.

“Zane?” Concern creased Annika's pretty face.

Swallowing hard, I forced my wolf back under control.

Heredity be damned. I won't go the way of my father.

“You're on the coyotes' radar,” I said, my voice thick. “We can't be too careful.”

“Maybe Courtney... maybe she was acting alone?”

The hope that filled Annika's voice made my stomach clench. Time to shut that blind optimism down. She had to take the threat seriously.

“That's not how it works. She made a move against Adam's family. No shifter would dare do that without their alpha's permission.” I shook my head. “Hell, it's practically a declaration of war.”

“I killed the man she loves. She might not be thinking straight.” Her voice faltered and she bit her lower lip.

Marit had asked me to keep an eye on Annika's mood. Her cousin was a sweetheart, Marit said, and killing Bryce—however justified the act—had to trouble her conscience. I inhaled slowly, scenting not only guilt, but fear. Courtney had frightened her. The shock of the attack was wearing off, and fear was taking its place.

Time to pull my head out of my ass. My well-earned sense of failure mattered less than any fright or undeserved remorse Annika felt.

“Hey.” I touched her shoulder. “You all right?”

“Yes.” She flashed an unconvincing smile.

Narrowing my eyes, I planted my hands on my hips. I dropped my voice to its lowest register, the one that warned pack subordinates not to mess with me.

“Annika.” I dragged out the syllables.

Her eyes shone, the command in my voice intimidating her not one whit. “Zane,” she drawled, her low tone mimicking mine.

I bit back a smile. A defiant Annika was as intimidating as a kitten throwing a hissy fit. Beneath my skin, my wolf nodded, impressed by her attempt to put me in my place.

“We’ll keep you safe. I promise,” I vowed. “And as for Bryce? He didn’t give you a choice.”

A pause, then she said, “I know.”

Bastard had forced her hand. She understood that, intellectually at least. But in her heart? I doubted it.

“He would have torn out Liv’s throat,” I reminded her, my choice of words deliberately brutal.

She winced. “You’re right. I know you’re right.”

As a sentry for the Black Rock Guardians pack, I was no stranger to violence. Apex predators dispatched their enemies without hand-wringing or second thoughts. Anybody who posed a threat to my people was a goner. Liv was a kindred spirit. I had no doubt she’d gut an enemy without blinking an eye. Annika didn’t have an ounce of mean in her. She’d do violence to protect the people she loved—she’d proven that—but actions contrary to her gentle nature haunted her.

I’d do my level best to spare her that pain.

I angled my head toward the back of the shop. “How about you and I finish cleaning up and let Liv and Julia manage the counter?” Julia’s mom was on her way to pick up the girl. She’d be out of harm’s way soon. Liv was so riled up that she’d watch the front like a hawk. One shout from her and I’d rush out to deal with Courtney or any other coyote who showed their face.

“Sounds good,” she agreed. “First, I’m going to wash up in the bathroom and change into fresh clothes. We keep extras in the back in case we spill something on ourselves.”

Liv minded the front of the shop while Annika and I cleaned and sanitized all the equipment. A few minutes before five, we started emptying the trays in the pastry case and packing up the leftover baked goods.

At precisely five, a frenzied-looking woman burst through the shop door. My senses on high alert, I shoved Annika behind me and glowered at the intruder. She froze in place, eyes wide, probably taken aback by my hostile glare.

“I’m not too late, am I? The sign says open.”

Annika shot me a reproachful look then rushed toward the stranger and wrapped an arm around her shoulders as she escorted her to the counter. “It’s fine. I told you we’d stay open until you could pick up Ethan’s cake.”

“You’re the best.” The young woman sighed. “My boss promised I could leave work fifteen minutes early, but she kept finding one more thing for me to do.”

“Not a problem,” Annika assured her.

The woman glanced at me, her eyes still uneasy. “I grew up down the street from Annika and Liv’s grandmother. We used to play together when they visited her.”

“And now she has the cutest little boy who’s turning five tomorrow,” Annika said. “Ethan asked for a dinosaur-themed birthday cake.”

“Here it is.” Liv emerged from the back room carrying a tall purple cake decorated with green leaves, a volcano, and at least a dozen dinosaur figurines.

“That’s perfect.” The mother’s eyes filled with tears. “At least one thing’s going right today. Ethan’s dad was supposed to pick him up tomorrow night after his birthday party, but he bailed on the visitation. His new girlfriend got a last minute deal on a condo rental in Cabo, so he’s ditching his son and flying to Mexico.”

“Rat bastard,” Liv commiserated.

I scowled. Rat bastard was right. What kind of a father didn’t show up for his kid? I’d say no shifter would do that, but hell, I knew better, didn’t I?

“Can I pick ’em, or what?” The woman rolled her eyes, then pulled her wallet from her purse. “Fifty dollars, right?”

Annika waved a dismissive hand. “We won’t charge a friend for her child’s birthday cake.”

“No, really.” The mother blushed. “I wouldn’t have ordered the cake if I thought you wouldn’t let me pay.”

“Exactly why we didn’t tell you it was free.” Annika laid a hand on her friend’s arm and lowered her voice. “Please let us do this for you.”

Dammit, she was sweet, kind, and generous to the bone. If she wasn’t careful—if somebody didn’t watch out for her—the world would chew her up and spit her out.

The woman’s gaze darted from Annika to Liv then settled on me, as if she was certain that Mr. Grumpy Face would put the kibosh on the Hagen sisters’ generosity.

She was barking up the wrong tree. Growing up in a pack, I’d learned the value of sharing resources and doing for others. I forced the muscles in my face to go slack. “I’d take Annika up on the offer if I were you. She gets ornery when you cross her.”

Liv snorted.

Annika slapped her hands onto her hips. “I beg your pardon?”

Laughter burst from the young mother’s throat. “Have you met Annika?”

I kept a straight face and piled on. “Yep. Rile her up and the woman’s more vicious than a junkyard dog.” I nodded toward Liv. “Do Liv and me a solid. Take the free cake.”

Liv’s lips twitched with barely suppressed laughter. She bumped her shoulder against mine. “Yeah, spare us the

aggravation and take the free cake.”

The woman shook her head. “I know when I’m beat. Thank you both so much. Ethan will love it.”

Liv packed the cake into a pink box and escorted their friend to the door, then turned over the open sign and flipped off the lights in the front of the shop.

Annika wheeled around, astonishment sketched across her pretty features. “More vicious than a junkyard dog?” she repeated slowly.

For the second time that day, she drew back her foot. She was going to kick me again. Doubtless this second blow would land no harder than the first. Like I said, there wasn’t an ounce of genuine mean in the woman. Still, a sentry for the Black Rock Guardians pack couldn’t allow a small human to keep walloping on him.

I straightened my spine and lowered my chin. “Annika.” I infused warning into my voice. “Behave.”

Her jaw dropped and her pupils dilated. Both humor and daring shone in her eyes. “Did you say *behave*?” She threw her hands in the air in an I-give-up gesture. “Well, now you’ve done it. I have to follow through. On principle, you know.”

Despite the defiant words, instead of striking, she hesitated, balancing her weight on one foot. Prey often froze or faltered when confronted with a predator, a fatal mistake.

“Darlin’, I know all about following through on principle,” I warned her.

Darlin’?

She jerked, clearly as startled as I was by my use of the endearment.

Beneath my skin, my wolf’s ears pricked up, and he tossed his head back as if he caught a scent.

Before Annika could recover from her surprise, I lunged. Grabbing her elbows, I spun her around and hauled her back against my chest. I brought my mouth to her ear.

“You gonna be good?” I murmured. “No kicking? No hitting?” Unable to resist, I brushed my lips over the pulse point behind her ear and slowly inhaled her spicy fragrance.

She whimpered and her body melted into mine, as if she couldn’t help it, as if yielding to me was the most natural thing in the world. “Yes,” she breathed. “I’ll be good.”

My heart kicked. A rumble rolled from my chest. Shivering, Annika angled her head to one side, baring her throat in an act of submission any dominant wolf would recognize. The soft, vulnerable skin on the slope of her neck called to the predator in me. I brought my mouth to the spot. My canines descended, and I scraped my fangs across the fragile flesh.

Bite her, the wolf urged. Take her to the floor and claim our mate.

I froze. My fangs retracted.

What the fuck was I thinking?

Shuddering with the effort, I gently pushed Annika away from me.

One stumbling step, then Annika turned on her heels and faced me. She trembled. Her rapid heartbeat tapped against the skin at the base of her throat. A pink flush stained her cheeks.

“Sorry,” I choked out.

“Why?” She lifted her chin and met my eyes, her expression defiant. “I kind of like it when you manhandle me.”

For the second time today, the little human left me speechless.

A new scent wafted toward me. My spine snapped straight and my nostrils flared. Parting my lips, I tasted it, the unmistakable tang of feminine desire. Shock jolted through me, sizzling along my nerves.

Annika wanted me.

CHAPTER FOUR



ANNIKA

Wolves took security very seriously, especially since their enemies were so keen to get their hands on the pack's magical Black Rock.

Nobody snuck up on pack headquarters. Soldiers patrolled the perimeter of the forestland. Security cameras with thermal sensors were positioned at every likely vantage point. Once Marit had mated with Adam and given the lease to Grandma's cabin to the pack, the wolves had gained absolute control over their land. They closed the hiking trails to the public, provoking an outcry among the outdoor enthusiasts in Belle Reve. Locked gates now blocked all the access roads.

With all the security precautions in place, I wasn't surprised to see Marit and Adam waiting for us on the porch of the magnificent lakeside lodge that housed the pack HQ. Marit rushed down the stone steps and flung herself on me, hugging me tight before stepping back and scanning my body from head to foot.

"Did Courtney hurt you? Are you okay?"

I held up my bandaged hand. "A small cut. Otherwise, I'm fine." My voice cracked on the last word. Darn it.

Marit frowned. "Yeah, right. You sound *fine*."

I glanced over at Zane, who was standing a few feet away. Even if I whispered my response, with his sensitive shifter hearing, he'd catch every word. He was already staggering under the weight of guilt. I wouldn't add to it by letting on how much Courtney had frightened me. Marit didn't need to hear it, either. She'd blame herself for bringing the coyote shifter into our lives. The best thing for everybody was for me to keep my mouth shut.

Memories of the attack would be one more addition to my rotation of nightmares.

I wasn't a child. I could handle bad dreams.

As if sensing my gaze on him, Zane turned his head. Beautiful blue eyes met mine, eyes that once again glittered with the wolf's searing intensity.

My toes curled and my stomach dropped to my feet.

Oh my God, I just had a mini orgasm.

Three steps. That's all it would take to bring me to his side. If he extended a hand, if he jerked his chin in invitation, I'd go to him. I'd slip my arms around his waist and press my cheek against his chest as if I belonged there.

I held my breath. Waiting. Hoping.

He looked away and my heart sank.

"I'm okay," I told Marit. I forced a smile and kept my voice firm.

She studied my face. "I don't buy it. Spill."

"Becoming the alpha's mate sure has made you bossy," I countered.

"Marit isn't bossy." Adam joined us. "She cares about you. We all do."

Adam had always been friendly and kind, in a tough guy way. Since becoming alpha, something had altered. My gaze fell on the chunk of meteorite he wore on a leather cord around his neck, the alpha stone, the symbol of his position in the pack. Although I suspected that the stone was more than symbolic.

Adam had changed since becoming alpha. The air surrounding him felt different now, charged with something elemental. Power swirled around him, hummed along his skin, probably coursed through his veins. It was a concept foreign to me with my human upbringing, but I sensed it, maybe because of the DNA I'd inherited from Grandma's wolf shifter mate.

Adam brushed his knuckles over my cheek. "If you need anything, if you need to talk, come to me."

Wolves were a tactile people. The alpha connected to his packmates with touch, a clap on the shoulder, a hug. The

children—the pups—clambered over Adam all the time. Last week, I saw an exhausted mother hand a fussy baby over to him. He cradled the restless infant against his chest and murmured a few words. The baby hiccuped then settled down. The alpha's touch held power.

I felt that power now, when his knuckles grazed my cheek. "I'll keep that in mind," I said, unable to offer him the same breezy assurance I gave my cousin. "Thank you."

He nodded, then walked back over to Zane.

"I want one of Adam's parents to look at your hand," Marit said.

Leigh and Jason Landry were the pack healers.

"Good." Liv joined us. "Annika cut it on a filthy piece of glass when she jumped into the dumpster."

Marit winced. "Yikes."

"I washed it off and put antiseptic ointment on the cut," Liv added, "but a medical professional should check it out."

"I'm giving a whole new meaning to the phrase 'dumpster diving,' aren't I?" I tried to make light of the injury.

"Come on." Marit wrapped an arm around my waist and led me up the stairs and into the lodge. "I texted Leigh and she'll meet us in the infirmary."

Zane and Adam followed us inside. Zane's gaze burned a hole in my back. I resisted the urge to turn around and confront him, to demand answers he clearly didn't want to give me.

"I called for the sentries to meet us in our quarters," Adam said. "Join us upstairs as soon as you're done."

Liv, Marit, and I walked through the lobby, past the grand central staircase, and down the long hallway that led to the infirmary, where Adam's petite mother waited for us.

"Some pups got into a patch of poison oak. Jason is tending to them, so it'll just be me. Take a seat over there." She

nodded toward a stool. I sat. She unwrapped the gauze bandage and examined the injury.

“How bad is it?” my sister asked.

“Not bad at all,” Leigh assured her. “No stitches required. Why don’t you and Marit head upstairs. Annika and I won’t be long.” It was a friendly request that held a hint of command. Healers ranked near the top of the pack hierarchy, and people listened when they spoke, even the alpha’s mate.

“You sure?” Liv hesitated.

“Come on.” Marit tugged on her arm. “If Leigh says Annika’s okay, she’s okay.”

With a reluctant glance over her shoulder, Liv followed Marit out the door.

Leigh worked in silence for a few minutes, cleaning and tending to the injury. She wrapped it in fresh gauze, washed her hands, then pulled a stool over next to mine. She sat, then leaned toward me, concern etched across her face.

“I’m not worried about the cut,” she said. “I’m more concerned about how you’re doing emotionally. You had a narrow escape, and the woman who tried to kidnap you got away. If you need to talk, if you need help processing what you’re feeling, you can come to me.”

She was the second Landry to offer emotional support in less than an hour. It looked like Adam came by his compassion naturally.

“Thanks. I appreciate the offer, but I’m okay.” I was grateful for their kindness, but I preferred to handle things on my own and not to drag other people down with me.

She nodded slowly, clearly not satisfied by my response.

“I’m worried about Zane, though.” I spoke before I could think better of it, my tongue outpacing my brain.

“Zane? Why?”

I hesitated. Zane wouldn’t appreciate my talking about him behind his back. Of that I was one hundred percent certain. I

wasn't about to ask his aunt if he "liked" me, or if a shifter and his wolf could be at odds. If I was misreading the signs, I'd rather spare myself the embarrassment. But if anyone could advise me on how to make him see reason—to let himself off the hook for Courtney's attempt to kidnap me—surely his aunt, a healer, was the best person.

Leigh touched my arm. "Sweetheart, you can tell me anything."

"Zane blames himself for not being at my side when Courtney showed up."

"Of course, he does." Leigh sighed. "He expects to be perfect and never cuts himself any slack."

"Or anybody else," I muttered. If you spent any time with Zane, you saw *the scowl*, the aggrieved expression of a man who thought somebody wasn't performing up to his standards.

Oddly enough, I rarely got the scowl. Sometimes, when Zane looked at me—when he caught me singing and dancing by myself in the kitchen, or his gaze fell on my favorite pink bunny rabbit slippers—his dispassionate mask slipped. I caught a glimpse of bewilderment in his eyes. As if he didn't know what to make of me. As if he saw me as some kind of sparkly unicorn, tripping through an imaginary world full of rainbows and flowers.

"Zane is harder on himself than anybody else," his aunt said. "It's like he thinks he's single-handedly responsible for keeping the world spinning on its axis."

"Nobody should feel that sense of responsibility," I said.

She shrugged. "He was always a serious child with a deep sense of right and wrong. But after his father left—" She shook her head, frowning at the memory. "He was fourteen. Remy was eleven. My sister, Grace, is a smart and capable woman, but she was reeling from being abandoned by her mate. And Zane stepped up..." Her voice trailed off. She stared into the distance, her forehead furrowed.

He stepped up? With his steely determination and his high standards, what a heavy burden stepping up must have been

for a boy of fourteen. No wonder anger and impatience lurked just beneath the surface of his calm persona. Sweetness hid there, too. He'd reject that notion with a derisive huff, but I saw it. I saw it in his devotion to his family, in his determination to do the right thing to keep the people he cared about safe. Zane wasn't soft or easy—I wasn't attracted to soft or easy—but he was good.

My heart ached for Zane, his mother, and his brother. I sent a mental thank-you to the heavens for my endlessly loving family. I was lucky and I knew it. Sometimes human parents let their kids down, like Ethan's dad flying off to Mexico with his new girlfriend. Mine never had.

But shifters?

"I thought... I mean..." Confusion rendered me tongue-tied.

"Marit told you shifters never abandon their mates," Leigh guessed.

I bobbed my head. "I thought mating created some kind of unbreakable, mystical bond."

"It does. And once in a blue moon, when something goes terribly wrong and that bond snaps, it's devastating. Grace has never been the same."

"Huh." I sat with that new knowledge for a moment. "Do you know what happened to Zane's dad? Does he ever contact them?"

Leigh pressed her lips together and swung her head in a no.

Shoot. Was I prying? "This is family business. I'm sorry if I put you on the spot," I said.

"Sweetheart." She leaned close. "You *are* family. You *are* pack."

I swallowed, deeply touched by her warmth and acceptance.

"I hope Zane can learn to ease up on himself," I said. "And on everybody else, too. He deserves to have fun, to be messy and imperfect."

Leigh tilted her head, a smile lifting the corners of her mouth. “Maybe you can help him figure that out.”

The prospect of a playful Zane brought an answering smile to my face. “Maybe I can.”

She rose gracefully to her feet, a small woman with a big heart.

“I’d better get upstairs,” I said. “Adam will want to hear about Courtney from me.”

A quick hug, and I took the elevator to the fourth-floor presidential suite that Marit and Adam now called home. Pausing outside the entrance to their suite, I raised my hand to knock, then stilled. The sound of angry voices filtered through the door.

Zane and Adam were arguing.

Oh, crap. Inhaling a slow, calming breath, I silently counted to three, then rapped on the wooden surface. The voices fell silent. Marit opened the door. She glanced over her shoulder at the men, then looked back at me. Narrowing her eyes, she gave a small shake of the head. She took my hand and pulled me inside.

“Annika’s here,” she said with exaggerated brightness, as if she hoped that my presence might shut down the argument.

I took in the room at a glance. A tight-jawed Zane stood with his back to the massive stone fireplace. His brother Remy and the senior sentry, Rolf, sat upright on one of the two leather sofas flanking the fireplace, Liam, the sentry-in-training, between them. Adam sat on the other sofa, his elbows resting on his knees, his gaze locked on Zane.

At least they weren’t toe-to-toe shouting at each other.

Tension crackled between the men, a friction that should have been unthinkable. Zane and Adam were cousins, close friends since birth. Although Adam was the alpha of the Black Rock Guardians pack, he was no dictator. He listened to his packmates’ opinions and invited debate. He never stood on ceremony or threw his weight around. I’ve heard Zane call him a dumb-ass to his face. But when push came to shove,

Adam's word was law. Zane respected that and always followed orders.

So what the heck was going on?

"Hi." My awkward greeting broke the silence.

Adam swiveled toward me, and the angry expression slid from his face. He touched the cushion next to him. "C'mon. Sit down and tell me about what happened with Courtney."

I met Zane's eyes, searching for some reassurance that all was well.

I didn't find it.

I took a seat next to Adam and recounted every detail of my run-in with the vengeful coyote shifter. When I was finished, he threw an arm around my shoulders, and drew me to his side for a quick hug. At the contact, Zane's eyes narrowed and he frowned, almost as if he didn't like another man touching me.

Wolves were possessive of their mates, Marit had said, irrationally so before they sealed the mating with a claiming bite. If Zane was indifferent, why did a simple hug make him frown? The man made my head spin.

Adam glanced at Marit. "I don't suppose the three of you will agree to close Freya's Bake Shop for a while."

"You supposed right." Liv spoke up before Marit could respond. "We already closed the shop for a couple of weeks after—" Her eyes cut to me. "Um... after all the excitement."

I heaved a sigh. After all the excitement? She was trying to spare my feelings with her tactful description of the shooting and the fire at the cabin. I might never be as bold or in-your-face as my sister, but that was no reason to treat me with kid gloves.

I turned to Adam. "If we want the business to succeed, we need to keep it open. But I hear you. You want to keep us safe. Do you have any ideas for how we can do both?"

"I do," Zane interrupted. "Take the war to the coyotes. End the threat once and for all."

“Will you let it rest?” Adam swung exasperated eyes toward his cousin. “I’ve already told you, I’m not convinced that Vilhauer sanctioned the attack. Until I know for sure that the coyote alpha gave the go-ahead, we aren’t going on the offensive.”

Zane’s chin jerked up. “Pull your head out of your ass, Adam. Grandpa didn’t make you alpha so you could sit on your hands when the enemy strikes.”

Remy’s jaw dropped, and he gaped at his brother.

“You’re out of line,” Rolf said quietly.

Adam lifted a hand, silencing the senior sentry. Slowly, he rose to his feet. Two steps brought him nose-to-nose with his seething cousin.

I held my breath.

“Zane.” A single syllable, a reproach, heavy with the power of an alpha.

Electricity zinged through the air. The fine hairs on the back of my neck stood up straight. I felt it down to the depths of my being, a compulsion to lower my head, to surrender to Adam’s authority. If I’d been standing, I would’ve fallen to my knees. Remy and Rolf looked down at the rug. Marit clasped her hands together.

For a long moment, Zane locked eyes with Adam, an astounding feat under the circumstances. His irises flashed glacier blue as his wolf confronted the undisputed leader of the pack. A low growl rose from Adam’s chest, a warning. Zane blinked and shook himself. The wolf retreated from his eyes. Dropping his chin, he yielded. The sense of impending doom that had clogged the air evaporated.

Thank God.

Adam laid a hand on Zane’s shoulder and jerked his head toward the back of the suite. “My office. Now.”

CHAPTER FIVE



ZANE

Damned gossipy wolves.

Word of my heated exchange with Adam must have made the rounds. I picked at my meal in the tension-filled communal dining hall, trying to ignore the whispers and the stares. Anger still rode me hard. A dull pain pounded in my head.

Why wouldn't Adam listen to reason?

I glanced around the room. People hastily averted their eyes.

Under my skin, my wolf snarled and snapped his teeth. He *snarled*. At pack mates.

No. Hell, no.

Throwing my napkin onto my plate, I stood and stomped from the room. A shift and a hard run might cool my temper and burn off the restless energy that left my muscles tight and twitchy. I headed for the lodge exit, but at the last minute veered down the hall toward the pack's exercise facility. Pumping iron, working my muscles to exhaustion, was just the thing I needed. I was in no mood for company. Fingers crossed I'd find the weight room empty.

No such luck.

Facing a floor-to-ceiling mirror, Liv raised the dumbbells in a bicep curl, paused at the top, and slowly lowered the weights. Beads of sweat trickled down her temples and onto her cheeks. Under her tank top, perspiration slicked her body. She jutted out her lower lip and blew a strand of damp hair off her face.

Looked like she'd been going at it for a good while. Bet Annika's brush with danger left Liv as restless and out of sorts as me.

If I had to share the space with somebody, Liv was better than most. I liked the smart-ass human. My wolf recognized in her a simpatico soul. I never had a sister, but if I could pick anyone to fill the role, it would be Liv. And since she wasn't a wolf, she wasn't likely to bust my balls for insubordination against the alpha.

I grunted a greeting, grabbed a pair of dumbbells, and took up position next to Liv. Side-by-side, we knocked out a set of curls.

While we rested, she turned to me. "You screwed the pooch, buddy."

I shot her a dirty look. So much for a human not giving me grief about my disrespectful exchange with Adam.

Grinning, she fluttered her eyelashes. "Or is 'screwed the pooch' the wrong idiom to use around a wolf shifter?"

I groaned. "Seriously?"

"My bad." She put the ten-pound dumbbells back onto the rack, took a swig from her water bottle, and turned to me. "So what are we going to do about it?"

I frowned. "What are we going to do about what?"

"About the coyote alpha ordering the attack on my sister. How do we prove it to Adam?"

"You think I'm right?" I asked slowly.

She hesitated. "I don't know for sure, but if you are, he deliberately chose Annika as his first target. I won't just stand by while someone tries to hurt my sister."

Adam and I had butted heads, but fair was fair. "Whoever started it, Adam and the pack will keep Annika safe. Nobody's gonna get to her again."

"Damn right no one's gonna get to Annika again," she agreed. "But I still want to know if Courtney was acting alone or under orders from her alpha. I want to know if we're dealing with an entire pack or one loose cannon."

“My gut tells me Courtney had his go-ahead, but proving it’s another thing.” Nothing I’d like better than to hand the evidence of Vilhauer’s involvement over to Adam, to set him straight, and to put all the contention behind us.

“Adam said the coyote alpha’s name is Vilhauer. Is he related to the family who owns the towing company in town?” Liv asked.

Vilhauer Towing, the only towing service in Belle Reve. Their red trucks were a fixture in town. The flood of tourists kept them busy during the summer, and in the winter they came to the aid of motorists whose cars had trouble navigating the icy roads.

“That’s right. Lance Vilhauer owns the company. His two sons drive for him.”

“Hmmm.” Liv looked thoughtful.

“What?” I asked.

“We need one-on-one time with somebody in the know in the coyote pack, somebody like one of Vilhauer’s sons,” she said.

“You’re thinking I should call for roadside assistance, then confront one of the Vilhauer boys when they get out of the truck?” I shook my head. “Won’t work. They’d scent wolf and keep on going.”

“Not if the person calling for help wasn’t a wolf.” Her eyes glittered with excitement. “Not if it was a human woman, all alone, broken down on the side of the road, miles from the city. Definitely not a threat to a shifter. No reason for them not to stop under those circumstances.”

“No way.” My head swiveled right then left. “I won’t use you as bait.”

“I’m not stupid. I’m not suggesting that I go by myself. You’d be there, out of sight and at a distance where they couldn’t smell you.” She tilted her head to one side. “How far away can one shifter catch a whiff of another?”

“Depends on which way the wind is blowing,” I muttered, my thoughts spinning.

“So you’ll find the right spot, where a coyote can’t smell you, but you can still see me.”

“If Vilhauer ordered the attack, it’s likely he has files on every member of Marit’s family. The driver might recognize you.”

“Not a problem,” Liv said. “We’ll drive back to the house in Belle Reve. I’ll take a shower and dress in fresh clothes. You know, in case any wolfy smell has worn off on me from you guys.”

Wolfy smell?

She continued, ignoring my reaction. “I like to dress up sometimes when I go out. I have wigs. Purple. Red. Blond.” She pointed at her hair. “I’ll change up my appearance, make sure nobody will recognize me or smell wolf on me. And Grandma Freya’s car is still in the garage at the house. It’s a white sedan. Lots of them on the road. Nothing about me will stand out or arouse suspicion.”

“I don’t like it,” I said. Yeah, Liv’s plan made a certain sense, but putting a human at risk felt all kinds of wrong.

“You don’t have to like it,” she said. “It’ll work. Besides, if anything goes wrong, a big bad wolf can handle one measly coyote, can’t he?”

I rolled my eyes, insulted by the question. “I can handle a coyote.”

Despite my reservations, Liv’s simple and straightforward plan was growing on me. A coyote tow truck driver would stop for a human. Once he was out of the truck, I’d make my move. We’d have a little chat. If he tried to lie about his father’s plans, I’d know it. If he confirmed my suspicions, Adam would have no choice but to take the war to the coyotes.

“I’ll do anything to keep Annika safe,” Liv said quietly.

“Yeah, me, too.”

Her gaze sharpened. “You like her, don’t you?”

“Sure.” I lifted both shoulders. Beneath my skin, my wolf barked.

“No, I mean you *like like* her.”

I made a face. “*Like like* her? What are you, twelve?”

“You know what I mean,” she persisted.

I knew exactly what she meant. From the moment I first laid eyes on Annika—her standing on her porch wearing a frilly apron and those ridiculous bunny slippers—something about the sweet-natured human called to me, called to my wolf. You’d think a tough-talking hard-ass like Liv would appeal to a curmudgeon like me, but no. Annika, with her love of whimsy and her generous, openhearted nature drew me like no other. My willful and unruly wolf had decided right away that she was the one.

What’s the old saying?

She has charms to soothe the savage beast.

And wasn’t that a risky proposition. My mother had thought their love could keep Dad’s wayward wolf in line. Look how that turned out.

I’d die to keep Annika safe, even from me.

“I like Annika just fine,” I told Liv. “But nothing’s gonna happen between us.”

Liv lifted a dark eyebrow, a skeptical expression on her face.

“I mean it,” I said.

“Right,” she drawled.

“Where’s Annika now?” I asked.

“With Marit and Adam. They’re going to talk to Xander about working at the bakeshop for a while.”

Xander was a stepcousin of sorts. After his beloved mate died, our grandpa had married Xander’s widowed grandma, Olga. The same Olga who eventually tried to kill the three Hagen women. Nobody held that association against him.

Xander was a good kid. Marit had encouraged his plans to attend culinary school, which had pissed off Olga no end. Olga thought he was destined for grander things, like leading the pack. Xander's ambitions lay elsewhere. He'd probably like nothing better than helping out at a bakery. His presence would put two bodyguards on the premises. He was only seventeen, but he was a wolf and could hold his own in a fight.

"Good." I nodded. "Let's go."

Ten minutes later, Liv and I were driving over the old access road that led toward the state highway that would take us to Belle Reve. We headed straight to the two-bedroom bungalow Annika and Liv had inherited from their Grandma Freya, the same place I'd been staying for the past two weeks.

Liv unlocked the front door and turned off the security system Remy had installed. My gaze traveled over the room. I saw no sign of any unwelcome visitors and caught no hint of coyote stink lingering in the air. My sleeping bag was rolled up untouched at one end the sofa. If a coyote had found it there, the *wolfy smell*—harrumph—would have driven him to tear it to shreds.

"Give me fifteen minutes," Liv called over her shoulder as she headed toward her bedroom. "There's pie in the fridge if you're hungry."

I'd barely eaten any dinner. Dessert sounded damned good, especially the black bottom pie Annika baked yesterday. I ambled to the kitchen and cut myself a generous slice of the chocolate and vanilla custard treat. Realistic-looking chocolate leaves dotted the whipped cream topping. Her talents never failed to impress me. I'd sat at the table yesterday evening and watched Annika happily humming to herself while she painted melted chocolate over the backside of stiff, waxy leaves.

"Camellias are non toxic," she had explained when she caught me watching her. "They have beautiful veins on the back of the leaves. When the melted chocolate cools and hardens you can peel off the camellia part, and presto, you have a perfect chocolate leaf."

A lot of trouble to go to for an edible decoration, but that was Annika for you. She delighted in taking the time and trouble to make things special, like that fancy dinosaur cake she made for Ethan.

A woman who paid attention to small things—who loved to get and give pleasure—what would she be like in bed? The mental image of a smiling Annika, lying naked on ruffled sheets, reaching for me with eager hands, took my breath away.

“Nope.” I shoved the erotic fantasy away.

My wolf huffed a protest.

I took my pie and sat at the small kitchen table on one of the once wobbly chairs I’d reglued and stabilized. The kitchen still bore the stamp of their late Grandma Freya: bright colors, wallpaper covered with birds and flowers, and kitchen towels embroidered with dancing vegetables. Annika came by her love of whimsy naturally.

After polishing off the pie, I rinsed my plate and stuck it in the dishwasher. A minute later, Liv emerged from the bathroom sporting a blond, Marilyn-Monroe-style wig and bright-red lipstick. I did a double take.

She preened and tossed her hair. “What do you think?”

“I have to look close to recognize you.” I leaned forward, inhaled, then waved my hand under my nose. “*Whew*. What is that god-awful smell?”

“A cheap cologne I’ve had since I was a teenager. The scent’s gone funky. I spritzed it all over myself. Think it’ll do the trick?”

That noxious odor would burn out any shifter’s olfactory sensors. “You reek. Thank fuck I’m not riding in the car with you.”

Liv punched my shoulder. “Dude, your how-to-sweet-talk-a-lady game needs serious work.”

Rolling my eyes, I reset the alarm and locked the front door behind us.

Liv drove her grandma's sedan, and I followed behind in my truck. Ten miles outside of Belle Reve, she pulled over on the side of the road and turned on her emergency flashers. I parked half a mile away, then jogged back toward Liv's vehicle. A brisk breeze blew east from the river. I hid downwind from Liv's location and whistled twice. According to our plan, at that signal she'd call Vilhauer Towing for help.

All we had to do now was wait.

Cold rain hammered the sedan. Liv had dressed warmly in a down coat. She'd be fine inside the car, even with the engine off. Good thing I didn't mind the chill or the damp. I spent the next forty minutes leaning against a tree, bored. I'd be a lot less bored if Annika were here, but exposing her to danger was the last thing I wanted. Water dripped down from the overhead branches and soaked through my jacket.

At long last, headlights poked twin holes in the darkness. A minute later, a red Vilhauer Towing truck pulled off the road behind Liv's sedan. Dropping into a squat behind a blackberry bush, I peered through the brambles and cocked my head to one side, listening hard.

A tall, lanky fellow climbed out of the truck and approached Liv's car. The driver's-side door flew open, and Liv hopped out.

"Oh, thank God," she cried, pressing a hand against her chest before gesturing wildly at the sedan. "The engine made a weird metallic sound—sort of like *clankety-clank-clank*—then the entire car lurched."

"Pop the hood," the man said with exaggerated patience. Probably wasn't the first time he'd heard about a weird sound coming from the engine of a stranded motorist.

"Okay." Liv leaned into the car and pulled the release handle. She followed the coyote around to the front of the vehicle, talking nonstop while he raised the hood.

I silently rose to my feet and waited for the man to bend over the motor. Liv would keep up her barrage of chatter,

covering the sound of my stealthy approach. At least, that was the plan.

Still prattling on, Liv took half a dozen steps backward. She reached into a pocket of her down parka and pulled out a pistol.

What the fuck? This was *not* part of the plan.

“Hey, asshole,” she called.

The coyote whirled around.

Thanks to the chunk of black rock I wore next to my skin, I could run faster than any coyote. But I was a hundred yards away, and the bastard was *right there*. I broke into a sprint.

“We need to talk.” Liv aimed the pistol center mass. “Did your father order Courtney to kidnap my sister?”

Dammit. Liv probably thought that standing ten feet away with a pistol pointed at the coyote gave her an advantage. Apparently the woman had no clue how quickly a shifter—any shifter—could move.

The coyote lunged and knocked Liv to the ground. A sound like a popping balloon split the night. The acrid bite of gunpowder and the coppery tang of blood burned my nostrils.

No. No. No.

Almost stumbling in my haste, I grabbed the collar of the coyote’s orange coverall, yanked him off Liv, and threw him backward. She looked up at me, her eyes wide, her face bleached of color, and her expression shocky. The bullet had ripped a hole on the side of her parka. Down feathers—stained an ominous red—poked through the opening.

If the injury was life-threatening, I’d call an ambulance to take her to the hospital in Belle Reve and damn the consequences of involving human authorities in shifter business.

My hands shaking, I pulled down the zipper, peeled back her coat, and carefully lifted her shirt. I sagged, relief a punch to my gut. Not a penetrating gunshot wound to the abdomen. The bullet had grazed the skin on the left side of her torso,

carving out a deep furrow in her flesh. Blood seeped from the wound. It had to hurt like hell, but it didn't look to be a serious injury.

The skin between my shoulder blades itched. Shit. Only a fool turned his back to the enemy. Glancing over my shoulder, I met the stunned eyes of the coyote.

“You're a wolf,” he whispered.

My shadow brother went predator still. Through my eyes, his fierce gaze drilled into the enemy who'd hurt Liv.

Kill. Kill. Kill, he chanted.

I swayed, the wolf's primal demand for bloody vengeance shoving aside all rational thought.

Kill. Kill. Kill.

Licking my lips, I gloried in the anticipation of fangs tearing into flesh, of warm blood spraying across my face, of —

Liv moaned, tearing me away from my grisly fantasies.

She needed my help.

It took every ounce of my strength to wrest back control from my murderous wolf.

No, he howled, bloodlust riding him hard.

Back down, I ordered.

The coyote took a step backward. “I didn't mean for her to get shot,” he choked out, sounding surprisingly sincere.

I'd think about his words later.

“You have a first aid kit in your truck?” I barked.

“Yeah.”

“Get it.”

He jogged to the tow truck and returned sixty seconds later, clutching a red duffel. He dropped it on the gravel next to me.

“Um, good luck.” He pivoted on his heel and bolted for the truck.

I could chase him down, try to get him to spill any information about his dad's role in the attack on Annika. But Liv was injured and taking care of her came first.

"I'm sorry," she gasped. "He... was... so... fast."

She'd totally underestimated the younger Vilhauer's speed and reflexes, but there was no point in rubbing that in. Our plan had gone sideways, and nothing could be done to salvage it.

"Don't worry about it," I said, tearing open a gauze pad. "Let's get you back to the lodge so our healers can tend to you."

She sucked in a shallow breath, shuddering from the pain. "Okay."

Despite our differences, human anatomy and shifter anatomy were similar. Applying pressure should staunch the bleeding. I positioned gauze pads over the bullet wound, then wrapped bandages around her waist to hold the pads in place.

"How you feeling?" I asked, brushing the hair back from her sweaty brow.

Her eyes filled with tears. "It burns."

Guilt slammed into me. First I failed to protect Annika, and now Liv. I should have known better. Our plan had too many unpredictable variables. What was wrong with me? I'd always had confidence in my judgment and trusted my ability to decide on the best course of action. Hubris had bit me in the ass. Annika and Liv paid the price.

"I'm sorry," I murmured.

Rather than jostle her during the half-mile trek back to my truck, I gently lifted her onto the back seat of her grandma's car. I'd send a packmate to retrieve my truck. She'd left the keys in the ignition. I fired up the engine and pulled onto the road. If I drove fast, we'd get to the lodge in half an hour. Aunt Leigh and Uncle Jason would take care of Liv.

And then I'd have to face Adam and try to explain why I went off half-cocked on an unauthorized mission that got his

mate's cousin shot.

Dammit. What a monumental fuckup.

CHAPTER SIX



ANNIKA

If I leaned over and stretched out my arm, I could barely reach the glass of wine perched on the edge of the coffee table. There was no point in trying to hold the stem in my hand. Loki was so happy to see me that he kept head-butting my arm. I'd splashed Pinot Grigio down the front of my shirt twice before I gave up and set the glass on the table.

"Come here, baby." I opened my arms and the overeager dog crawled across my lap. "Who's a big, beautiful boy?" I crooned, stroking the silky fur on his shoulders and back with both hands.

I am, his blissed-out wriggle proclaimed.

I shot a longing glance at my wine. Marit and Adam stocked the good stuff. I'd drunk only half a glass before Loki jostled me, but I was such a lightweight that already I felt myself sliding toward tipsy. It was tempting to finish the wine off and ask for a second glass—to ease my brain into a dull haze—to blunt memory—but no. Drinking my way to oblivion was a habit I didn't want to develop.

Marit sat on the sofa across from Loki and me. She quietly studied us over the rim of her wine glass. Adam ambled out from the kitchen, wiping his hands on his jeans. He might be the big shot alpha of the Black Rock Guardians pack, but he took his turn loading the dishwasher after dinner. Plopping down next to his mate, he snagged her wine glass and helped himself to a sip.

Loki rolled onto his side, encouraging me to go for his belly.

"Can I borrow the big guy for the night?" I asked on impulse.

Marit arched one brow and laid a hand on Adam's thigh. "I love you, cousin, but there are some things I just don't want to share."

Adam kept a straight face. “But we’re flattered that you asked.”

I tossed a throw pillow at them. Chuckling, Adam batted it away.

“*Loki*,” I carefully enunciated his name. “Can I borrow *Loki*?”

Marit sobered and lost her teasing tone. “If you don’t want to be alone tonight, you can sleep in our extra bedroom.”

Liv and I had been given guest quarters across the hall from each other on the third floor.

“I’m fine,” I repeated for what felt like the zillionth time today. “It’s just that I’ve missed Loki, and I’d like to cuddle.” I scratched his belly and his back leg kicked out spasmodically. “Auntie Annika found the sweet spot, didn’t she?” I murmured, then glanced over at Marit and Adam. “Did I tell you guys that I’m thinking of getting a kitten?”

Marit frowned. “Quit deflecting.”

“Quit pushing.” The words slipped out before I could think better of it.

She threw both hands in the air in an obvious ‘I surrender.’

I sucked in a breath, a pang of regret stabbing my chest. There was no need to be rude when Marit meant well. “Sorry. I appreciate your concern, but really, I’m—”

“Fine.” Marit finished the sentence for me, clearly unconvinced by my protests.

Adam slung an arm around his mate’s shoulders and pressed a kiss to her temple before turning his attention to me.

“So you’re thinking about getting a kitten?” he asked.

I nodded, grateful for the change of subject. “Liv and I had a big, fluffy orange cat when we were little. We named her Pippi, after Pippi Longstocking.”

“Who?” Adam looked confused.

“A character in a children’s book,” Marit explained.

“Pippi was a great cat.” I smiled at the memory. “A lot of personality. She loved to play and to snuggle. I’ve been thinking about her lately. Missing her. It feels like the right time to bring home a new kitty.”

The right time may have been an exaggeration. Stability and security eluded Liv and me, but surely we could keep a tiny cat safe.

“You know, felines don’t much like wolf shifters,” Adam warned.

Marit bounced her shoulder against his. “Guess that means you and Zane will have to be on your best behavior and win the cat over.”

Adam laughed. “I guess it does... *kitten*.”

At his use of her nickname, Marit’s expression softened. She turned sideways on the sofa and brushed fingertips down his cheek and across his full bottom lip. “Kitten gets me every blessed time. I love you, Adam Landry.”

They locked eyes, existing in their own little bubble. Wolf-gold flashed in his pupils, and a hint of his alpha power floated through the air.

“And I love you, mate,” he rumbled.

Good grief. If this wasn’t my cue to leave... I slid out from under Loki’s weight and scrambled to my feet.

“Loki and I are heading out. I’ll bring him back in the morning.”

Marit nodded, never taking her eyes off her man.

“C’mon, boy.”

Was that jealousy that punched through me as I led Loki to the kitchen? No, it couldn’t be. I’d never begrudge my cousin the happiness she found with her mate. It was more of a wistful yearning for the same kind of love and connection.

Zane’s handsome face invaded my thoughts. I sighed.

I quickly filled a plastic baggie with dry dog food and took two metal bowls from a cupboard. Loki and I slipped out past

Adam and Marit. We took the stairs down to the third floor and dropped off the food and bowls in my guestroom.

“How about a walk before bedtime?” I asked the dog. His ears perked up and he trotted over to the door.

At the bottom of the grand staircase, we passed Xander.

“Hey, cousin,” he said, pausing to pet Loki.

Marit, Liv, and I had recently discovered that our fathers—Grandma Freya’s twin sons—weren’t the product of Grandma’s adventures at Woodstock in the summer of ’69. No. Our grandfather was Grandma’s lost love, a wolf shifter named Aleksandr. Theirs was an ill-fated romance, kept secret because at the time it violated pack law. Only Dorrie Mittelmann, Grandma’s best friend, and Olga, Aleksandr’s kid sister, knew of the union. Aleksandr died shortly after they mated and never met his sons.

Olga blamed Grandma and hatred festered in her heart for decades. Xander was Olga’s grandson, which made him some sort of cousin. Unlike his spiteful grandmother, Xander welcomed his blood connection with us.

“You heading out for a walk?” Xander asked.

“Yeah. I thought we’d wander down toward the lake.”

“How about I join you?”

I saw right through his casual offer. The compulsion to protect was hardwired into wolf shifters, one of things that made Zane so irresistible. Never mind that the sentries and soldiers who patrolled the land should guarantee my safety. Never mind the high-tech security system Remy had installed. Xander needed to put himself between his human cousin and the remotest possibility of danger.

“We’d love your company.” I flashed a welcoming smile.

Commotion erupted around us. The lodge’s carved wooden front doors flew open and two soldiers rushed in from the porch. Jason Landry ran down the hallway from the infirmary, pushing a hospital gurney. Leigh jogged behind him. They

rushed past us without a backward glance. Through the wide open doors, distant headlights lit up the darkness.

Adam bounded down the stairs. Seeing me, he paused at the bottom.

“Have you heard?” he asked, his face set in stern lines.

Oh, God. Those words never boded well. The saliva in my mouth dried up. “Heard what?”

He laid a hand on my shoulder. “Liv’s been hurt. Don’t worry. It doesn’t sound to be life-threatening.”

“Liv?” My sister’s name slipped out past stiff lips. Hurt, but not dying. That was a comfort, but devastating injuries could stop short of taking a life.

Liv.

I felt the blood drain from my cheeks. Invisible threads pulled me down, my trembling limbs no match for gravity. My knees gave out and I sunk onto the bottom step. Whining, Loki nuzzled my face. Sound faded, Adam and Xander’s voices retreating to a distant *wah-wah-wah*, the words a meaningless babble.

Marit dropped down next to me. She wrapped an arm around my shoulders and pulled me close. “Liv’s going to be all right.”

A car—Grandma’s old white sedan—pulled up in front of the lodge. Zane jumped out of the driver’s seat, threw open a passenger door, and swung Liv up into his arms. Three quick steps brought him to the porch, where he carefully laid her down on the gurney.

Desperate to get eyes on Liv, I wobbled to my feet and shuffled toward the door, Marit at my side.

Jason and Leigh took over from Zane, trundling the gurney over the threshold and across the lobby. I caught a fleeting glimpse of my sister as they ran past. Her dark lashes fanned against her cheeks. Sweat glistened on a face bleached bone white. Blood stained the side of her parka.

Bleeding? Why was she bleeding?

The healers rushed Liv down the hall toward the infirmary. Adam followed them.

I scanned the lobby, searching for Zane. He stood inside the door, his bloodstained hands clutching his head.

Marit signaled for the soldiers to return to their posts on the porch. The men retreated outside, quietly shutting the door behind themselves. Silence reigned, broken only by the *tik-tik-tik* of the rustic clock hanging on the wall across from the door. Marit, Xander, and I turned to Zane.

“What happened?” I asked.

He lowered his hands and looked at me, his expression bleak. My heart squeezed and I laid fingers on his arm. His bicep muscles quivered with tension.

“What happened?” I repeated.

“I fucked up.”

CHAPTER SEVEN



ZANE

Adam lowered himself onto the high-backed executive chair—the boss chair—across the wide wooden desk from where I stood inside his office.

“Take a seat, please, Zane.” Speaking in a low, even tone, Adam pointed to the smaller guest chair.

Mild, stilted words, so why did the hair at the back of my neck spring up?

I sat.

Adam moved slowly and carefully, as if his bones were brittle. As if he was holding onto control by a thread. As if any sudden movement or loud sound might make the alpha we sometimes called the Ice Man fly apart or burst into flames.

Adam’s anger was a silent and deadly thing.

Oh, no.

My mind flashed back to our childhood, to that time when Remy ate himself sick on fresh Rainier cherries, and his rancid soundless farts could clear a room. Adam and I had been beside ourselves with glee. *Silent and deadly*, we’d hooted.

And now, despite the gravity of the situation, despite my overwhelming sense of guilt, I had to fight to stifle a laugh. A snort snuck out. *Dammit*. I bit back another. Like giggling during a funeral, cracking up right now was inappropriate to an appalling degree.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” If Adam clenched his teeth any harder, he might crack his jaw.

I was losing it. I really was. That thought—even more than Adam’s suppressed anger—shut down the impulse to laugh. Sobering, I met my cousin’s furious eyes.

“Sorry,” I croaked.

“Tell me about your so-called mission,” he ordered.

I did, spilling all the details, from the time Liv and I hatched the plan in the weight room, until the moment I called security to tell them I was bringing in an injured Liv.

“What the hell is going on with you, Zane?” Confusion stamped Adam’s features. “You’re the least impulsive man I know. You follow orders. You don’t put vulnerable humans at risk in some half-baked, half-assed operation against our enemies.”

Adam’s perplexity was worse than straight-up rage. I deserved rage. I didn’t deserve his attempt at understanding. I shifted in my chair, unable to find words.

“Liv came to when Mom and Dad started working on her,” he said. “Her eyes opened and as soon as she saw me, she said, ‘It’s my fault, not Zane’s. The mission was my idea.’”

I couldn’t allow that to stand. “No. This is one hundred percent on me. Not Liv.”

“I agree.” Adam leaned forward in his chair. “And what am I supposed to do about that? What am I supposed to do when a sentry... my cousin... my closest friend, goes off on some unsanctioned, cockamamie mission?”

“You could kick me out of the pack.” That solution sucked, but I latched on to it. Maybe getting rid of me before things got out of hand would be for the best, the safest thing for everybody. For Annika.

At that thought, my wolf growled and scrabbled against his confinement beneath my skin.

Never leave Annika.

Back the fuck down, I ordered.

Make me, he countered.

Claws sliced through my fingertips as the wolf struggled for control. I nonchalantly shoved my hands under my thighs, hoping to hell Adam hadn’t seen.

Adam tilted his head. “I saw the wolf in your eyes.”

I grunted. I'd been fooling myself. Of course the alpha sensed when a wolf tried to claw his way out through a shifter's skin.

"You know, as soon as I met Marit, my wolf told me she was the one," Adam said slowly. "Marit and I both fought the attraction, but the wolf knew his mate when he saw her."

"I remember." I didn't like where this was going.

"Annika could've been killed today." The alpha's keen gaze pierced straight through to my soul. "A shifter might go a little crazy defending a potential mate."

"Annika isn't my mate," I said a little too quickly.

She is, the wolf cried.

She can't be, I barked back.

Maybe I'd inherited my father's fatal flaw. Maybe I was destined to be alone forever. Until I was absolutely certain that my wolf was under control, I couldn't even think about mating. Not even with someone as enticing as Annika.

Adam's mouth pulled to one side. He stroked his chin, his expression thoughtful.

"You sure?" he finally asked. "We've all seen how she discombobulates you."

"Discombobulates?" I deflected. "You're starting to sound like Grandpa."

He shrugged. "That a bad thing?"

He had me there. Our grandfather was one of the finest men who ever lived.

"No," I conceded. "Never."

Adam heaved a long sigh. "I'm not kicking you out of the pack. That's a nonstarter. So, what am I going to do with you?"

It might have simplified his life to boot me, but Adam was never one to take the easy path. Gratitude for my cousin's

support struck me, gratitude that gave way to suspicion. As alpha, he couldn't let my insubordination slide.

“Don't pull me off bodyguard duty.” I swallowed. “Please.” Begging cost me, but my pride was nothing compared to my need to stay by Annika's side.

My wolf was a bad-humored beast, yanking on his restraints and liable to snarl at friends who crossed him. A lot like me, if I was being honest. And right now, I couldn't trust him to back down from any fight, or to come to heel when the man needed to assert dominance over the beast.

A few weeks ago, my wolf tracked a black-tailed deer through the forest. When the deer crossed the boundary separating pack land from state land, my wolf should've abandoned the chase. We were forbidden to take down prey outside of the stretch of forest owned by the pack. Instead of giving up the hunt, my wolf picked up the pace. I tried to reel him in, ordered him to turn back. Ignoring me, he cornered the deer, ripped out its throat, and gorged on the meat.

The alliance that bonded wolf to man was fraying.

Still, my wolf had shown not the slightest inclination to frighten or harm Annika. Beneath my skin, he tossed his head, affronted by the mere suggestion.

Never, he sniffed.

Had my father been just as certain *his* wolf would never strike out?

My left hand drifted to my right forearm. My fingers traced along the edges of the scar I'd wear till my end of days.

Adam's sharp eyes tracked the movement.

“Is Annika safe with you?” he asked.

The question held a host of meanings. Was I capable of guarding her? Did I pose a threat to her?

“I'd die before I let anything or anyone hurt her.”

God's honest truth. If I concluded that things had gone past the point of no return, that my wolf endangered Annika—or

anybody—I'd disappear, just like my father.

Adam heard the conviction in my voice. "Good enough." Leaning forward, he pressed his palms flat on the desk. "Something's going on with you, man. Grandpa's probably asleep by now, but tomorrow morning I want you to go talk to him."

Grandpa had stepped down as alpha and turned the power over to Adam a few months ago. Adam often consulted with the old man, whose heart was weak, but whose mind was as sharp as ever.

"I will," I promised.

My cell phone vibrated in my pocket. Digging it out, I saw Adam reaching for his own phone.

SECURITY ALERT, the text read. *Coyotes massing along northern perimeter.*

I groaned.

Had my little misadventure triggered an invasion?

CHAPTER EIGHT



ANNIKA

The crackle of static filled the air, followed by a loud *beep beep beep*.

Loki lifted his head, cocked an ear, then slowly stretched to his feet and shook himself. He ambled over to Marit and nudged her leg.

I scanned the infirmary for the source of the mystery sound. My gaze landed on a speaker built into the wall next to the door, part of an old-fashioned intercom system, a relic from mid-20th century.

“Is that a fire alarm?” I asked.

Marit raised a hand to silence me.

A few seconds later, a voice came over the intercom. “Code orange.”

“What’s going on?” Liv’s voice was groggy. The racket must have roused her from her drug-induced slumber.

“Nothing for you to worry about, sweetheart,” Leigh assured her, although the glance the healer cast our way was anything but reassuring. “Marit, my son knows where we are. He’ll stop and explain what’s going on on his way out.”

Marit nodded, took my hand, and pulled me to the opposite side of the room. “Code orange is the second-highest threat level,” she said in a low voice. “It means we *may* be under attack. Children, the elderly, and noncombatants will take shelter in the safe room in the basement. Adam will leave a squad of soldiers to defend the lodge, and then he...” Her calm facade cracked and she swallowed hard.

“Marit.” I squeezed her hand, sympathy welling up in me.

She squeezed my hand back, clearly struggling with the prospect of an encounter that would place people she loved in harm’s way. “And then Adam, his sentries, and the rest of the soldiers will go out to deal with whoever is out there.”

My blood chilled. Zane was a sentry. Whatever happened, he'd be in the thick of it along with Adam, Remy, Xander, and so many good people I'd come to care about.

"It's the coyotes, isn't it?" I guessed, my mind spinning. Was this happening because Courtney failed in her bid to kidnap me?

"Most likely," Marit agreed.

"What are you supposed to do?" I asked.

"If I were a wolf or a soldier, I'd go out with Adam to meet the enemy. But I'm human—untrained—and he won't let me fight."

"But you *are* the alpha's mate," I reminded her.

"Yes, and that means something to the pack. Everyone left behind in the lodge will look to me for instructions, for reassurance. And if things go to hell, I need to make sure our people in the safe room get out through the escape tunnel."

"You have an escape tunnel?" That sounded like something out of an action movie.

She nodded. "Remember, the pack was almost exterminated during the Great War against the grizzlies in the 1950s. That's why they fled Alaska and settled here in Washington. They'll never allow themselves to be caught unawares again. They're ready—Adam is ready—to face anything."

"Good lord," I breathed.

"We have cars and supplies stowed in a building at the other end of the escape tunnel," Marit continued. "I have access to the pack's bank accounts. It would be on me to keep the pack together while we wait for any survivors of the battle to contact us."

That was a lot, but I had no doubt that Marit was up to the task. "You got this," I said.

Her lips curved in a tremulous, but determined smile. "Yes, I do."

“And I’ll help,” I vowed. “Whatever you need.”

“Never underestimate a Hagen woman,” Marit murmured, quoting Grandma Freya.

“Do we need to pack up medical supplies?” I asked, glancing around the room.

“No,” Leigh said. “The safe room is well-stocked.”

She pushed a wheelchair over to the side of the hospital bed where Liv was resting and slid an arm beneath my sister, helping her sit up. With her shifter strength, Leigh easily lifted Liv into the chair.

The door to the infirmary swung open. Adam and Zane rushed inside. Each man wore a bulletproof vest and a holster holding a pistol and knife strapped to his thigh. Apparently both the alpha and his lieutenant intended to retain their human forms when they met the intruders.

“Whoa,” Liv mumbled, squinting sleepily at the armed men. “Shit just got real.”

“We stopped at the armory to gear up before we face the coyotes,” Adam explained, pulling Marit into his arms.

Armory. Holy shit. The Black Rock Guardians had an escape tunnel *and* an armory.

“It’s the damnedest thing,” Adam continued. “Security cameras show coyotes in animal form lined up in formation along the northern perimeter.”

“None of them have crossed the boundary line onto pack land?” Marit asked.

“So far, no,” he said.

“Weird,” she murmured.

“Maybe Vilhauer is waiting for Adam to show up,” I suggested. “Maybe he wants to talk.”

Adam lifted a shoulder. “We’ll see.”

Zane strode to my side, then halted, indecision sketched across his face.

I had no clue what would happen when the wolves confronted the enemy, but Liv was right. Shit just got real. Adam and Zane might not emerge from this unscathed.

Screw caution.

I threw myself against Zane and pressed my cheek against the stiff vest that covered his broad chest. After a moment, he wrapped his arms around me. I held on tight, breathing in his woodsy scent and savoring the sense of safety and home I always found in his presence.

I might be safe taking refuge in the basement, but he was about to confront his enemy, an enemy he blamed for my attempted kidnapping. He'd keep a cool head this time, wouldn't he, and not strike out in anger?

God. He had to.

Tilting my face up, I met his eyes. "You be careful out there."

A furrow dented the skin between his eyebrows. His lips parted, but he hesitated for a heartbeat before speaking. "I'm a wolf, a sentry. I won't back down from a fight."

"Just don't start one, okay?" I begged.

He stiffened and pulled back, as if offended by the suggestion.

Dammit. I wasn't trying to insult him. I clutched at his vest. "What I mean is, I don't want you or anybody else to get hurt because of what happened to me. If you can find a way to keep the peace, do it."

"Zane, we gotta go," Adam called.

Zane nodded at his alpha and gently pulled my fingers away from his vest.

I didn't want to leave things like this, with any misunderstanding hanging between us. I cupped his face between my palms. "Come back to me safely."

His eyes widened and his gaze dropped to my mouth.

I'm not shy, but I am observant. In the past, I've made the first move with a man, when the signs indicated that he'd welcome it. I couldn't read Zane, not for sure. Oh, he was protective to the nth degree, but that was a trait hardwired into every wolf shifter. And protecting Liv and me was his job. Over the past few months, I'd caught him with his head angled to one side watching me, studying my every word and gesture, as if I were an oddity he was trying to figure out.

The man paid attention to what I needed and what would give me pleasure: fixing a broken chair, building outdoor furniture and flower planters for the cabin's deck. A few days ago, he surprised me with a beautiful blown-glass hummingbird feeder.

He'd shrugged when I thanked him. "Know you love bird feeders. Saw it and thought you'd like the colors."

The serious-minded fourteen-year-old boy who stepped up and took care of things when his father left the family had grown into a man who was a natural caretaker. He'd scoff at the notion, but I saw evidence of it every day.

But what did he see when he looked at me? A duty? A curiosity? Someone vulnerable who required his care? Could it be something more?

He'd pushed me away the first time I tried to kiss him, but I knew—I *knew*—that the wolf wanted me.

Screw caution, my new catchphrase.

Rising up on my tiptoes, I pressed my mouth against his. If he turned his head or stepped away, I'd hide my embarrassment by making light of its significance. A kiss goodbye. A kiss for luck. Nothing more.

He didn't push me away. A sharp, startled intake of breath, then Zane reacted. His lips warm and firm against mine, he took control of the kiss the way he took charge of everything else in his life. One hand cupped my nape as he tilted my face up to his. My lips tingled, as if an electric current passed between us. Did he feel it, too? My heart beat so quickly that I gasped for air, panting against his lips.

Adam cleared his throat.

Zane's hands fell to my shoulders, and he broke off the kiss. Too soon. It had ended too soon.

I wobbled and sank back down on my heels.

Zane released my shoulders, then traced a line from the corner of my eye down to my kiss-swollen lips. His gaze lingered on my face, almost as if he were committing my features to memory.

"Zane, we gotta go," Adam repeated. "Now."

Zane shook himself, a man coming out of a reverie. "You stay safe," he said in a low voice.

I nodded mutely.

He turned on his heel and followed Adam from the room.

"Well, hot damn," Liv mumbled.

My sentiments exactly. My lips still tingled from his kiss, and heat still flushed my face.

I glanced at my twin. She offered a weak smile accompanied by shaky thumbs-up.

"We need to get moving, too." Marit held the door open, and Leigh pushed the wheelchair into the hall. Loki kept to Marit's side as we hurried toward a lobby filled with packmates making their way downstairs to the safe room.

One of the younger children spied Marit. Emma pulled free of her mother's hand and rushed over to us. "Are the bad guys going to get us?" she asked, her eyes huge.

Marit crouched down and hugged the frightened little girl. "No, sweetheart. Adam and the soldiers will protect us. And your mother and a lot of other grownups will stay with you and make sure you're safe."

"Will you be there, too?" Emma asked.

"Of course." Marit smiled and ruffled the little girl's hair. "But now, you need to head down to the basement with your mama." Marit pointed over Emma's shoulder. "Look, there's

your friend Tory. She's holding two big pillows. Maybe you could help carry one downstairs for her."

"Okey doke." Emma's lips trembled, but she ran over to join her friend.

Marit stood and turned to Leigh. "Can you take Liv down in the elevator? I'll stay in the lobby until everyone else has made it to the safe room."

"I'll stay with Marit," I offered. Liv was in good hands with Leigh. I might be of more use in the lobby.

The evacuation to the safe room proceeded in an orderly fashion, without any sense of panic or jostling. Most folks took the stairs to the basement, saving the elevator for those who'd have trouble navigating the steps.

A harried-looking young woman—Rolf's daughter—approached us, her month-old baby son cradled in her arms and a heavy diaper bag weighing down her shoulder. "Mom and Aunt Sharon are in Belle Reve catching a late movie. My mate and my dad and my sister, Lexie, went out with the other soldiers. What a night to be alone."

"You're never alone." My cousin touched the young woman's face.

Bethany's eyelids fluttered shut and she pressed her cheek against Marit's palm. A few seconds later, Bethany opened her eyes, appearing noticeably calmer. I blinked, surprised. If Marit's touch could calm a shifter, some of Adam's alpha magic must have worn off on his human mate.

Marit took the diaper bag from Bethany. She caught the eye of a teenaged girl, summoned her over, and handed her the bag. "Help Bethany and the baby get to the safe room. Find a comfy spot for them."

"Yes, ma'am." The girl slung the bag over her shoulder and stuck close to Bethany's side as they headed to the stairs.

I touched Marit's arm. "You've changed."

"What do you mean?"

I waved a hand at the crowded lobby. “People are turning to you for help, for support. You’ve really grown into your role as the alpha’s mate.”

“I suppose I have,” Marit agreed. “But there’s no place I’d rather be than here, with Adam and the pack.”

I understood. I was starting to feel at home with Zane and the pack, too.

“Speaking of Adam,” I said, “I’m going to peek outside.”

“Good,” she said. “I’m dying to know what’s going on out there.”

I crossed the lobby and slipped outside onto the covered porch. Waving at the guards who flanked the door, I walked to the end of the porch and peered into the darkness. A light drizzle fell from the sky. Clouds hid the moon and stars. Fog rolled in from the lake. Soldiers in both wolf and human form prowled the land surrounding the lodge. Without a doubt, more soldiers patrolled the woods.

The northern boundary of pack land lay two miles away. Sound carried well after dark. Sharp shifter ears may have been able to detect voices or the sound of hand-to-hand combat at that distance, but try as I might, I couldn’t hear a thing. No *rat-tat-tat* of gunfire. No lights pierced the darkness.

This absence of commotion had to be good sign, right?

I turned my eyes up to the sky, and spoke in a barely-there whisper, “Hey, Grandma, if you have any pull up in heaven, keep them all safe.” I paused, then swallowed. “Keep Zane safe.”

I headed back toward the door. “Have you heard anything?” I asked one of the two guards.

“Nope,” he answered, his face set in grim lines.

Back in the lobby, the crowd had thinned and the rush to the safe room slowed to a trickle. Matthew—the former alpha—stood at Marit’s side, nodding at the people who filed past. He might have handed the leadership of the Black Rock

Guardians over to Adam, but a bit of alpha magic would always cling to him, his presence a comfort to his packmates.

“What’s happening?” Marit asked as I approached.

“As far as I can tell, not a thing. It’s dark and quiet.”

She sighed. “No news is good news, I guess.”

Matthew turned to me. “I was glad to hear that you escaped relatively unharmed from the coyote. How’s your hand?”

In all the hub bub, I’d totally forgotten about the small injury.

“It’s nothing,” I assured him, holding up my bandaged palm and wiggling my fingers. “Leigh took good care of me.”

He angled his head toward me. His nostrils twitched and his eyes widened.

Good grief. The old man must have caught a whiff of Zane’s scent on me. I felt a blush crawl up my cheeks. How had Marit ever got used to shifters’ knowing glances when they smelled Adam on her?

Finally, the last packmate disappeared down the staircase. Marit, Matthew, Loki, and I took the elevator to the basement. We walked down a long corridor toward a substantial metal door, guarded by two soldiers.

“Bulletproof, blast proof, concrete-lined hardened-steel, with an encrypted keypad,” Marit said under her breath as we crossed the threshold. “Nobody can get past it.” The soldiers followed us and locked the door, shutting us inside the pack’s safe room.

I’d expected the space to feel claustrophobic, with low ceilings, bare concrete walls, flickering light bulbs, and dozens of utilitarian cots lined up in neat rows, like some sort of grim Cold-War-era bomb shelter. Instead, walls painted a pale yellow stretched up to a high ceiling. Framed photographs of Shooting Star Lake and forestland hung on the walls. Vibrantly colored plush rugs softened the concrete floor. Comfy-looking sofas anchored at least a dozen seating areas. A corner of the room held a children’s play area, complete

with toys and books and beanbag chairs. In another corner, two teenage packmates were setting up cribs and cots. Liv lay stretched out on a cot, fast asleep. Bethany had settled in a rocking chair, cuddling her baby son.

At my startled expression, Marit shrugged. “I know. It’s not what I expected, either. No doom and gloom atmosphere. Nothing to jack up the children’s anxiety. It’s cozy and safe. We have backup power and a top-notch air filtration system.” She pointed at another steel door on the opposite side of the room. “That leads to the escape tunnel. The other doors go to two bathrooms, a kitchenette, a storage room, a utility room, and the security center.”

I raised my brows. “The security center?”

“Remy is in there, keeping an eye on the live camera feeds.”

I startled. “You mean we can see what’s going on outside? We can watch Adam and Zane?”

“It depends. If they’re within sight of a camera, we can watch the live stream remotely,” Marit said.”

I grabbed her hand and tugged her toward the room. “What are we waiting for?”

She glanced at the former alpha. “Grandpa, do you want to come watch the live camera feed with us?”

“No,” he answered. “I can do more good out here among the people.”

“Whatever you think is best.” Marit kissed his cheek. Matthew walked over to an upholstered armchair, then settled into it with an *oomph*.

Emma skipped over to us. “Can Loki come sit with Tory and me?”

“Loki is always up for a good snuggle,” I said.

Emma tapped her leg. “Come on, boy.” Loki trotted after the child.

Marit and I made our way to the security center. Inside, Remy sat at a table facing a bank of monitors mounted to the wall.

“Holy shit,” Marit breathed.

Holy shit, indeed. One screen showed at least a hundred coyotes in their animal forms. They stood in neat rows behind an invisible line on the ground, presumably the border of pack land. I’d wrapped my head around the notion that shifters existed—that humans could change into beasts—but these coyotes raised the fine hairs on the back of my neck. Their unnatural silence, their stillness, the way they arranged themselves in an orderly formation... it was all so... so wrong.

Not twenty feet away from the coyotes, another tree-mounted camera captured Zane, Adam, and Rolf standing tall and proud, facing the horde of coyotes. Dozens of wolves paced back and forth behind their alpha and his lieutenants.

Coyotes outnumbered wolves by at least three to one. The numbers didn’t concern me. One wolf could easily tear apart any number of the smaller and weaker coyotes. If the coyotes charged, it would be a suicide attack. They had to know that, so what were they hoping to achieve?

“What are they waiting for?” Marit wondered aloud.

“Damned if I know,” Remy muttered.

“Maybe it’s like a game of chicken,” I suggested. “Who will blink first?”

“Maybe.” Remy lifted one shoulder. “Close the door, will you?”

“Sure.” I shut the heavy door, blocking out both sound from the safe room and our conversation.

“The cameras have audio, but so far nobody’s talking.” Remy slipped headphones off his ears and fiddled with a dial. For the second time that night, static crackled from a speaker.

While we waited for whatever came next, I looked around the small room. Across from the computer table and monitors,

another steel door was built into the wall. Catching Marit's eye, I pointed at it and lifted my brows in a wordless question.

"Gun safe," she whispered.

That made sense. Even if their enemies couldn't break into the safe room, the wolves would want to carry weapons if they had to flee through the tunnel.

Movement on a monitor caught my eye. A tall older man stepped out of the forest behind the coyotes and marched toward the wolves. Four men followed in his wake. The older man came to a halt directly across from Adam. His companions flanked him, mimicking Zane and Rolf's poses.

"Who are they?" I asked.

"Lance Vilhauer in the middle. His sons are on his left, and his two top lieutenants on his right." Disgust filled Remy's voice.

One of the two sons had tussled with Liv before her gun went off and she got shot. It had been an accident, but still, one of them had tackled my sister to the ground and left her with a bullet wound.

Zane's head jerked to the left. He recognized the man.

Keep your cool, baby.

The coyote alpha bent forward, spat on the ground, then straightened to his full height. He sneered at the wolves. Narrow-shouldered and with thinning hair, the man looked utterly ordinary and unremarkable. On a crowded street, he'd draw nobody's eye. His sons were pleasant-enough looking, but equally nondescript.

When the Almighty doled out looks, presence, and charisma, the Vilhauers got the short end of the stick. Whatever the Vilhauers were lacking, Zane, Adam, and Rolf had been given in abundance. Tall, broad-shouldered, and oozing confidence, they didn't react to the coyote alpha's petty show of disrespect.

The silence stretched on and on, as if neither alpha wanted to be the first to speak. Tension roiled in my stomach.

“Jesus,” Marit hissed. “It’s like waiting for an ax to fall.”

I reached out and took her hand.

Vilhauer broke first. Angling his head toward Zane, he said, “Your boy tried to lure my son into a trap.”

That was exactly what Zane had done. But I knew in my heart that however angry he was over Zane’s actions, Adam would never throw his cousin under a bus.

“A coyote attacked my mate’s human cousin, a woman under the pack’s protection,” Adam countered. “You struck first.”

I held my breath, waiting for Vilhauer’s reply. Would he accept responsibility for the attempted kidnapping—confirming Zane’s theory—or would he throw the blame on Courtney?

A slender figure stepped out from the trees. She wove her way between the lines of coyotes and came to a stop next to the alpha.

Zane’s shoulders snapped back and he shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

“I told you to stay outta sight,” Vilhauer growled.

“I know, darling.” Courtney laid a hand on the alpha’s arm. “But I couldn’t leave you to face the wolves without my support.” Rising up on her toes, she whispered in his ear.

Darling?

Marit and I exchanged slack-jawed glances.

I don’t know if Courtney and Bryce had been mated or were simply hooking up. In any case, she’d loved him. Her attack on me was entirely personal. She’d said as much.

So why was she fawning over the alpha?

Vilhauer’s sons shot her dirty looks, apparently asking themselves the same question.

“Looks like Courtney is aiming to trade up,” Marit said under her breath.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Vilhauer’s mate died a few years ago. A shifter gets only one true love, but they can remarry.”

“Like Matthew did with Olga?”

“Exactly.” She nodded. “And look how well that turned out.”

I stared at the monitor, taking in the adoring expression Courtney wore on her face when she gazed up at Vilhauer. “You think she’s aiming to be the next queen bee of the coyote pack?”

“Could be.” Marit lifted one shoulder. “If she’s ambitious, latching on to the alpha is a smart play.”

“Maybe it’s more than that,” I said slowly. “If what she really wants is payback for Bryce’s death, who better to give it to her than an alpha she has wrapped around her little finger?”

“Great.” Marit sniffed. “The packs might finally declare war because Courtney’s in a snit.”

The sound of Vilhauer clearing his throat came through the speakers. “Your mate’s cousin shot and killed my second-in-command. According to your own words, the woman is under the protection of your pack. That makes you responsible for her actions.”

Me. They were talking about me.

Marit threw her hands in the air. “Is the jack wad forgetting that Bryce attacked us?”

Courtney lifted her chin, righteous indignation stamped across her face. “The Vilhauer pack demands justice for the murder of Bryce Toobin.”

I drew in a shuddering breath. My heart dropped into the pit of my stomach.

Vilhauer threw back his shoulders and looked Adam straight in the eye. “You have twenty-four hours to turn Annika Hagen over to us to face execution for the killing of my second-in-command.”

CHAPTER NINE



ZANE

If I thought there was a chance in hell that Adam would comply with Vilhauer's ridiculous demand, I would have lost my fucking mind. Good thing I knew better. Adam would *never* turn Annika over to the coyotes. Still, it took all of my self-control to stop myself from lunging over the boundary line and ripping the coyote alpha's head from his shoulders.

Adam shot me a sideways look that silently asked, *You good?*

Meeting his eyes, I jerked my chin. No need for Adam to worry that I was gonna lose my shit on the coyote bastard. He nodded, satisfied, then looked back at our enemies.

"I'm curious. What's your endgame, Vilhauer?" Adam asked in a deceptively mild voice. "Because you have to know we'll never hand my mate's cousin over for execution."

"We aren't playing games." Courtney spoke up before the alpha could reply. Her eyes glittered with a disconcerting mixture of glee and spite. "We—"

Vilhauer raised a hand, silencing her.

She slammed her lips together, conspicuously cutting off her flow of words.

"Forgive me, my dear. I didn't mean to be harsh with you." Vilhauer patted her hand. "But let the alphas speak."

"Of course, Lance." She bowed her head meekly. Behind her, the coyote who shot Liv rolled his eyes.

Interesting.

"I've called on our allies, and they're sending reinforcements." Vilhauer's smirk made my hands twitch with the urge to do violence. "Think about that, son. When your enemies come knocking, you might be surprised by what you're willing to do to keep the peace."

We all knew our enemies' endgame was to get their hands on our pack's Black Rock. Courtney's anger over Bryce's death was one hundred percent genuine. Vilhauer's outrage might be nothing more than a pretext for stepping up hostilities. Maybe the move against Annika had been the opening gambit in their new campaign. Maybe Vilhauer was testing Adam, trying to gauge how far he could push the new, young wolf alpha. If he thought Adam was weak or a pushover, my cousin would soon set him straight.

"You think I'd keep the peace at the cost of a woman's life?" Adam asked without heat. That cool, unruffled tone was deceptive. Adam was never more dangerous than when he slipped into his Ice Man persona.

Vilhauer's sons and lieutenants sensed the peril. They stepped closer to the coyote alpha and dropped their hands to the butts of their pistols. Rolf and I followed suit.

If either alpha took it in their head to end their conflict by eliminating the enemy's leadership—to draw a weapon or to jump them—this already fraught meeting would deteriorate into a bloody shit show. Adam was too wise and too honorable to attack first. Had to hope Vilhauer was too savvy to risk dying at the hands of his younger and more powerful enemy.

Vilhauer shoved both hands into his pants pockets as if he hadn't a care in the world. "Well, now, I guess we'll see if you're as smart as I hope you are, won't we? You have twenty-four hours."

"And then what?" Adam asked.

"Then things will get interesting." The coyote alpha turned on his heels and sauntered back toward the shelter of the trees. Courtney and his sons followed him. The coyote soldiers held formation until a whistle spurred them into action. As one, they rose from their haunches, whirled around, and bounded for the trees. Seconds ticked past. Branches snapped and twigs crunched underfoot as a hundred coyotes retreated through the dense forest. Silence returned.

Adam looked up at a security camera mounted in a cedar tree.

“Code yellow,” he announced.

An indicator light on the front of the tree-mounted camera—usually kept in the off position—flashed red. Remy got the message and would relay the stand-down order to the others. Good.

Adam swung his eyes my way. “Looks like you were right. Vilhauer either knew what Courtney was up to, or he approved it after the fact.”

“Yeah,” I agreed, resisting the urge to say *I told you so*.

“But Courtney and Vilhauer getting together, I did not see that coming,” he added.

“She’s a sly one,” Rolf said. “And her grudge against Marit and Annika won’t make things any easier for us.”

“Since when have things been easy?” I snorted.

Adam turned to the wolf soldiers pacing restlessly behind us. “A Squad, you’re on patrol until sun up. B Squad, with me. Rolf and Zane, let’s get back to headquarters.”

We ran the two miles back to the lodge. By the time we arrived, most packmates had already made their way upstairs from the safe room. They stood in clusters around the lobby, waiting for the arrival of their alpha. Adam moved from group to group, laying a hand on a shoulder, hugging an overwhelmed child, offering assurances that all was well.

For now.

I searched the crowd for Annika, my wolf whining when I couldn’t lay eyes on her. The elevator door slid open. Annika stepped out, her cheeks far too pale for my liking. She must’ve heard Vilhauer’s threats, and they’d frightened her.

My protective instincts roared to life, and my feet started moving toward her like they had a mind of their own. I had to make her understand that she had nothing to fear, that there was no way we’d ever allow the coyotes to get their paws on her. I threaded my way through the crowd, my eyes locked on Annika.

When she spied me, her face lit up with relief. She smiled, a smile so bright that the corners of her eyes crinkled. I halted midstep, an imaginary knife slicing through my heart.

What the fuck am I doing?

The woman wanted me. I'd scented her desire this afternoon. She'd initiated our first kiss. She *like liked* me. I shook my head over the juvenile phrase Liv had uttered this evening.

And I wanted her, with a need so stark it might drive me to my knees. I wanted to lower the walls that kept even my closest friends—Adam and Remy—at a certain distance. To give up striving for perfection and to embrace happiness. To bask in the warmth of her sunshine smiles.

My mind flashed back to the sight of Annika sitting on the shore of Shooting Star Lake, blowing bubbles and laughing with delight when the soapy orbs floated out over the water. Annika knew how to find joy in the simplest moment. I wanted to share that joy with her. To bring that joy to her. Keeping her safe and making her happy—straightforward goals my wolf already embraced as his own.

Fate had brought me my perfect mate, my one and only, my true love. If I rejected her, I'd be alone forever.

She's ours, the wolf whispered in my ear.

Can I trust you never to do her harm? I asked my shadow brother.

Yes, he promised.

I felt his eagerness, his hope that I'd finally see things his way.

As if drawn by an irresistible force, my eyes turned to the long-healed bite mark on my arm. Nature devised few things more dangerous than a shifter wolf out of control. My wolf had already proven himself a rule breaker, chasing down and killing forbidden prey, snapping at packmates. Could I rely on him to control his violent impulses?

Never. Hurt. Annika. The wolf huffed.

He meant it. Of course, my father had meant it when he promised to always protect and cherish my mother, my brother, and me.

I wavered, torn by conflicting impulses.

Annika felt no such ambivalence. Her eyes shining, she walked up to me and laid her hands on my vest. “Thank God you’re all okay.”

I balled my hands into fists, fighting the urge to reach out and pull her into my arms, to stake my claim in front of the pack. Instead, I took a small step backward, just enough to create some distance between us.

At my retreat, a pink flush crawled up Annika’s cheeks.

Dammit. Hurting her feelings or embarrassing her was the absolute last thing I wanted to do. My wolf whined an unhappy protest.

“Did you watch the security feed?” I asked.

She bobbed her head.

“You got nothing to worry about. We won’t let those bastards near you.”

Sighing, she looked down at the floor. A curtain of shiny golden-brown hair fell forward and obscured her features but couldn’t hide the scent of disappointment that clouded the air around her. She took a breath, then lifted her face to mine, her features composed, her smile brittle and forced. “I know,” she said.

Damn it all to hell, I *had* hurt her feelings. I had no clue what to say to make it right. We stared at each other for an awkward half minute.

Adam approached us, an arm slung around Marit’s shoulders. Releasing his mate, he pulled Annika into a hug and kissed her forehead. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. You’re under the pack’s protection. We’ve got you.”

I understood Adam’s comforting gesture for what it was, a promise of safety from the alpha to his mate’s cousin.

My frustrated and possessive wolf did not. *Mine*, my shadow brother snarled at my closest friend. His muscles bunched, as if he wanted to lunge.

Are you fucking kidding me?

Before he could do something stupid, I wrestled a mental straitjacket on my wolf.

Adam shot me a funny look and released Annika.

Marit slid her arms around her cousin. “Family breakfast tomorrow morning at nine, in our quarters. If Liv’s up to it, she can come, too.”

“Sounds good,” Annika said.

“I’m calling a meeting of the sentries in my office in fifteen minutes,” Adam told me.

“I’ll be there,” I said.

“Let’s get you to bed. I didn’t forget that I promised to lend you the big guy for the night.” Whistling for Loki, Marit steered Annika toward the staircase.

I cocked a curious brow at Adam.

“Annika is borrowing Loki overnight. Liv says she’s been waking up with nightmares.”

“Since she shot Bryce?” I guessed.

“Yeah.” Bitterness colored his voice.

The same guilt and self-recrimination that weighed me down showed on Adam’s face. He’d been drugged and handcuffed—his black rock stolen by the coyote—when Bryce threatened to kill Liv. And me? I’d been off chasing after a pair of grizzly enforcers.

“We gotta do right by her,” I said, as much to myself as Adam.

“We will,” he vowed. Tilting his head to one side, he studied me, his sharp gaze dissecting the expression on my face. “You kissed Annika,” he said at last.

Technically, she kissed me first, but only an asshole would point that out. And I didn't try to end the kiss. Hell, I gave in to my impulses and went all in. "Got caught up in the heat of the moment. Won't let it happen again."

"For fuck's sake, why not?" Exasperation filled Adam's voice. "You've wanted her since the first day you met her. I saw it. Marit saw it. And sure as shit Annika wants you, too."

"No." I waved a hand, rejecting the notion.

"You telling me you feel nothing for her?" he demanded. "That your wolf isn't insisting that she's the one?"

He waited a beat while I searched for an honest but evasive answer. None came to me.

"I knew it," he cried. "That's why you went off the rails when Courtney tried to kidnap her. Annika is your mate."

"No." The word burst from my mouth, even as my wolf growled a protest. I threw both hands into the air. "Just back off and mind your own business, cousin."

His expression sobered. "Something is going on with you that I don't understand. And I don't like it."

I raised my shoulders. I couldn't say what I was thinking: *That's too damned bad*. But the gesture sent the message loud and clear.

"If I can't get through to you, maybe Grandpa can. Talk to him," he ordered. "Tomorrow morning."

That was the alpha speaking, not my friend.

"Yes, sir." The words were polite even if my tone was something short of deferential.

He clenched his jaw, clearly biting back a pissed-off response. Turning on his heels, he headed toward the stairs.

I fucking hated being at odds with Adam, but no way could I confess my fears about the wolf to my friend, to my alpha. Out of an abundance of caution, he'd pull me off my sentry duties, put someone else in charge of Annika's protection. I

knew, *I knew* in my gut that forcing me to stand down would be the wrong move.

But what was the right move?

With a sigh, I followed Adam up the stairs for the meeting.



Grandpa was an early riser, so I didn't think twice about knocking on his door a little before 8 a.m. the next morning.

After naming Adam as his successor, Grandpa had moved out of the presidential suite and into Adam's old quarters on the fourth floor. It was a spacious room, two doors down from mine, with a fireplace and a view of Shooting Star Lake.

Grandpa opened the door. I stepped inside and caught a faint whiff of acrylic paint underneath the welcome scent of fresh brewed coffee.

A sunny alcove overlooking the lake and surrounded on three sides by windows used to be Adam's reading spot. Grandpa had moved Adam's big chair and ottoman over close to the fireplace, next to a rocking chair I'd made for him. He set up an easel in the brightly lit window alcove. Painting was his new hobby. I can't say the old man had any particular talent for the endeavor, but it made him happy.

"Adam told me you'd be stopping by, Come on in. I got coffee." Grandpa shuffled over to the low dresser where he set up his coffee maker. He moved slowly and still wore plaid flannel pajamas and a pair of beat-up slippers. He hadn't combed his hair.

"You good this morning, Grandpa?" I asked.

He handed me a full mug. I raised it to my mouth. Steam and the pungent, smoky aroma hit me smack in the face. Hot black coffee, biting strong. Grandpa and I liked our morning caffeine fix the same no-nonsense, uncomplicated way.

Grandpa gave a small laugh. "I'm fine. It just takes my old bones a while to get going in the morning."

I walked over to his easel and studied his work in progress, a painting of the view across the water. The lake and trees didn't look right, and the lines and angles of Grandma Freya's cabin on the opposite shore were wonky and off-kilter.

Grandpa came up behind me. "Not very good, is it?"

I hesitated.

"Tell me the truth," he urged.

"It sucks," I confessed.

Grandpa laughed again. "Your mother and aunt can't bring themselves to say that to my face. They say, 'Good for you, Daddy' and 'Look at all the bright colors.' I appreciate your bluntness, son."

I said nothing, then downed another swallow of coffee.

"It took a lifetime, but I finally learned to give myself permission to be absolutely mediocre," Grandpa said. "There can be pleasure in the doing of something, even if you don't get it right."

I grunted, unconvinced by the suggestion.

"Let's sit." He inclined his head toward the chairs and love seat flanking the fireplace. I dropped onto the love seat. Grandpa sat opposite me in the rocker, clasping the warm mug between his hands. Was he cold?

"I can light a fire." I pointed at the fireplace.

"No need." He pulled an afghan across his lap. "Adam said you'd fill me in on what was decided at the meeting last night."

A safe subject.

"He's recalling Kyra."

"She won't like cutting short her visit with her aunt," Grandpa said.

"Can't be helped. We need every sentry on duty. And we have a dozen packmates out roaming. He's ordering all of

them to return home. He's gonna reach out to our closest allies and ask them to send soldiers to reinforce our defenses."

"What about Freya's Bake Shop?" Grandpa asked.

"I doubt they'll like this, but he wants Annika and Liv to stay at the lodge. Annika and Marit can do all their baking in the communal kitchen. Then wolves will transport everything to Belle Reve and mind the shop."

"They definitely won't like that," Grandpa agreed.

"Probably not," I conceded, picturing the irritated expression on Annika's adorable face when we suggested it. "Xander's on board with the plan. Marit's been teaching him how to bake their specialties. He and Kyra will be in charge of running the shop for the time being."

He smiled fondly. "Xander will be in his element. I love that boy like he was my blood." Grandpa took a sip of coffee and stared off into the distance. Bet anything his thoughts had turned to Xander's grandmother, Olga.

"Nobody holds Olga's actions against him," I reminded him.

Grandpa sighed, regret etched across his features.

Shit. Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned his treacherous ex-wife, but now that I had, there was no backing away from the subject.

"Have you heard how Olga is doing?" I asked.

As the new alpha, Adam had held Olga's fate in his hands. He had three options for her punishment: execution, incarceration, or exile. Adam would never order the death of his grandfather's wife. Imprisoning her in one of the cells in the basement—her proximity a constant reminder of her crimes—would've been too painful for Grandpa and the Hagen women. Adam sent her away, to live out her days with a small pack of fierce wolf shifters in the wilds of northern British Columbia. Even in wolf form, she couldn't traverse the distance to the nearest town. She was stuck there. Their alpha promised to keep a close eye on her and make her toe the line.

Grandpa didn't answer, looking lost in thought.

"Grandpa?" I gentled my voice.

Startled, he met my eyes. "She's doing fine. Quiet as a mouse and following orders." He sighed. "I have many regrets, but not recognizing how unhappy my wife was... not seeing the burden of sadness and anger that she carried... well, that's one of my biggest regrets of all. If I saw it, if I'd done something, maybe I could've helped Olga and spared the Hagen women so much grief."

This sorrowful, introspective train of thought was new, or maybe when he was alpha, Grandpa didn't think it right to confess any self-doubts.

"She kept her secrets," I said. "None of us saw her true nature. Besides, what's done is done. Her bad choices aren't your fault."

Grandpa pressed his lips together, looking skeptical, then he threw me a wry smile. "At my age, I get up three times a night to pee. I usually have trouble falling back asleep. Lying in bed, wide-awake, gives a man time to think, to look back over his long life."

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. "Don't talk like your time's almost up."

"I've got a lot to live for and don't plan to go any sooner than I have to. Now that I'm retired, I have time for my hobbies." He pointed at his lousy painting. "And I have time to reflect on my life, on what I achieved and what I didn't."

"You were a good alpha," I said.

"Was I?" He frowned. "I made mistakes. I should've seen what was going on with Olga. I shouldn't have forbidden mating with humans. Look at the misery that caused."

"Everybody makes mistakes. But the good you've done far outweighs the bad."

"I hope so," he said. "But when I contemplate my life, you know what I think about the most? Your grandmother. My Katia. My mate. Living with her, loving her, was a little slice

of heaven, and I will always be grateful that fate brought us together.”

I grunted in agreement. They had been good together.

“And now Adam has found his mate, and I hope that you’ve found yours.” He blew on his coffee, then took another sip. “I like Annika very much.”

“Annika isn’t my mate,” I corrected him.

“No?” He cocked his head to one side, his eyes as sharp as ever. “Could’ve fooled me.”

“She can’t be—” I started.

“Why?” he interrupted. “What are you afraid of, son?”

Damn. As alpha, Grandpa had had an uncanny ability to cut through the crap and see the essential truth. Nobody had pulled a fast one on him. Well, no one except Olga.

“I’m not afraid,” I blustered.

Not true. Fear had me by the balls. I was scared of failing to protect Annika. Not from the coyotes—I could handle them—but from myself.

“Nope,” he said. “Don’t try to sell your grandfather that line of bullshit.”

“What do you want from me, Grandpa?”

He blew out a long, slow breath. “When your father left, I was so worried about Grace, so grateful for the way you handled things, that I didn’t question whether we were expecting too much from you.” He frowned at his coffee. “There’s another one of my regrets. I didn’t do right by you.”

I leaned forward, catching his eye so he’d see my sincerity. “You didn’t fail me. I’m naturally wired to take charge and to make sure things get done right.”

“A lot like your father,” he observed.

I jerked back, his words a slap across the face.

He startled. “That’s it, isn’t it? You’re afraid you’ll go the way of your father?”

I stared at him, unwilling to admit the truth, but unable to attempt a bald-faced lie.

“Zane, taking charge and striving to do things right isn’t a moral failure. Zachary was a perfectionist and a hard-ass—”

“Like me,” I interrupted.

“Yes,” he conceded. “But that wasn’t what went wrong. His wolf was always short-tempered and impulsive. Over time, the wolf slipped more and more out from under his control. Till finally one night...” He paused.

“I was there,” I reminded him. “I know exactly what went down.”

The images from that night were burned into my brain. Mom, standing with her back pressed against the refrigerator, holding out both palms and pleading with Dad’s wolf to stand down. Remy huddled next to her, confused and frightened. Dad’s wolf growling, saliva dripping from his muzzle.

Without giving it a second thought, I’d picked up a kitchen chair and brandished it at my father. He sprang at me, knocking the chair from my hands. I took a swing at him, and he sank his fangs into my arm. Tasting blood, he released me and backed up, whining. Mom rushed to my side and knelt beside me, wrapping a kitchen towel around my bleeding arm.

“Go away, Zach,” she’d said.

The wolf slunk from the room and ran away into the night.

I never saw my father again. Lest I forget what went down, I refused Grandpa’s offer to heal the injury.

“Yes, you *do* know what went down,” he said. “But you don’t know what came before. I didn’t find out about it until after your parents had been mated for several years. Your father had struggled with his wolf since he was a child. Your mother tried to help him. He tried to help himself, but over time, the wolf grew stronger.”

“My mom and brother were scared.” I sat very still, remembering the fateful night and unwilling to cut my father any slack.

“Yes.” He squeezed his lids shut, as if a simple act could block out painful memories. “They were frightened. Grace told me it was the first time Zachary’s wolf ever snapped at her. She said... she said his eyes changed, flickered back and forth between human and wolf. She saw the man struggling to gain the upper hand. She felt her mate’s horror and sorrow when the wolf took control back from him.”

“Don’t you see, Grandpa? If Dad knew his wolf was slipping its leash, he should have done more to protect his family. He should have gone to you for help or left the pack.”

Grandpa set down the mug and clenched his hands together. “Do you know how hard it is for a wolf to abandon his mate, his pups? He must’ve believed that he still had the upper hand, or he wouldn’t have stayed.”

“What could be worse than a wolf threatening his mate or his pups?” I asked. “If he even suspected he was losing the battle, that his wolf could turn against Mom, he should have done more to keep them safe.”

Grandpa leaned back against the rocker cushion, his brows drawn down to form a V. “Are you fighting a battle against your wolf?”

My muscles locked and it took a moment for me to answer. “I am,” I confessed in a harsh whisper. “For the past couple of months, my wolf has been out of sorts. Angry. Restless. Hard to control. He chased a deer and made the kill on state land. Snarled at packmates.” My voice trailed off. Fuck, I’d gone so far, I might as well tell it all. “He swears he’d never hurt Annika, but I’m not sure I can trust him. What if my wolf is hardwired to go rogue, like Dad’s?”

“For the past couple of months, he’s been giving you trouble, you say?” Grandpa asked.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Since around the time you met Annika? He didn’t challenge you before that?”

“No,” I said. “We’re both strong-willed, and sometimes we butted heads, but we always maintained our equilibrium.”

“Until you met *Annika*,” he repeated, emphasizing her name.

“Yeah.” I frowned. “So what?”

“Zane, you see the world in terms of black and white. No shades of gray. You’ve always followed the rules. Think about it. When you met Annika, I was alpha and my law forbidding mating with a human was still in place.”

“That’s right.”

“I bet anything your wolf recognized his mate right away, but your law-abiding human mind refused to even consider it,” Grandpa said.

“Adam had no trouble accepting that Marit was his mate, despite what the law said,” I pointed out.

Grandpa smiled fondly. “Adam knows right from wrong, but he’s never been a stickler for the rules, the way you are.”

“Adam is alpha now. The law has changed,” I reminded him.

“That’s right,” Grandpa agreed. “The law has changed, but your fear of losing control of your wolf hasn’t. That fear has burrowed deep into your heart, and it won’t go away easily. Consider this, maybe your wolf doesn’t have a genetic propensity to go rogue. Maybe he was frustrated and at his wit’s end because you wouldn’t listen to him when he tried to tell you Annika was the one. You’re still not listening.”

Hope was a tantalizing bitch, dangling the answer to my prayers almost within reach. I’d give almost anything if I could stake my claim to the sunny, generous, sweet-hearted human. Beneath my skin, my shadow brother pranced in agreement. I’d give anything to know for sure that Grandpa was right, but I couldn’t risk it.

Could I?

CHAPTER TEN



ANNIKA

When we sat down for the family breakfast, Zane took a seat at the opposite end of the table, creating an unwelcome distance between us. He barely spoke during the meal, but every time I glanced his way, I found his glacier-blue eyes zeroed in on me.

Talk about mixed messages.

Zane's taciturn nature, his silent reserve, his self-restraint, had always appealed to me. How many times had I wondered what would Zane be like in bed if he allowed his control to slip?

Or if he didn't? The alpha male wolf shifter—the stern taskmaster with sharp teeth and claws—capable of compelling obedience with a glance—had fueled a thousand kinky fantasies.

But in every fantasy, I knew for certain that he wanted me. In reality, I wasn't sure. Those damned mixed signals the man sent out.

As soon as Zane finished his last bite of French toast, he tossed his napkin on his plate, stood, and excused himself. The room fell silent. He walked around the table, heading for the door, then came to an abrupt halt next to my chair.

I turned my face up to his and waited for him to speak. I hadn't imagined how he responded to our kiss or the gentle way he'd touched my cheek afterward. He wasn't indifferent, no matter what the distance he now created implied, so why the ambivalence?

“You sleep well?” he asked.

I ignored the default impulse to assure him that I was fine. If I was ever going to bridge the impasse between us, I couldn't hide my feelings.

“Not really.”

He dropped into a squat, so our faces were level. His brows drew together and furrows creased his forehead.

“Bad dreams?” he asked.

After lying awake for hours, I’d slept in fits and starts. If I’d dreamed, I couldn’t remember it. I shook my head. “No.”

His frown deepened. “If you’re worried about the coyotes, you gotta know that the pack will keep you safe.”

Of course I was worried about the coyotes. Who could ignore a death threat? But it was more than fear for my personal safety that had held sleep at bay.

I tore my eyes away from Zane and glanced around the table. My gaze traveled from Marit, to Adam, to Matthew, to Xander, to Remy, before settling on Liv. My sister was still pale and shaky, unnaturally quiet after the bullet grazed her side. I loved her. I loved them all. A war would put their lives at risk, too.

I swallowed hard. “I don’t want people to die because I killed Bryce.”

Leaning forward, Zane grasped my shoulders. “Hey, listen up. Our enemies want the Black Rock. This war’s been a long time coming. It’s not about you shooting Bryce. The coyotes are just using you as a pretext to start hostilities.”

Even if that were true, the knowledge my actions were the spark that might ignite a bloody conflagration left me hollow and heartsick. I blinked back a sudden rush of tears.

“Not your fault.” Zane’s voice thickened to a deep rasp.

The wolf flashed in his eyes, shards of silver splintering the blue of his irises. His fingers tightened almost painfully on my shoulders. His face... it... it rippled, as if the muscles beneath his human flesh were subtly reshaping. The air surrounding Zane shimmered.

I sensed his wolf struggling to emerge.

A claw pricked my skin. I gasped in surprise, and he yanked his hands away.

Adam slowly rose to his feet.

Zane shuddered and dropped his head. The powerful cords in his neck worked. The single claw that had emerged from the tip of his thumb retracted. When he lifted his head, crystal-blue eyes without a hint of silver met mine.

The wolf was vanquished.

Without another word, he stood, turned on his heels, and strode from the room.



The day passed in a flurry of activity. I didn't see Zane again after breakfast. When I asked Marit where he was, she told me he was in the forest helping Remy install additional security cameras.

Adam spent hours on conference calls with the pack's allies, arranging for reinforcements to bolster their defenses. The big Pindus Pack from northern Greece agreed to send forty soldiers. The smaller Shawano Pack from Wisconsin—the original home of both Adam's father Jason and the trainee sentry, Liam—offered a dozen. Other allies also promised to provide soldiers. When all was said and done, the Black Rock Guardians had to scramble to accommodate at least seventy-five guests.

Many packmates vacated their private rooms in the lodge and doubled-up with friends. Zane hauled his clothes and toiletries to his brother's room. Liv and I moved from our private quarters into Adam and Marit's guest room. Teenagers set up cots in the basement. It'd be tight quarters, but all of the allied soldiers would have a place to sleep.

Liv managed the business side of Freya's Bake Shop: ordering supplies, paying the bills, handling all the paperwork. Marit asked Liv to calculate how much additional food would be needed and to put together a shopping list. Xander and another young wolf drove a van to the big warehouse store in East Wenatchee and loaded up on foodstuffs. We sent a pair of wolves to Belle Reve to pick up extra pans, cookie sheets, and

other supplies from the bakeshop. Marit and I worked in the communal kitchen, getting organized to both feed the influx of visitors and bake things for the shop.

I predicted a lot of late nights and early mornings in our future.

The first batch of packmates summoned home from their travels flew into SeaTac midafternoon, Kyra among them. Adam had gotten a hold of all of our missing packmates except one. Rolf's nephew Jackson hadn't responded to the texts. Liam picked them up and shuttled them back to the lodge. Kyra might have been disappointed over cutting short her visit with her aunt, but you couldn't tell by looking at her. The friendly, red-haired young sentry gave Liv and me a huge smile when she arrived at the lodge and immediately pitched in to help.

By dinnertime, we were all exhausted. A grumpy Liv—weak and in pain—ate a sandwich and went to bed early. I stayed late in the dining hall, helping with the cleanup and hoping to catch a glimpse of Zane, but he and Remy were working late installing the security cameras. The men had to eat dinner eventually, didn't they?

I didn't notice Marit walk up behind me until she threw an arm around my shoulders and pulled me into a hug. "I love Zane," she said. "But sometimes I swear that his stubbornness is going to drive me around the bend."

My astute cousin had seen right through me and figured out why I was lingering in the dining hall.

"You're spouting grandma-isms." I returned the hug.

She laughed. "They pop out when I'm tired."

After barely sleeping last night, I was wiped, too. "It's been a long day. You know what time it is?"

"A little after ten." She covered her mouth to hide a wide yawn.

Ten p.m.

A shiver ticked up my spine. I'd been pushing away thoughts of the coyotes' impending deadline all day. If the wolves refused to turn me over by midnight, things would get interesting, Vilhauer had promised. What did that mean?

Adam told me that any combat was unlikely to involve a gun battle or heavy weapons. A human might call the authorities to report artillery fire. Officers from the Department of Fish and Wildlife—who investigated crimes in the forest that abutted the pack's holdings—would descend on the woods.

Nobody wanted to draw the attention of the state. So, what would a *quiet* shifter war look like?

Ten p.m.

I frowned. "Shouldn't Zane and Remy have finished with the cameras by now?"

"They probably have, but I'm sure Adam put them on another job. I doubt whether Adam or the sentries will get much sleep tonight." Marit yawned again.

I looked closely at my cousin. Lines of fatigue etched her face and dark half-circles smudged the skin under her eyes. Her usually clear eyes were bloodshot. She was running herself ragged trying to be the perfect alpha's mate.

"How about you? Will you get any sleep?" I asked. "You look like you're about to fall down."

"No, I'm good." She waved a dismissive hand, then undermined the assertion with another yawn.

"I'm going to text Adam and tell him you're exhausted," I threatened, pulling my phone from my pocket. "Somebody needs to remind the pack that you're a human, and that you don't have a shifter's stamina."

"No." Marit grabbed my hand. "That's not it."

"No? Then what is it?" I demanded.

Marit bit her lips together and lifted a shoulder with exaggerated nonchalance.

“Marit?” I drawled, suspicion dawning in my mind.

She tugged on my hand and pulled me out into the empty hallway. She leaned close and spoke in a whisper. “It occurred to me this morning. I’m five days late.”

“Holy shit, you think you’re pregnant?”

“I don’t know,” she moaned. “I’ve never maybe-been-pregnant before.”

“I thought—” I started.

“I know,” she interrupted, throwing her hands in the air. “Adam said that wolf shifters aren’t especially fertile. That they hardly ever have more than two kids. That even if we tried, I probably wouldn’t get pregnant for years. It’s only been a couple of months.”

“Does he know?” I whispered.

She wagged her head. “Leigh told me that alphas are always the first to sense a new baby in the pack. Adam would have said something if he even suspected.” She shrugged again. “But maybe it’s too soon for even an alpha to tell. Or maybe I’m just running a few days late and my period will still show up.”

I couldn’t read past the overwhelm and uncertainty on Marit’s face. “Do you *want* to be pregnant?” I asked.

Marit hesitated. “I want to have children with Adam. More than anything. But I thought I’d have a couple of years to figure out pack life before I got pregnant. And with the war heating up, the timing is terrible.”

My stomach clenched. Zane and Adam assured me that the war wasn’t my fault, but I’d played a big part in the timing of it, hadn’t I? And if Marit was pregnant, all the stress—not to mention the physical danger—couldn’t be good for her or the baby.

Whatever it takes, I silently vowed. I’d do whatever it takes to keep Marit safe and healthy.

“If it turns out you’re pregnant, Adam will be out of his mind with joy,” I said.

“Yeah.” She smiled. “He will.”

“How about you go up to bed and let me finish any chores still hanging over your head?” I suggested.

“Nope,” she refused. “As the alpha’s mate, I have a part to play in the pack. They need to see me taking care of business. It helps them believe that all will be well.”

“Some kind of pack magic thing?” I guessed.

She made a face. “I don’t know. Maybe. Or maybe it’s human psychology at work. In any case, I can’t go to bed early.”

She was not going to back down, so I gave up. “If you aren’t going to bed, I won’t either. Tell me what I can do to help.”

Marit and I kept busy for the next couple of hours. It was after midnight before we finally retired to the presidential suite. Marit stumbled, bleary-eyed, to the primary bedroom. I used the bathroom, donned my favorite pajamas, and headed for the guest room. Leaving the door open a crack, I tiptoed across the carpet and slid onto one side of the king-sized bed, careful not to jostle Liv, who was lying flat on her back on the other side, snoring softly.

Loki ambled into the room and over to my side of the bed. He laid his chin on the mattress and looked at me with an unblinking, hopeful expression. “Sorry, baby,” I murmured. “Mommy and Daddy say no sleeping on the bed.”

He tossed his head, as if disappointed that I wouldn’t fall for his charms and allow him to sleep sprawled across my feet. With a sniff, he trotted from the room.

I rolled onto my side. “Hey, Grandma,” I whispered into the dark. “Put in a good word for Marit, and Adam, and Liv, and everybody in the pack, will you? And Zane, keep a special eye on Zane.”

My lids drifted shut. In my mind’s eye, I relived the moment of our first kiss, saw again his expression when he touched my face. My pulse sped up, the way it had in that

moment. I touched my mouth, remembering the sensation of his lips against mine.

Smiling to myself, I slipped gently into slumber.

Sometime later, the boom of a door slamming shut startled me awake. Rapid-fire conversation came from a nearby room. I heard the *tap-tap-tap* of feet rushing down the hallway. I sat up, swung my legs out of the bed, and squinted into the semidarkness. Next to me, Liv groaned a protest and burrowed into her pillow.

Half-awake, I cocked my head to one side, listening hard. At the sound of Zane's deep voice, relief swept over me. A desperate compulsion to see him—to make sure that he was all right—propelled me to my feet. I ran to the living room, then stopped dead in my tracks.

Blood. Zane's shirt was covered with fresh blood. It stained his chest and stomach and dripped down onto his jeans.

"Oh, my God." I flew to his side, torn between the need to touch him and the fear of doing harm if he was hurt. "Zane?" My knees trembled, and my hands shook when I reached out and patted his uninjured arm.

"Not my blood," he gritted out.

"What happened?" I choked on the words. "Whose blood is it?" A horrible thought occurred to me. "Not Remy's?"

"No, not my brother's blood either. Remy and I'd just got back to the lodge and were heading to the kitchen to scrounge up something to eat, when a soldier charged into the lobby carrying an injured wolf in his arms. I helped get him to the infirmary."

"A shifter, not a natural gray wolf?" I asked.

"Yeah, a packmate," Zane confirmed. "One of our soldiers was running patrol in wolf form. Without any warning, a coyote fucker shot him with a crossbow. He managed to run back toward the lodge with a bolt buried in his side. He collapsed a hundred yards from the porch. Another soldier found him and carried him in. He's with Aunt Leigh and Uncle Jason now."

“It was Kyra’s brother, Harrison.” Rage filled Adam’s voice. “Twenty-two years old. Smart as a whip. Wants to be an architect.”

Dear God, Kyra must be beside herself. Her poor parents.

“It’s a miracle he didn’t bleed out before he made it back to HQ,” Zane said.

Adam glanced at Marit. “We need to go to him, kitten.”

“Give me thirty seconds to throw on a robe and slippers.” She dashed from the room.

“When the alpha and his mate lay their hands on an injured pack member, it speeds the healing process,” Adam explained to me.

Alpha magic.

Only six months ago, I believed magic and the big bad wolf were the stuff of fairy tales. Back then, I had no idea that my grandma had loved a wolf shifter, or that I carried shifter DNA. If Marit hadn’t met and fallen in love with Adam, I might have lived my life in ignorance of both my heritage and the supernatural world. Now I couldn’t imagine a life without my new family, without the pack. Without Zane.

If I brought danger to their doorstep, if I was in any way responsible for Harrison’s injury, it would be more than I could bear. Adam and Zane kept telling me that the war wasn’t my fault. Even if that were true—even if I were nothing more than a scapegoat the coyotes used in their quest to steal the Black Rock—did it matter? Would a coyote have shot Harrison if the wolves hadn’t refused to hand me over? Would Marit be worried and exhausted—when she might be pregnant—if the wolves weren’t sheltering me?

I doubted it.

Marit ran back into the room. Adam took her hand and they raced out of the suite.

Holding his hands out in front of him, Zane stared at his bloodstained palms for almost a minute. He raised his eyes to meet mine, his expression bleak. “Gonna go take a shower and

put on clean clothes, then I'll check on Harrison. You need anything before I go?"

I shook my head. I needed something, but Zane couldn't give it to me. I needed to fix this mess.

"Try to get some sleep," he urged. Stretching out his arm, he almost touched me before he stopped short. He frowned down at his hand as if the drying blood that stained his skin had somehow seeped into his pores and polluted his soul.

"Hey." I couldn't let him walk away thinking that I'd ever reject his touch. I wrapped my fingers around his upper arms and gave a gentle shake. "Everything is going to be all right."

His raptor gaze swung my way. "You think?"

"I do," I said. "And you know what else I think?"

"What?" Suspicion narrowed his eyes.

"I think you're a good man, and spending time with you has been a blessing."

"Shit, Annika. I'm nobody's blessing," he scoffed.

"Take the compliment, Zane," I ordered in a gruff, don't-mess-with-me voice.

The corner of his mouth kicked up. At that, some of the tension in my chest relaxed. I'd distracted him from his worries with my tough-girl act, at least for a few seconds.

"Bossy woman," he intoned.

"You've no idea." I cracked an imaginary whip.

He clutched his chest, a genuine smile touching his lips. "Bossy *and* more vicious than a junkyard dog."

"And don't you forget it," I warned, shaking a finger at him.

His expression sobered. "I'll never forget a single second I've spent with you."

Sweet. Despite all his protestations to the contrary, the man was sweet. Tears filled my eyes, tears totally at odds with the

playful moment we'd carved from a difficult day. I brushed them away, refusing to sour one second of this time with Zane.

"Annika..." he started.

A woman could only take so much. If we didn't end this conversation quickly, I might lose my nerve.

"You need to go take a shower and check on Harrison," I reminded him.

He hesitated.

"Get going." I waved him off.

"Yes, ma'am." He offered a mocking salute, then strode to the door. He glanced over his shoulder and nodded, then quietly pulled the door shut behind him.

"Zane," I whispered, pressing a fist against my stomach. I sucked in a breath, held it for a count of ten, then slowly exhaled. Careful not to wake Liv, I slipped into the guest room, and traded my pajamas for jeans and a sweatshirt. I grabbed my wallet, then stood for moment, looking down at my sleeping sister.

"I love you." My lips silently formed the words.

Back in the living room, I took a seat on a sofa and dug around in my wallet until I found a business card. I pulled my cell phone from my pocket.

Loki ambled over to me and pressed against my leg as I punched in a number. With my free hand, I wove my fingers through his silky fur and held on to the dog for dear life.

"Vilhauer 24-Hour Towing," a woman answered.

"Hello." Despite my brave resolve, my voice quaked. I cleared my throat and tried again. "This is Annika Hagen. I need to speak to Lance Vilhauer."

CHAPTER ELEVEN



ZANE

Sixty seconds after I climbed into the shower, I was sluicing off the last of the soapsuds and blood. My mind raced even faster than my hands. Something was wrong. I couldn't shake a nagging sense of impending disaster.

"Spit it out." I urged my brain to reveal what my subconscious saw that my conscious mind didn't.

Frustrated, I turned off the water, stepped out of the stall, and grabbed a towel. I was scrubbing my arms dry when it hit me. My hands stilled.

What had Annika said?

"Everything is going to be all right." Followed by, "You're a good man and spending time with you has been a blessing."

That sounded a lot like a goodbye.

Fuck.

I threw on a pair of jeans, shoved my feet into boots, and dashed toward the presidential suite, not bothering to knock on the unlocked door. Adam and Marit were with Harrison, and Annika and Liv should be asleep in the guest room.

Shutting the door quietly behind me, I glanced around the living room. A table lamp spilled light across the empty couches and chairs. Loki dozed on the hearth rug. He lifted his head, blinked twice, saw it was me, and settled back down. I hurried up the hall to the guest room and pushed the door open. Liv slept soundly on her half of the bed, one arm thrown over her head. Annika's side was empty.

Where the hell was she?

Two steps brought me to the hall bathroom. I tapped on the door, hoping against hope I'd find Annika soaking in the tub. Nope.

A boulder lodged in my chest. I yanked out my cell phone and punched in Annika's number. A few seconds later,

Annika's unmistakable ringtone rang out from the living room. I rushed down the hall and glanced around the room, tracking the sound. The phone was nowhere in sight, but I found it stuck between two sofa cushions.

Had it slipped from her pocket and wedged itself between the cushions? Or had she hid it?

A bad feeling—something as close to panic as I've ever experienced—grabbed me by the balls. I tapped the phone icon and checked her recent calls. She'd called a local number ten minutes ago. Holding my breath, I hit redial.

"Vilhauer 24-Hour Towing," a woman's sleepy voice answered.

My lungs seized and my muscles locked. What the ever-loving hell had Annika done?

"Are you there?" the woman asked.

I hit the end call button.

Ten minutes. She'd made the call ten minutes ago. Even if she'd immediately rushed downstairs and hopped into a car, she couldn't have made it through the woods to the state highway yet. A locked gate blocked access to and from the highway. She'd have to punch in the code on the keypad before turning on to the main road into town. Remy and his security team kept track of every time the gate opened.

I lurched into action and bolted from the suite, yanking my phone out again and hitting Remy's number as I ran.

"Has anybody opened the gate in the past few minutes?"

"No, why?" Remy asked.

I ignored his question. "Remote lock the keypad, stat."

"What's going—"

I disconnected, shoved the phone back in my pocket before Remy could finish his question, then hurtled down the stairs, through the lobby, onto the porch. I scanned the row of vehicles parked in front of the lodge. Grandma Freya's white sedan was missing.

Grim determination flooded my veins.

You won't get far.

My predatory instincts roared to life. The familiar excitement of the hunt heated my blood, the primal need to give chase, to bring down my prey.

Annika's not prey, the wolf protested, as if deliberately reminding me she was always safe with him.

No, but she won't escape me, I thought.

Won't escape us, the wolf corrected me. *Hurry, brother.*

If I cut through the forest on foot, I could beat the sedan to the gate. I'd cover ground faster on four feet rather than two. I quickly stripped off my boots and jeans, then dropped my leather-and-black-rock bracelet onto the pile of clothes. Cracking my neck, I summoned my shadow brother. The air around me shimmered. Pain bit into me. Muscles and tendons stretched. Bones cracked and my skin split, as the shift from man to wolf reconfigured my body.

Standing on four legs, I shuddered, settled my fur, then leapt from the porch. I bounded toward the trees, my wolf's sharp vision easily piercing the darkness. I ran hard, my legs eating up the distance between me and the woman who would be my mate. My paws struck against the wet ground. Mud splattered my fur. I tasted Annika's scent in the air, an irresistible mixture of vanilla, coconut, and woman. Stronger than the smell of damp pine, or rotting foliage, or rabbit, or deer, or any other prey. The sweet fragrance led me unerringly toward her.

I burst through two tall trees and skidded to a stop, not ten feet from the metal gate that blocked the roadway. Grandma Freya's car approached, its headlights revealing my presence to the driver. I stood, imposing and tall, blocking her way. The car squealed to an abrupt stop. Annika leaned forward, dismay on her pretty features. She stared through the windshield at my wolf, then slumped back in the driver's seat, looking defeated. Thirty seconds later, she turned off the headlights, plunging her world into darkness. I could see just fine.

Residual power from the black rock still coursed through my veins. I quickly shifted back to my human form. Rain pelted my naked body, streaming down my face, chest, and legs. I scarcely felt it as I strode to the car and pulled on the door handle. Locked.

Did she seriously think it would do her any good to lock the damned car door?

I tapped my fist against her window. "Open up, Annika."

She hit the gas and the car lurched forward a few feet.

Oh, she did not. Four long strides, and I caught up with her and pounded on the window again. "What's the plan? You gonna ram the damned gate?"

I wouldn't put it past Liv to try it, but Annika was less impulsive and more likely to see reason than her twin. I swallowed back my frustration and thumped the glass again, this time more gently.

She hit the gas, and the car hitched forward.

Seriously? I caught up and grabbed the door handle again.

"You aren't going anywhere," I said. "You might as well stop the car."

Glowering at me, she rolled the window down a few inches and cut the engine. "Happy?"

"Darlin', I'm about as far from happy as a man can get."

I tried the door handle. Still locked. I blew out an impatient breath. Did she understand that if I half tried I could snap the handle clean off? Shit. Get me riled up enough, and I could rip the door from the car and throw it across the road.

At that thought, my irritation plummeted back down to earth. Was that what I wanted to do with Annika? To get my way through physical force? To bully and frighten her into submission?

Hell, no.

Not unless it was the only way to keep her safe.

Beneath my skin, a low growl rolled from the wolf. He was *so* not on board with the notion of doing anything that might scare Annika.

I stepped back from the car and raised both hands in the air. “We need to talk about your plan to go to Vilhauer. Unlock the door.”

She turned around in the seat, retrieved something from the back, then opened the car door. Hopping out, she tossed me a red-and-green plaid stadium blanket.

“Do you mind?” she asked, averting her eyes from my body.

Running around naked was nothing to a shifter, but my nudity clearly discomfited Annika. And maybe standing close to the tempting woman—trying to carry on a serious conversation with my junk hanging out—might put me at a disadvantage.

I wrapped the blanket around my shoulders, covering everything down to my knees. “Good enough?” I asked.

Annika crossed her arms and leaned against the car door, a defiant expression on her face. I walked over and stood a couple of feet away.

Patience. Not my strong suit, but the situation required a butt load of it. I’d let Annika speak first, and not because I was a gentleman. I’d conducted enough interrogations to know that extended silence made folks uncomfortable. Sometimes uncomfortable people yammered out inconvenient truths.

Seconds ticked by. I stood very still, my eyes locked on Annika.

Her arms fell to her side, and she twisted her hands together. “No matter how you parse the facts, Harrison got shot because the wolves won’t turn me over to the coyotes.” Her eyes were shiny. “And I don’t know how to live with that knowledge.”

Her pain was palpable. “Annika—” I started.

She raised a hand, stopping my words.

“Please don’t tell me it’s not my fault. I’ve heard all of your rationalizations and they don’t help, not one bit. Even if war is inevitable, *today* people are getting hurt because of me. Turning myself over to Vilhauer seemed like the best way to placate the coyotes and stop the violence, at least for a little while.”

The sweetheart had no fucking clue about shifters and how far we’d go to protect and avenge our own. Time for some hard facts.

“You’re right. Harrison got shot because we won’t hand you over to the coyotes for execution.”

She flinched.

I continued. “That changes *nothing*. You think things are bad now? If you’d succeeded, if the coyotes executed you, Adam would rain hell down on the Vilhauer pack. He’s no hothead, but if anybody hurt a member of his family, nothing but bloody revenge will satisfy his wolf.”

“I didn’t think—”

“No,” I cut her off. “You *didn’t* think about the consequences of your actions. About what your death would do to the people who love you. Liv and Marit would be gutted. And I—” I stopped short, unwilling to reveal my heart by finishing that sentence. “If you had stopped to think, you never would have reached out to Vilhauer.”

“I’m so tired.” She scrubbed her hands over her face. “My brain’s muddled. I can’t figure out the right thing to do.”

Well, shit. Figuring out the right thing to do was my gift. “First things first. You’re gonna promise me that you will never—abso-fucking-lutely *never*—try to pull this stunt again. You won’t offer yourself to the coyotes, or the grizzlies, or anybody else who means to do you harm.”

She dropped her hands and met my eyes.

I jutted out my chin. “You give me that promise, or I’m gonna lock you down.”

“Zane.” On her lips, the word was a you-can’t-be-serious reproach from a modern human woman who couldn’t fathom the notion of a man curtailing her freedom.

She had no clue how far I’d go to protect my own. “I mean it, Annika.”

She studied my face, saw my resolve, saw that I wasn’t bullshitting her. Her eyes grew wide. I could almost see the wheels turning in her head. She sighed, giving up.

“Okay. You win. If you’re sure that it would only make things worse, I promise I won’t try to turn myself over to the coyotes again.”

“Glad to hear it.” Once Annika gave her word, I knew she’d keep it.

“But as long as I’m at the lodge, under the wolves’ protection, the coyotes will keep striking out at the pack,” she continued. “Adam will respond. The violence will only escalate.”

I grunted. Retaliations and counter retaliations, that was likely how this would play out.

“Shifters can tell if someone is lying, right?” she asked.

I frowned. “Right.”

“If I disappeared, if Adam could truthfully tell Vilhauer that he had no idea where I was, then the coyotes couldn’t claim that the wolves were sheltering me. They’d lose their excuse for waging war.”

“Hell, no.” Disappearing was not the answer. The thought of Annika alone and defenseless in the world was almost as bad as her plan to turn herself over to Vilhauer.

“I can’t hide in the lodge while bodies pile up, Zane. *I can’t*. It would break me.” Leaning forward, she lay a hand on my chest. Even through the blanket, her touch lit sparks across my skin. “Maybe... maybe I can’t prevent the war, but if I go away, I can hit the pause button on it, at least for a little while.”

Not two minutes ago, a threat to confine the woman extracted a promise of cooperation from her. It was worth trying again. “Give me your word that you won’t disappear, or —”

“Or what?” she broke in. “You’ll lock me down, like a princess in a tower in a fairy tale? Do you think I’d hold still for that? Do you think Marit would go along with the plan? Or —God help us—*Liv*? Trust me. You don’t want to mess with the Hagen women.”

Dammit. Life would be so much easier if she’d back down and let me keep her safe, but when pushed too hard, the sweetheart showed her claws.

Beneath my skin, my wolf roared his approval.

Traitor, I thought.

He sniffed.

“Here’s the plain truth,” I told her. “If you run from me, I’ll hunt you. Track you to the ends of the earth if I have to. Wouldn’t be able to stop myself.”

She contemplated my words, her eyebrows pulled together with an adorable dent between them. After a few seconds, her forehead smoothed.

“How about if you come with me?” she slowly asked.

CHAPTER TWELVE



ANNIKA

A steady drizzle fell as Zane parked his truck on the street in front of the bungalow. At not quite six in the morning in October, the sun hadn't yet peeked over the horizon. We dashed up the wet front walk with only the light from the streetlamp to illuminate our way. I unlocked the door and quickly punched the security code into the keypad.

"I'll be five minutes, tops."

"No problem." He pointed to the kitchen. "I'll eat another piece of your black bottom pie while I wait."

He'd opened the door with that comment, hadn't he? I fluttered my lashes, then poked the bear—er, the wolf.

"You really like to sink your teeth into something sweet, don't you, Zane?"

His jaw dropped as he caught my not-so-subtle meaning.

I held his surprised gaze for a moment, then turned. Smiling to myself, I jogged down the short hall to my bedroom, hauled a suitcase out from under the bed, and started throwing clothes and shoes into it.

The backpack I'd brought to the lodge Saturday night was stowed in the rear seat of the truck, next to two duffels crammed full of Zane's stuff. Since we didn't know how long we'd be gone, we were stopping at the house so I could grab additional clothes and toiletries.

The \$400 in emergency cash I'd hidden in my sock drawer would come in handy, especially since we couldn't use our bank or credit cards once we left town. Remy was a computer whiz. We couldn't leave an electronic trail for the security chief to follow, not when we wanted to stay off the pack's radar.

I fetched the \$400 I'd hidden in a thick sock and tucked the cash into my pocket. On impulse, I grabbed my pillow—the one whose pillowcase Grandma Freya had embroidered with

frolicking kittens—and from the foot of the bed, the colorful, crazy quilt she'd hand-stitched. Tossing the quilt over my shoulder and tucking the pillow under my arm, I rolled the heavy suitcase to the front hall.

Zane stood at the kitchen sink, holding a slab of black bottom pie in his hands. He glanced at the quilt and pillow and arched a brow. “We can afford a motel, you know.”

“I know, but having Grandma’s quilt will be like taking a little piece of home with me.”

He bit into the pie, chewed, and swallowed, his expression thoughtful. He brushed a smear of whipped cream off his chin, then licked his fingertip. I followed the action with avid eyes. My nipples tightened at the sight of his broad tongue flicking against the cream.

“If you’re having second thoughts, it’s not too late to change your mind.” He took another giant bite.

“No.” I shook my head to emphasize my refusal. “This is the best way to prevent more bloodshed.”

He looked as unconvinced now as he did last night when I first argued my case for disappearing. I held my breath, bracing for another argument. None came. He still didn’t like my plan, but he was willing to go along with it when he saw how much it mattered to me.

“Have it your way.” He brushed crumbs off his fingers. “Ready?”

“Almost.” I crossed the kitchen and pulled open the junk drawer. In the very back—kept safe in a small metal box—I found what I was looking for. I dangled keys in the air. “We don’t want to drive three thousand miles only to realize we’re locked out.”

He snorted, as if amused by the suggestion that a locked door would thwart his plans. He took the suitcase from me and strode toward the door. I set the alarm and followed him out.

We drove to our banks first and withdrew cash from the ATMs, then to the gas station. While Zane filled the tank, I shopped for food and drinks. It was slim pickings in the gas

station's small market, but Belle Reve's only grocery store wouldn't open for hours. At Zane's request, I picked up three burner phones, too. After dropping the bags on the floor of the back seat, I took out my cell. My fingers flew over the keypad.

Going away for a while. Pack won't know where I am so coyotes can't blame them for protecting me. Best way to restore peace and stop the violence. I'll be okay, I promise. Zane is with me, keeping me safe. Be in touch later. Wait till ten to tell Adam and Marit. Love you!!!

I hit Send and glanced at Zane, who was slipping the gas nozzle back into its holder. "All done."

He dropped his cell phone onto the concrete, stomped it, then tossed it into a nearby garbage can. He held out his hand for my phone. I reluctantly passed it over, wincing when he smashed the pretty pink-crystal case, and threw it into the garbage.

"I'll buy you a new one when it's safe." He strode past me to open my door.

Why did the man always insist that he was a mean-spirited grump? "You *are* sweet," I said emphatically as I climbed into the cab.

Was that a growl that rumbled from his chest before he shut my door?

Zane picked up two coffees at a drive-through, then we headed out of town.

"How far do you think we'll get today?" I asked, inhaling the glorious aroma of freshly brewed coffee.

"I'd like to get least as far as Bozeman before we stop for the night. That's a good ten hour drive." He took a sip of the piping hot coffee. "We could go farther—"

"You didn't sleep at all last night," I reminded him. "And I only got a few hours in myself. We can take turns driving, but I think we should stop in time to get a good night's rest."

He lifted a muscular shoulder. "I can go days without sleep. Shifter stamina, you know?"

No, I didn't know, but I could imagine. Man oh man, could I imagine.

My mind flashed back to the conversation Marit, Liv, and I had in Grandma's cabin over a pitcher of margaritas, a few hours before Olga set the place on fire. Topsy and with my inhibitions down, I'd asked Marit what sex with a shifter was like. Her description kept me awake at night and sometimes had me reaching into my nightstand drawer for my vibrator.

Amazing stamina. Short refractory period. Cock locks in place. Comes like a geyser.

I conjured up a mental picture of a naked, hard-bodied, inexhaustible Zane coming like a geyser. Sighing happily, I squirmed in my seat.

"Shifter stamina."

Oh, crap. Had I said that out loud? Was that dreamy, moonstruck voice mine? My cheeks heated and I stared straight ahead through the windshield. After sixty seconds of awkward silence, I shot a sideways look at Zane. He caught me in the act. A cocky, self-satisfied smile curved his lips.

He glanced into the rearview mirror. The smile slid from his face. "Take this." He handed me his coffee and put both hands on the steering wheel.

Craning my neck, I looked over my shoulder. A vehicle followed about a mile behind us. Darkness had barely loosened its grip on the land. In the pale morning light, under a rainy sky, I couldn't make out its color or shape. As I watched, it maintained a steady distance, neither speeding up to pass us nor falling behind. Zane drove for another few minutes, checking the mirror often.

Intuition told me I might need to use my hands. I lowered the passenger window and dumped out both coffees. "Call me paranoid, but I think somebody's after us."

"You aren't paranoid," Zane said. "I thought we'd be safe driving my truck. They shouldn't know the license plate. Looks like Vilhauer had somebody watching your house."

I turned around in my seat and squinted into the distance. All of a sudden, the vehicle following behind us sped up and raced toward us. Zane hit the gas, taking the next curve faster than I liked.

A red tow truck careened around the curve, hot on our tail. It flashed its headlights.

“Vilhauer Towing,” I cried.

“Yeah,” Zane’s voice was grim.

Lance Vilhauer wanted me dead. He’d be furious that I’d stood him up, that I failed to turn myself over for execution. I had absolutely no doubt that he’d kill Zane to get to me.

“Is a tow truck fast enough and powerful enough to force a pickup off the road?” I asked.

“Not gonna happen,” Zane said through clenched teeth.

He braked hard. The tires squealed. I braced myself, one hand on the dash and the other on the door, as the truck pulled a rapid U-turn. He shifted to park but left the motor idling.

Before I could catch my breath, Zane pulled a gun from the glove box and leapt from the truck.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



ZANE

Pistol in hand, I stalked toward the tow truck. I kept my eyes forward, locked on the driver who sat like a statue behind his steering wheel. Behind me, the door to the pickup swung open. Shoes struck the pavement when Annika hopped out. A breeze carried her sweet scent my way.

“Fucking hell,” I muttered.

Liv had asked me if a wolf could handle one measly coyote. Cocky and full of confidence, I’d said yes. Look how that encounter went sideways.

I’d left my key in the ignition and the motor running. In the unlikely event that the coyote got the best of me, I’d told myself Annika could quickly throw the truck into gear and get away. She was reckless with her own safety, but not stupid. It hadn’t occurred to me to order her to stay put. You wouldn’t think I’d have to state the obvious, but apparently, in Annika’s case, I did.

“Get back in the truck,” I ordered.

Her footsteps faltered but didn’t retreat. Dammit.

“Annika,” I snapped in a voice my packmates knew meant business. “Get your ass back in the truck.”

“No,” she replied. “I won’t come any closer, but I’m not getting in the truck.”

We’d talk about this stubborn disobedience later.

The coyote still hadn’t budged from behind the wheel. A dozen feet from the front of his truck, I halted. I balanced my weight on the balls of my feet, ready to spring out of the way if he hit the gas.

To my surprise, he cut his engine, climbed out of the cab, and slowly approached me, both hands raised over his head. Coyotes were sly devils. His helpless pose didn’t fool me into lowering my guard. Coming to a stop a few feet away, he kept

his arms in the air. I recognized him. Vilhauer's son, the one who shot Liv.

"What do you want?" I asked.

"I just want to talk," he said.

"Yeah? You mean you wanna keep me busy yakking till your coyote buddies get here?"

"No." He jerked his head in a negative. "I was assigned to stake out the Hagen house." He pointed at Annika. "But I didn't call it in when she showed up."

"Why would I believe that?" I scoffed.

"Because it's true. Consider it a gesture of good faith."

Annika sidled up next to me. Fucking hell. So much for her promise to stay close to the truck.

"How is she?" the coyote asked. "The woman who got shot."

"She'll live," I said, putting myself between Annika and the coyote. I glanced down at her hand and frowned. Why on earth did she have a death grip on a tube of lipstick?

"Good... that's good." His eyes swept toward Annika. "I didn't mean for your sister to get hurt."

"What do you want?" I slowly repeated. I didn't buy for one minute that he followed me for miles in order to inquire about Liv's health.

"My father's gone off the deep end," he said. "His new woman—Courtney—she's twisting him around her little finger and playing him for a fool."

I had a low opinion of coyotes but an even lower opinion of a man who'd turn on his kin.

"What game are you playing?" I demanded.

"No game. I love my father, but he's obsessed with the Black Rock, and he's listening to a woman who's howling for blood. His bad judgment is endangering the pack. Coyotes

can't win a war against wolves." Scowling with apparent frustration, he lowered his hands to shoulder height.

"Watch it." Wouldn't put it past the man to try to fake me out, to reach for a weapon behind his back. I waved my pistol, warning him against any such foolhardy attempt.

"Shit. Sorry." He lifted his hands into the air again. "Listen. Dad's relying on Maxim Medved to send grizzly reinforcements, but I don't trust Medved not to screw us over and make a play for the Black Rock himself."

Maxim Medved was a self-serving son of a bitch who wouldn't think twice about betraying an ally. In his case, the apple didn't fall far from the tree. Medved's father came within spitting distance of wiping out the Black Rock Guardians pack back in Alaska in the 1950s. Our survivors barely got away with their lives and our powerful Black Rock.

The younger Vilhauer was right about one thing. Only a fool would count on Medved as an ally.

"For the third and last time, what do you want?" I growled.

"I want you to tell your alpha that there are some of us in the Vilhauer pack who think the war is a mistake. Tell him we'll be reaching out. And if he wants proof of our goodwill, point out that if I'd called for reinforcements, I could've had fifty coyotes surrounding you and your pretty little human right now."

He looked me straight in the eye, and I didn't catch one whiff of deceit coming off him.

"You want peace?" Annika spoke up, hope in her voice.

"The pack's survival comes first," he answered. "Peaceful coexistence with the wolves is the only way forward for my people."

"Even if it means breaking faith with your father?" she persisted.

"Yes," he said. "Even then. My name's Daniel, by the way."

"I'm Annika. It's good to meet you, Daniel."

“For fuck’s sake,” I snarled. “This isn’t a tea party.”

Off in the distance, past Daniel Vilhauer’s head, I spied another vehicle rolling toward us.

His keen shifter hearing caught the sound of the approaching car. He glanced over his shoulder. “Somebody’s coming. We should get gone.”

I gestured with the gun for him to return to the tow truck. Hands held high, he backed up to the door and climbed in.

“I believe him,” Annika said. “Maybe there’s a way to make peace with the coyotes.”

I tucked the pistol into my waistband, seized Annika’s arm, and hustled her back to my pickup. Vilhauer’s tow truck hung a u-ey and accelerated toward Belle Reve. The oncoming vehicle—a beater driven by a teenaged girl—drove past us without slowing down.

Annika fastened her seat belt and glanced at me. “Do *you* believe him?”

I threw the pickup into gear and sped away from Belle Reve. First things first. “I *believe*,” I emphasized the word, “that I told you to get back in the truck.”

She heaved a long-suffering sigh. “Yes, you did. But at the risk of sounding like a petulant child, you’re not the boss of me, Zane Hunter.”

I braked hard and the truck skittered to a stop. I turned to face her. “I’m a wolf soldier, a sentry for the Black Rock Guardians pack. When it comes to your safety and security, I *am* the boss of you.”

No sensible person could argue against that.

Annika wrinkled up her nose, a gesture so darned cute that it almost distracted me. “How’s this for a compromise?” she said. “When bullets fly—or fists or claws—I’ll defer to your experience and do as I’m told.”

“Yeah, you will,” I agreed, not exactly in the spirit of compromise. “It’s my job to stand between you and danger. Why else do you think I came on this damned trip?”

She flinched. “Are you saying that I’m just a job to you? That you’re here only because Adam ordered you to watch out for me?”

Ah, shit. I’d hurt her feelings again. I bit back my irritation and gentled my voice. “No, that’s not what I’m saying.”

Beneath my skin, the wolf nudged at me.

“What *are* you saying?” she persisted.

Tell her, the wolf urged.

“I like you,” I said, then groaned inwardly. Like? How lame was that? The word made it sound as if I felt no more than a tepid affection for her, a fondness totally devoid of passion or spark. Absolutely nothing could be further from the truth.

She sat up straight and swiveled her body to face me head-on. “I’m a grown woman. You don’t need to worry about hurting my feelings. You’re a... you’re a hard man to read. I can’t tell if you feel anything for me beyond friendship or duty. When I kissed you, you kissed me back, but that doesn’t necessarily mean anything. People hook up all the time without it meaning anything.”

“Annika—”

She held up a hand. “No. Let me finish. The truth is—*my truth is*—that I’m attracted to you in a way I’ve never been attracted to any other man.” A blush crawled up her cheeks, but she resolutely held my gaze. “If it’s one-sided or unwelcome, if your wolf wants me but you don’t, tell me. I’m a big girl. I can take it. We can get on with our lives as if this conversation never happened. And don’t worry. I have waaay too much self-respect to make a fool of myself chasing after a man who doesn’t want me.”

The fragile human woman was more brave and willing to lay it on the line than the big bad shifter. My wolf pranced and tossed his head, his joy bubbling up through my skin. I had to lay it on the line, too.

“I’m guarded with my feelings,” I confessed. “I don’t make it easy for people to read me or to get close. But the truth is—

my truth is—I’m drawn to you as much as my wolf is. I have a deep compulsion to protect you from harm. That’s why I’m here, not because Adam ordered me to guard you.” I paused and shoved a hand through my hair. “Annika, what I feel for you goes way beyond friendship or duty, but that doesn’t mean it’s a good idea for me to act on those feelings.”

At those last words, the happiness that had lit up her face faded away. She nodded. “I get it. Timing’s bad. With a death sentence hanging over my head, I can see why you’d hesitate.”

“No.” The word burst past my lips. “It’s got nothing to do with the war or the coyotes. It’s me. I have some things to figure out before I can even think about starting a relationship with you.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” she asked hesitantly.

The sweetheart. I allowed myself to reach out, to run a strand of her golden-brown hair through my fingers, to see if it was as soft and smooth as I imagined. It slipped over my skin like satin.

“No.” I shook my head, regret swelling in my chest. Annika deserved better than a man afraid to commit. “Just give me some time to figure stuff out.”

“I can do that.” She settled back against the seat, a small smile on her lips.

Emotions carried a scent. Anger and fear were the most pungent. During a chase, the sour stink of terror poured from prey and spurred a wolf on. Anger stung like a powerful solvent. When pups played together—when Tory and Emma giggled over a game—a candy-scented cloud of pure happiness surrounded them.

My nostrils twitched. In this confined space, I tasted the subtle fragrance of Annika’s satisfaction. My words had given her hope, and hope smelled sweet.

The rumble of approaching tires dragged me back to reality. I let the car pass, then pulled back onto the highway.

We kept quiet for a while, each lost in our own thoughts. Annika wedged her bed pillow against the window and pulled

her quilt over her lap.

“You cold?” I asked, reaching for the knob on the heater.

“Not really.” She shook her head and sent her shiny hair flying. “I want to snuggle down under Grandma’s quilt, all comfy cozy.”

Twenty minutes later, she’d drooped sideways, her head on the pillow, fast asleep. Good. After the past two nights, she needed rest. I was fine. The shifter stamina that brought a pretty blush to Annika’s cheeks would keep me awake and alert.

I drove to Spokane and on into Idaho with only my thoughts to keep me company. No radio or talking broke the silence, but the woman at my side made soft snuffling sounds in her sleep.

By the time we got close to Coeur d’Alene, I was ready for another cup of coffee, and I had business to take care of. I pulled into a Starbucks, parked the truck, and reached into the back seat for the bag holding the burner phones. The crinkle of plastic woke Annika.

“What’s going on?” She yawned and stretched her arms over her head.

I ripped open the packaging on the prepaid phone. “Gotta call Adam.”

She winced in sympathy, then looked around the parking lot. Spying the Starbucks sign, her eyes lit up. “I’ll go inside and get our coffee and let you make your call in private.”

“Chicken,” I teased.

“*Buck-buck-buck,*” she clucked. “You got that right.”

I watched her walk into the coffeehouse, allowing myself to admire the fine curve of her ass. Once she disappeared inside, I sighed and punched in the alpha’s number.

He picked up on the first ring. “What the fuck, Zane,” Adam barked without preamble. “Where the hell are you?”

Apparently Liv had delivered Annika’s message.

“I can’t tell you that.” I braced for another verbal explosion.

Marit murmured something in the background. Adam sucked in a slow breath. When he spoke again, his voice was calm, but I could tell that the effort cost him.

“Explain.”

I did. I told him everything that happened after he and Marit went down to the infirmary to lay healing hands on Harrison. Marit gasped when I got to the part about Annika calling Vilhauer and gasped again when I described how I caught up with her car at the gate.

“That was too damned close,” Adam muttered.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “My first instinct was to lock her down and keep her safe.”

“Mine, too,” he said.

“You know how tenderhearted Annika is. She’d blame herself for every packmate who got hurt protecting her. She told me that the guilt and pain would break her.”

“Shit.” Adam sighed.

I kept an eye on the door to the coffeehouse, hoping to wrap this conversation up before Annika rejoined me.

“She needs to feel like she’s doing something to fix this mess. She’s convinced that taking herself out of the equation—allowing you to tell the coyotes you have no idea where she is—is the answer.”

Adam snorted. “I don’t like it.”

“Me, neither, but it’s one hell of a lot better than turning herself over to Vilhauer.”

“Yeah.” I heard reluctant acceptance in my cousin’s voice.

“One more thing,” I started.

Adam groaned. “What else?”

“Daniel Vilhauer caught up with us on the way out of Belle Reve. He said he belongs to a faction of coyotes who believe

his father is leading the pack down the wrong path. He said he'll be reaching out to you."

The door to the coffeehouse swung open and Annika stepped outside, holding two to-go cups.

"Annika's coming," I said. "I gotta go."

"Wait. Tell me where you're heading."

"Can't." It was my turn to sound reluctant. "Promised Annika I wouldn't."

"I'm your alpha, dammit."

Once again, Marit murmured in the background.

Annika rounded the front of the truck.

"Tell Liv and Marit I promise to keep Annika safe. I'll be in touch." I disconnected the call just as Annika tapped on the glass. I rolled the window down and took the coffee she held out.

"I had them add a shot of espresso."

"Nice. Thank you."

"Is Adam mad?" she asked, climbing into the truck.

I snorted. "What do you think?"

"How much trouble are you in for helping me?"

The woman's conscience wouldn't take a rest, would it?

If my alpha were anyone other than my cousin, the answer probably would be a lot. No matter how much my behavior pissed him off, Adam was a fair and reasonable man, and my closest friend. He'd cut me some slack, especially since he suspected that my wolf had staked a claim.

"Nothing for you to worry about. Adam and I will work it out," I assured her.

I topped off the gas tank—with cash—before we hopped back on I-90.

We got to Bozeman around dinnertime and found a 1950s-style diner. Annika swooned over the black-and-white-

checkerboard patterned floor and the turquoise vinyl booths. While we ate, a jukebox played “Jailhouse Rock,” “Blueberry Hill,” and “Mack the Knife,” among other classics. The music and retro ambiance totally charmed Annika. She sighed happily over her veggie burger and fries. I chowed down on a bacon cheeseburger and onion rings. To prolong her fun, I suggested that we split a hot fudge sundae.

“Yes, please,” she exclaimed.

She dipped her long-handled spoon into the ice cream and lifted it to her mouth. A blob of chocolate sauce fell onto her chin. Her tongue darted out and swiped across her lower lip.

I swallowed a groan. Good thing a napkin covered my lap.

“Missed some.”

Without pausing to consider if it was a smart move, I reached out and dragged the pad of my thumb across her chin. Eyes locked on Annika’s, I brought my thumb to my mouth and licked it clean. She swallowed. Her pupils dilated. The enticing scent of her arousal floated toward me, slicing through the aroma of bacon and burgers. My cock threatened to punch a hole in my jeans.

I tore my eyes away from her. What was I doing?

Talking to Grandpa had planted a seed of hope in my chest. Maybe my wolf wasn’t fatally flawed. Maybe he wasn’t destined to break. But hope could lead a man astray. Make him take foolish chances. Until I knew down to my bones that Annika was safe with my wolf, I needed to keep my hands to myself and not send mixed messages.

I inhaled slowly, willing my rioting senses to subside and my cock to settle down. Exhaling, I looked up and found Annika leaning back against the vinyl seat, her eyes narrowed as she studied me.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asked quietly.

Hell no. If I talked about it, I’d only fill her head with images from the worst night of my life. That kind of ugliness had no place occupying real estate in her brain.

“No, sweetheart, I don’t.”

Disappointment flashed across her face, but she didn’t push.

We finished the sundae in silence, paid the bill, then drove till we found a motel with a vacancy. We rented a room on the second floor next to the ice machine, the last one available. Annika took a shower while I sat at a small table and plotted the course for the rest of our journey. The shortest route cut through Ontario and Quebec. I carried an enhanced driver’s license from the state of Washington that would allow me to enter Canada without a passport. I had no idea if Annika had an EDL. If not, we’d stick to roads within the US.

Annika emerged from the bathroom, wearing a pair of long-sleeved purple cotton pajamas. Fluffy green socks covered her feet. Her skin was flushed pink from the hot shower, and her barely damp hair fell in waves around her shoulders. I caught a whiff of her coconut-scented shampoo as she sat down opposite me.

I squinted at her pajamas, taking in the design on the fabric. “Poodles?”

“Poodles driving convertibles past the Eiffel Tower. Ooh la la,” she added in a terrible French accent.

Guess I shouldn’t be surprised that Annika’s love of whimsy extended to her pajamas. I usually slept naked, but I’d packed a pair of plain old gray sweatpants to wear at night.

We put our heads together and studied the maps on my phone. Almost 2500 miles separated us from our destination. Turned out Annika didn’t have an EDL, so we’d have to take the slightly longer route through South Dakota, Chicago, Cleveland, and Buffalo. According to my best calculations, we’d be on the road for four days.

“I’m gonna take a shower before I turn in,” I said. “Let’s aim to be outta here by seven.”

I grabbed my toiletry bag and headed to the bathroom, resolutely not glancing at the solitary queen-sized bed I’d have to share with Annika. Back home, I slept sprawled across a

king mattress. Sleeping in a smaller queen—even by myself—would feel cramped. Sharing a queen with an attractive woman I had to keep at a distance would be a challenge.

Luckily, by the time I finished my shower, Annika had fallen asleep. Breathing softly, she lay curled on her side, facing the motel room's wide window. I didn't like her sleeping closest to the door but didn't want to wake her and ask her to scoot, or pick her up and move her. Tomorrow night, I'd ask her to sleep closest to the interior wall. I slipped in next to her, lying flat on my back, with my arms and legs pinned to my sides. I stared at the ceiling for a long time before sleep finally snuck up and claimed me.



Moans and incoherent mutterings startled me awake, the words unintelligible, but the distress that accompanied them crystal clear.

My eyes snapped open, and I rolled to face Annika.

“No, no, no,” she mumbled. She tossed her head from side to side, batting at the air with both hands.

I sat up.

“Annika.” I spoke in a low, soothing voice, trying not to frighten her. No response. I laid a hand on her shoulder and gave a gentle shake. “Annika,” I repeated, louder this time.

Her back arched. Her lids flew open and she gaped at me without a hint of recognition in her terror-stricken brown eyes. Scuttling backward against the headboard, she clutched a sheet in both hands.

I locked my limbs and made no sudden movements, a predator trying not to frighten the most defenseless of creatures. “It’s Zane, sweetheart. You’re safe. It was just a bad dream. You’re safe.”

She blinked twice. Recognition flooded her features. “Zane?”

She flung herself at me and burrowed her face in my chest. I wrapped my arms around her and held her close, wishing like hell I could reach into her nightmare and throttle whatever or whoever had frightened her. Although I suspected that I knew what haunted her dreams.

She shuddered, her shoulders trembling.

“You’re safe,” I repeated, both a reassurance and a vow. Rocking her back and forth, I rubbed my hand up and down her back and murmured words of comfort.

After a few minutes, the trembling ceased. She hiccuped, lying limp against my chest.

“Bryce?” I guessed.

She nodded.

Never had a killing been more justified than when Annika pulled the trigger and ended that bastard’s life. For the millionth time, I wished I’d stayed behind instead of chasing after the damned grizzlies. If I had... if I had... My jaw tightened and the wolf’s low growl rumbled from my chest.

Killing Bryce wouldn’t have troubled *my* conscience one whit.

Annika’s small hand slid across my shoulder. She touched my chin, her fingers brushing over the scruff. “Hey,” she whispered, lifting her face to meet my eyes. “Not your fault.”

She was comforting me? My heart turned over in my chest. The claim she’d already staked to my battered soul grew rock solid.

She’s ours, the wolf whined, his desperation for me to believe that he’d never hurt her palpable.

I sighed. *I hope to God you’re right, brother.*

I smoothed damp hair away from her forehead. “Think you can get back to sleep?”

“Yes, but I’m thirsty.” She wriggled out of my arms and swung her feet out of the bed.

“Stay put. I’ll get water.” I padded to the bathroom, filled a glass, and brought it back to her.

She emptied half the glass, her eyes fixed on me, uncertainty across her features.

“What do you need?” I asked.

“Will you hold me while I fall asleep?”

“Of course.” I took the glass, set it on the nightstand, then sat down next to her. “Big spoon, little spoon?”

She smiled. “Who gets to be the big spoon?”

I play-growled and tugged her down, her back to my chest. “Who do you think?”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



ANNIKA

We hit the road early Tuesday morning and drove eight hundred miles to Sioux Falls, South Dakota. I offered to spell Zane behind the wheel, but he said that if it was all the same to me, he preferred driving. I readily agreed. For me, driving was a necessity and not a pleasure. I was always aware that if my mind wandered—if I made a stupid mistake—my negligence could cause an accident, and somebody could get hurt. That knowledge made driving a chore and not a joy.

On Wednesday, we made it all the way to Grand Rapids before stopping for the night, a trip punctuated by a two-and-a-half-hour ferry ride across Lake Michigan. We reached Buffalo, New York Thursday evening. It would be our last night in a motel. We'd arrive at my parents' vacation home in New Hampshire tomorrow evening.

In the four days we'd spent on the road, Zane and I had fallen into a nighttime routine. We shared a bed. I'd fall asleep, tucked up against him, relaxing into the warmth of his body and the promise of safety found in his muscled arms. At the first hint of a nightmare—if I moaned or thrashed—he'd wake me up. We'd lie side by side in the dark, talking and cuddling until I calmed down and fell back asleep.

Grandma Freya would call Zane a "perfect gentleman." He held me close, stroked my back, pushed strands of hair off my face, but there was nothing sexual in our physical connection. We were as chaste as the couple in an Amish romance I once read.

In fiction, as well as reality, I preferred the steamy stuff, the darker stuff. But Zane held firm to his determination to hold off on that kind of intimacy until he figured things out. And I'd promised to wait. During the day, I kept my hands to myself. At night, when we spooned, I was aware of my bottom tucked up against his groin. I wouldn't allow myself to wiggle, to try to get a rise out of the man—so to speak—but it was a struggle not to.

We rented a room on the second floor of a motel on the edge of Buffalo. While Zane took the first shower, I made a call. It was after business hours, so a machine picked up. At the tone, I left a message.

“This is Annika Hagen. I’ll be arriving in town tomorrow evening. If you see a pickup truck in the driveway or lights on at the place, don’t worry, it’s just me.”

The shower turned off. Ten seconds later, Zane stuck his head out of the bathroom. “Did I hear you make a call?”

“No worries. I just left a message with the people who manage my folks’ vacation property in Aldrich. I don’t want them calling the police if they see that someone’s in the house.”

“Smart.” He pointed at his soapy hair. “Gotta rinse the shampoo out, then the shower’s all yours.”

When I got out of my shower, I found Zane sitting up against the headboard, thumbing through a glossy magazine guide for “Things to Do in Buffalo.” Seeing me, he slapped the magazine onto the bed. “I miss my damned phone.”

“I miss mine, too.” I confessed. “But we have lot of books at the house, and games, an old record player, a TV. We won’t be bored.”

I turned off the overhead light, crawled into bed, and rolled onto my side. Zane tugged me into his arms as if it was the most natural thing in the world. As if it was where I belonged. My heart melted into a puddle.

“The vacation house has three bedrooms, but I’d like it if we still shared a bed.” I held my breath, waiting for his reply.

“I’d like that, too,” he said sleepily.

His broad hand slowly slid over my hair, stroking from the top of my head down to where my hair fell over my shoulders. He did it again and again. The repetitive sensation lulled me into a lazy stupor.

“That’s nice,” I sighed with contentment. “I like it when you pet me. I feel like a kitty cat stretched out in front of a

fireplace, limp with pleasure.”

He laughed softly, his warm breath tickling my hair. “Most wolves are tactile creatures.”

Most?

“How about you?” I asked. “Are you a tactile creature?”

“Didn’t used to be. Before I met you, I didn’t see the appeal of... um, of...” He searched for the right word.

“Cuddling?” I suggested helpfully.

He grunted. “I am *not* a cuddler.”

If the past four nights had taught me anything, it was that Zane Hunter was totally a cuddler.

“Keep telling yourself that, buddy.” A smart man like Zane couldn’t possibly miss the smug derision in my voice.

His hand slipped from my shoulder toward my waist. I bucked, realizing what he was up to. “Don’t you dare,” I shrieked as his fingertips pressed into my sides. “Please. No tickling.”

Unless he allowed it, there was no way I could escape. I wriggled out of his embrace and backed up to the edge of the mattress. Breathless, my heart pounding, I met his startled eyes.

“No tickling? For real?” he asked.

I bobbed my head. “I hate it.”

He held both hands up, fingers widespread and harmless. “You hate it, I won’t do it.”

There was no need to ask him to promise. His declaration of intent was good enough. “Thanks. So how about we get back to our *cuddling*?”

His chest rumbled a protest at my choice of words, but he opened his arms, inviting me in. I rolled against him. He kissed the back of my head. “Smart-ass,” he muttered against my hair.

That night, for the first time in months, I slept peacefully, my rest undisturbed by visions of Bryce's bloody death.

The next day, the closer we got to Aldrich, the more my excitement grew. I loved this place. My mother had inherited the A-frame from her parents. When Liv and I were growing up, our family visited several times a year. We went cross-country skiing in the winter. We hiked, played golf, and fished in the summer. Every October, when the hills surrounding town were painted in vivid reds, oranges, and golds, we traveled to Aldrich to see the fall foliage. Mom and Dad were taking a riverboat cruise this year instead of visiting Aldrich, so Zane and I would have the place to ourselves.

I exclaimed over every familiar sight: Mt. Washington, a covered bridge, a country store, a beautiful old church. Zane tolerated my enthusiastic outbursts with good grace. A hundred yards from the turnoff to the A-Frame, I was bouncing in my seat like a kid.

"Take the next turn slowly," I warned him. "It's the local version of a dead man's curve. Out-of-towners and drunk drivers sometimes take it too fast and *boom*."

"I'll be careful. Thanks." A minute later, Zane pulled into the long gravel driveway. He'd scarcely parked before I leapt out and waited impatiently for him to join me. I grabbed him by the hand and pulled him up the path toward the front porch.

Zane halted, his head tilted back, his eyes scanning the property. "Somebody's been here recently."

"A landscape crew comes once a week to mow the grass and tend the flower beds. Could that be what you're sensing?"

"Maybe." He frowned and turned around to peer into the trees at the edge of the property. "Let me go first, in case somebody's in the house." He led the way up the steps and onto the covered porch. I handed him the key, and he went through the door first. "The scent is stronger in here," he announced.

I stepped inside. Instead of the stale smell that I expected from a closed-up house, I caught a whiff of lemon cleanser. I

glanced from the small foyer into the living room. A white envelope was propped up on the mantel of the stone fireplace. My name was written on the outside in big block letters.

“Bet it’s from Josephine.” I walked over and picked the envelope up.

“Who’s Josephine?” he asked.

“Josephine Morrow. Her family owns the landscape maintenance company that takes care of the place.” I read over the note. “She says she had her grandkids air out the house, wipe down all the surfaces, and put fresh sheets on the beds. And they picked up some groceries, so we won’t have to rush out to the store tonight. Nice.”

Zane wandered around the cozy living and dining areas, pausing now and then to sniff the air. “How long have you known Josephine?”

“Forever. She and her husband originally worked for my mom’s parents. Nowadays, a lot of wealthy out-of-towners have vacation homes here. My grandparents bought the house when properties in town were more affordable.”

“Lucky for them,” he observed.

“Lucky for us all. Jo and Karl designed and maintain some of the best gardens in town. They’re probably in their seventies now, but I swear they have the stamina of thirty-year-olds. We still see them all the time out on the ski trails.”

“They have a big family?” he asked, running his fingers along a dust-free table top.

“A son and a daughter, their spouses, and three grandchildren. The oldest grandchild, Thomas, just turned thirty, I believe. His brother Jamie should be about nineteen. They all live in a big old farmhouse on the north side of town. Everybody works for the landscaping company. They manage short-term vacation rental properties, too. It keeps them busy.”

“Sharing a house? That’s unusual.”

I shrugged. “I guess it works for them.”

“You want to show me around the place?”

I took his hand and gave him the tour, starting with my bedroom on the ground floor. “I have a queen-sized bed. I was thinking we could sleep in here. Mom and Dad have a king-sized bed upstairs. That would be more comfortable for a big guy like you, but—” I made a face.

“It’d feel weird sleeping next to me in your parents’ bed?” he guessed.

“Yeah. Do you mind?”

“No. I get it. It wouldn’t feel right having a woman in my mother’s bed, either.”

Having a woman in my mother’s bed. He didn’t mean it in any sexual sense. It was simply an ambiguous turn of phrase. Still, at the reference, heat crept up my cheeks. Darn it. Why couldn’t I have a better poker face? I looked the other way, hoping he hadn’t noticed.

No such luck. Zane caught my chin and tipped my face up so I had no choice but to meet his eyes. “I’m sorry if I’m making this awkward for you. If I thought it would be casual between us—you know, sex between friends—I wouldn’t hesitate. But with us, it would never be casual. And I have to know it’s safe.”

My brows pulled together. “I don’t understand. Why wouldn’t it be safe?”

His lips parted, like he was about to speak, then he hesitated.

“Never mind,” I said quickly. Zane was reserved and reticent by nature. I’d already forced him to confess that he had feelings for me. Pushing him to open up further was just plain wrong. “I told you I’d give you time to figure things out. You don’t need to answer.”

“I have an issue with my wolf.” He spat out the words.

That statement raised a million questions. What possible issue could a shifter have with his wolf? I couldn’t ask Marit, because she might ask Adam. Zane might not want to share his concerns with his alpha.

I swallowed my questions and laid a hand on Zane's chest. "If you ever want to talk about it, I'm here. But only if you want to, and only when you're ready. Okay?"

"Okay." The look of gratitude that crossed his face more than made up for my thwarted curiosity.

We finished the tour of the house and unpacked our suitcases. I found the makings for grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup in the kitchen. Jo had left a plate of brownies on the counter. We ate at the breakfast bar. While I cleaned up after dinner, Zane lit a fire on the stone hearth, then went outside to fetch more wood. I opened a bottle of Mom's favorite Pinot Noir, poured a small glass for me and a bigger one for Zane, and set them on the coffee table in front of the fire. Zane returned, carrying an armful of firewood. He filled the log rack, washed the pitch off his hands, then settled down next to me on the overstuffed couch.

He took a sip of wine. "It's a beautiful place. I see why you love it so much."

I nodded, drowsy and content. We drank our wine in companionable silence. My lids grew heavy. Yawning, I balanced my half-full glass unsteadily on my knee. Through half-closed eyes I watched as Zane took the wine glass from my hand and set it on the table. He stood and swung me up into his arms.

"Bedtime," he said firmly. He strode down the short hall to my bedroom and deposited me on the foot of the mattress. Kneeling on the braided rug, he slipped off my shoes.

"My wolf needs to run. I won't go far. I want to explore the woods and get the lay of the land around the property."

After being cooped up in the truck in human form for days on end, it was no wonder Zane's wolf was restless and eager to run.

"Sounds good." A protracted, jaw-cracking yawn escaped me.

He laughed softly. "I won't be long. I'll keep an eye on the place. You'll be safe."

I reached out sleepily and touched his chin, smiling at the sensation of stubble scraping against my fingertips. “I always feel safe when you’re nearby.”

Glacier blue flashed in his eyes, the sign of the ascendant wolf. The air crackled around him, and a metallic taste flooded my mouth. I smelled ozone. I’d never watched Zane shift, never witnessed the beast who lived inside him emerge.

Zane jumped to his feet, breaking the physical contact between us.

“Go to sleep, Annika.” His voice was thick and rough, as if his vocal cords were reshaping, already assuming a different form. He bent and pressed a kiss against the corner of my eye. His hot breath tickled my cheek. Heat poured off his skin. A musky scent—so thick I could almost taste it—floated in the air.

“Zane,” I breathed, fighting the urge to reach out to him again.

He backed away from me, shaking his head. “I gotta run.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



ZANE

From the moment I stepped out of my truck, I'd smelled shifter.

Not wolf. The closest wolf pack lived north of the St. Lawrence River, in Quebec.

Not coyote. Natural coyotes roamed the state, but if a coyote shifter pack had established a foothold in New Hampshire, I hadn't heard of it. If anyone from Vilhauer's pack had managed to follow us from Washington—if I'd caught even a hint of their stink in the air—I'd have thrown Annika back in the truck and raced hell-for-leather away from the place.

No. When I hopped from the truck, the smell that tickled my nostrils was feline. Feline shifters were a mysterious lot. They lived solitary or in small family packs, and they kept to themselves. I've dealt with only a few cats, loners I met while on my travels.

The scent of feline grew stronger as Annika and I walked up to the front door, and even more potent inside the house. As I wandered through the A-frame's living room, touching surfaces that held the sharp tang of feline, two things were immediately apparent to me. Josephine and her family were cats. And unbeknownst to Annika, coyotes and wolves weren't the first shifters she'd met.

Did the cats know that Annika and Liv carried shifter blood? Maybe not. The twins had only one shifter ancestor, their grandfather, Aleksandr.

Adam hadn't sensed Marit's shifter blood when they met, but looking back, he told me that subtle clues were there. All three Hagen women were slightly taller and stronger than typical humans. I'd sparred with Liv. For a human, she was fast and packed a mean punch. They all possessed a keen sense of smell. Annika could identify cinnamon or cardamom or ginger spices from across the room, a skill she attributed to

her baking expertise. I suspected otherwise. The first time Adam and Marit cuddled—*that damned word*—she'd licked his throat, a very shifter thing to do to a potential mate.

If Adam hadn't clued into Marit's shifter connection, odds were the cats hadn't picked up on Annika and Liv's hidden bloodline either.

Their father, Michael, was a different matter. He was half shifter. I hadn't met the man yet. Adam decided to wait till next summer to invite Michael and Nicholas, Freya's twin sons, for a meet-the-in-laws visit. Once he spent time with them, took their measure, he'd decide if he'd entrust them with the secret of their parentage. Since it was pack business, the women agreed to go along with his judgment.

Did Michael give off shifter vibes that Josephine's pack recognized? I had no clue. Time would tell. In any case, I wanted to meet these cats who'd watched Annika grow from child to woman. They'd spied on me when I went outside to gather firewood. No doubt they smelled me the same way I smelled them. Most likely, they were waiting outside for me now.

I backed out of the bedroom, my wolf clawing to escape my human skin. At her simple words, "I always feel safe when you're nearby," the wolf had come undone. He was desperate to show himself. To prove to me how safe she was in his presence. To demonstrate that her faith wasn't misplaced.

Not yet brother. First things first.

I held on to my human form as I fled the house and ran into the yard. I stripped out of my clothes and shoved my black rock bracelet into a pocket, all the while feeling nonhuman eyes watching me from the surrounding woods. The change took me quickly. I stretched on four legs and shook my fur into place. Lowering my head, I stalked slowly toward the treeline.

A cat with mottled gray fur and black ear tufts sat atop a fallen log, watching me approach with the cocky nonchalance of a natural predator. In the bright moonlight, her eyes glowed a vivid greenish yellow. Bigger than a bobcat, but smaller than

a cougar, the Canadian lynx swished her short black-tipped tail back and forth once as I drew near.

Leaves rustled and twigs in the underbrush snapped. Three more adult lynx joined us. Cats surrounded me. My hackles rose. One-on-one, or two-on-one, I could take a lynx. But four-to-one? Shit. If they pounced, they could probably drag me to the ground and tear into my belly.

Then what would happen to Annika if the coyotes came and I wasn't here to protect her?

Still, I sensed no aggression coming from the beasts. They were as curious about me as I was about them.

On impulse, I shifted back to human, then straightened to my full height, facing the female lynx perched on the log. The air shimmered and after a couple of minutes, she took her human form, too.

Josephine stood before me, a tall older woman, muscular and fit, with gray-streaked hair and lines etched into the corners of her sharp brown eyes.

“Wolf,” she drawled. “What are you doing with our Annika?”

Our Annika? The lynx claimed Annika as their own? Hah. By blood and by rights, she belonged to the wolves.

To us, my wolf hissed. Still close to the surface, he growled, offended by the woman's effrontery.

“I see.” Her lips tipped up in a cheeky smile. “You've called dibs on her, have you?”

Dibs. Josephine made me sound like a twelve-year-old demanding the last slice of chocolate cake. She reminded me of my late grandmother, Katia, who gently teased me into seeing sense when I felt mistreated and aggrieved.

I wasn't about to tell this smirking stranger that Annika was my mate, not before I made up my mind and formally staked my claim. I knew how to shut down the lynx's snark.

“A coyote alpha back in Washington state wants Annika dead.”

The good humor slid from Josephine's face. "What did you say?"

"There was an incident back home." I'd go light on the details and share only the essential facts. "A coyote threatened Liv. Annika shot him before he could kill her sister."

"What—" she started.

I lifted a hand. "Can't tell you more without my alpha's permission, but you should know that there's a remote chance that coyotes might come looking for her here."

Josephine turned to the largest of her lynx companions. "I want a cat patrolling the woods around the house twenty-four seven. No damned coyote will get near our girl."

"No, they won't," I agreed. "Nobody will get past me to hurt Annika."

She arched a brow. "You're sounding awfully territorial, wolf."

Yeah, maybe, but my relationship with Annika was none of her business. Although I'd welcome another pair of eyes keeping watch on the place. "The name is Zane. Zane Hunter."

"Josephine Morrow."

"How long have you known?" I asked, deliberately keeping my question vague on the off chance she hadn't recognized the Hagens' shifter blood.

"From the first time Annika's grandparents introduced me to their new son-in-law," she said, quashing any doubts about her knowledge. "I knew instantly that Michael was part wolf and figured out pretty quickly that he had no idea of his heritage. He's a good man, a devoted husband and father. Your pack should have been proud to claim him as one of their own."

Judgment filled her eyes, a judgment I couldn't disagree with. But no way would I throw my grandfather under the bus. I'd accepted the necessity of his law that forced Grandma Freya to hide her sons' parentage, hadn't I?

“The pack accepts Annika, Liv, and their cousin Marit,” I said.

“I’ve met Marit.” Josephine smiled fondly. “A lovely girl. I’m glad the wolves have finally welcomed the Hagen women into the fold.”

She already knew so much, there was no harm in telling the lynx a bit more. “Marit is mated to our new alpha, my cousin, Adam.”

She nodded to herself, her expression thoughtful. “I see. So the coyote alpha wants to kill a member of the wolf alpha’s family. Do I smell a shifter war on the horizon?”

“War’s been coming for a long time. The coyotes are using Annika as an excuse to get the ball rolling.”

Josephine studied me, her gaze deadly serious. “Do you swear you mean no harm to my pack, Zane?”

I pressed a fist to my heart. “On my honor, as a sentry of the Black Rock Guardians Pack, I swear that I intend no harm to you or yours. My only goal right now is to keep Annika safe.”

She tilted her head and pursed her lips. “I’m not sure I believe that’s your *only* goal.”

I liked her, I decided, so I went all in. I shrugged. “You said it yourself. I’ve called dibs on Annika.”

“And just what does she think of your proprietorial claim?” Josephine asked. “Because if she doesn’t want you, you should know my lynx and I are Team Annika all the way.”

“Thanks for the warning,” I said. “Just to be clear, Annika spoke up first. If she didn’t want me, I’d leave her the hell alone.”

“Good to hear, but it sounds like things aren’t quite settled between you,” the savvy woman observed.

No, they weren’t, but my troubles with my wolf were nothing I wanted to discuss with the lynx. I shrugged again.

“Interesting,” Josephine pronounced slowly, narrowing her eyes. After a moment, her quizzical expression cleared. “Annika has my number. If you need anything, don’t hesitate to text or call.”

“I will, and thank you for putting an extra guard on the place.”

“My grandson Thomas will be on patrol for the rest of the night. I should warn you. I once had hopes that Thomas might mate with Annika.”

The growl that rumbled from my chest brought a small smile to Josephine’s lips. “God help us. There’s nothing like a wolf who has staked his claim.” She sighed, then tilted her head. “You *have* staked your claim, haven’t you Zane?”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



ANNIKA

The tantalizing aroma of freshly baked cinnamon rolls pulled me from sleep. Smiling in happy anticipation, I stretched and yawned. My eyelids fluttered open.

I sat up and peered around the familiar bedroom. Mom and I had picked out the fabric for the curtains and bedspread when I was little, bluebirds of happiness against a creamy yellow background. One of Grandma Freya's paintings of Shooting Star Lake hung over the white wrought iron bed. A narrow nightstand topped with a blue lamp, an antique birds-eye maple dresser, a tall cheval mirror, and a matching chair were the only other furnishings. The room was small and cozy, and I loved every inch of it.

I ran my hand over the sheet on the side of the bed where Zane had slept. I'd drifted off long before Zane had come to bed. The mattress had bounced and the bed frame squeaked loudly when he slid in next to me. At the disturbance, I'd come half awake. He'd sworn under his breath, and I'd suppressed a giggle. The man had been trying so hard to be quiet, but the old bed refused to cooperate. He'd tugged me into his arms and held me tight, as if afraid I might sprout wings—like the bluebirds of happiness—and fly away. No fear of that.

Where was Zane now? Unless he'd conjured up some mad new skills, he wasn't responsible for the cinnamon rolls I smelled. I crossed the hall, quickly used the bathroom, then padded to the kitchen. Zane and Josephine sat at the breakfast bar.

"Jo," I cried, rushing to her side for a hug.

She returned the embrace, burying her nose in my neck and inhaling deeply. A sudden self-consciousness struck me. I hadn't showered since yesterday morning. I couldn't possibly reek only twenty-four hours later, could I? I stepped back and looked at Zane, who wore a smug and complacent expression on his handsome face.

“It’s wonderful to see you, sweet girl. Let me get a good look at you.” Jo brushed my long hair away from my cheeks, just as she’d done since I was little. Astute brown eyes scrutinized my face. She glanced at Zane, then back to me. “You look well. It appears the wolf is taking good care of you.”

“The wolf?” I repeated, flustered. Surely Zane hadn’t confessed that he was a shifter to a complete stranger.

“Yes, the wolf.” She lifted a mug of coffee to her lips and studied me over the rim.

I looked to Zane for guidance.

“Josephine’s a shifter, too,” he said. “A lynx, the alpha of her family pack.”

Jo. A shifter. An alpha. Her family—Karl, Thomas, all of them were shifters, too. Supernatural beings had been part of my life since I was a baby. My mind reeled. I scrambled to make sense of this new knowledge.

“Holy shit. Is the entire world crawling with shifters?” The words burst out before I could think twice.

Zane barked out a laugh. “That’s right. We’ve spread across the land like a veritable plague of locusts.”

I groaned and dropped my face into my hands. Dear lord, could my question sound more rude?

Zane jumped from his counter stool and dropped a kiss onto my temple. “No offense taken, darlin’. I was just teasing. Come sit down and I’ll get you a cinnamon roll.”

I lowered myself onto his vacant stool while Zane plated a pastry and poured a cup of coffee. He slid both in front of me.

“By the way, lynx aren’t the only shifters who live in Aldrich,” Jo said.

Zane stiffened. “Who else lives here?”

Jo waved away his concern. “Milton Cranberry, who runs the Wild Turkey Country Store, is a bull moose. He’s a loner and harmless, unless you get on his bad side.”

“Wait. What?” I exclaimed. “Milton is a moose?”

Milton Cranberry was a barrel-chested elderly man with a full head of silver hair. He always wore striped bib overalls. He smelled like the peppermint candies he kept in his pocket. If he liked you, he offered you a cello-wrapped mint. I got one every time he saw me.

“That’s right. He left his pack and struck out on his own after his mate died. He approached me thirty years ago and asked permission to settle in lynx territory. He promised to be a good neighbor and friend to the pack. He’s kept his word. We get along just fine.”

I sensed an odd undercurrent in the room, not hostility exactly, but something unspoken between Zane and Jo. I turned to her. “Do wolves and lynx get along fine? You aren’t traditional enemies, are you? If it’s a problem for us to be here, we can go someplace else.”

Jo laid a hand on my arm. “No, sweet girl. There’s no particular history of animosity between lynx and wolves.”

My brows drew together. Something was going on that I couldn’t put my finger on.

The front door opened and someone stepped inside. I swung around on the stool to see who’d come in. A tall, sandy-haired young man wearing jeans and a plaid flannel jacket stomped his boots on the doormat. Familiar hazel eyes met mine.

“Thomas!” I flew off the stool and gave my old friend a hug. “How have you been?”

“Good.” He bobbed his head shyly. “I’m good, although I was sorry to hear about your troubles.”

I blinked. Surrounded by friends, back in my childhood vacation home, I’d actually managed to forget for a few minutes that I had a death sentence hanging over my head, and that my family and friends back in Washington were in danger.

“Thank you.” I looked back over my shoulder at Zane, who watched us with a stony expression. “Come inside. I want you to meet my friend, Zane Hunter.”

“We met last night.” Zane’s tone was flat and unwelcoming.

There was the taciturn, antisocial grouch that everyone warned me about. Zane didn’t like strangers and was slow to warm up, but that was no excuse for rudeness. I shot him a warning look that clearly said *behave*.

“Come on.” I grabbed Thomas’s hand and tugged him toward the kitchen. “Can I get you some coffee?”

“No, thanks.” Thomas planted himself next to his grandmother and shoved his hands in his pockets. He briefly met Zane’s eyes before turning his gaze to the floor.

I looked toward Zane, whose unfriendly attitude cast a pall over the room.

“Thomas and I have known each other forever.” I always babbled when I was anxious, as if an uninhibited flood of words would somehow make things better. “When I was thirteen, I had the biggest crush on him. He’d come over to mow or pull weeds, and I followed the poor guy around like a puppy, offering him a glass of lemonade every fifteen minutes.”

“Is that right?” Zane asked coolly.

I frowned. He couldn’t possibly be jealous over an old friend I hadn’t laid eyes on in years, could he? Annoyance ticked through me. Nobody should get bent out of shape by a thirteen-year-old’s unrequited crush. Jealousy was *so* not a good look on a man.

But he’s not simply a man. He’s a wolf, too.

Wolves were hardwired to be possessive, especially over their mates. I swallowed my irritation. I’d never apologize or feel guilty over friendship with a man, but maybe rubbing a wolf’s nose in my little crush was unwise and provocative. Time to clear this up.

“I’m sure I was a major pain in the ass. Thomas was eighteen and *so* not interested in a having a kid moon over him. He was always very kind and patient, but he had to be relieved when I grew out of it.”

Jo made a choking sound that morphed into a cough.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Mm-hmm.” She covered her mouth and bobbed her head.

Zane swung his attention from Thomas to me. “Your coffee is getting cold.”

Feeling everyone’s eyes on me, I sat back down and took a sip of coffee.

“Karl got up early this morning to make the cinnamon rolls,” Jo said. “You should try yours.”

“Here.” Zane broke off a piece of my pastry and held it out to me, feeding me like I was a small child.

What was up with that? Was it a shifter thing? My eyes narrowed, but I parted my lips and took the bite. I chewed and swallowed, then looked from Zane to Jo. “It’s delicious. Please tell Karl thank you from me.”

“I will.” Jo stood. “I think it’s time for Thomas and me to get out of your hair. If you see a cat prowling through the woods, it’ll be my daughter. She’ll be keeping watch today.”

“We appreciate the extra eyes,” Zane said.

“If you see any sign of trouble, night or day, call for backup,” she added. “Milton has a soft spot for the Hagens. He’d be happy to help, too.”

“Thank you, ma’am.” Zane dipped his head, showing Jo the respect she was due as an alpha. He walked them out and held open the door for Jo.

A lynx alpha. I still had to wrap my head around that notion.

I took another bite of the gooey cinnamon roll, this one without assistance.

“I’m gonna shift and run.” Zane had a hand on the doorknob. “Unless you need something from me.”

“You’re not worried that I have any lingering feelings for Thomas, are you?” I came right out and asked. “Because I

don't."

He jerked his head in a no. "I'm not worried that you have feelings for Thomas."

Somehow that wasn't an entirely satisfactory answer and did nothing to explain the tension in the room during the lynxes' visit.

"Then what's wrong?"

He opened his mouth, then snapped it shut. "Nothing I want to talk about right now."

I wanted to argue with him, to press for information, but I couldn't bring myself to demand more than he was willing to give. "Just tell me this. Are you upset with me for some reason?"

"Of course not." His response came quickly. He strode across the room and pulled me into his arms. "You haven't done a damned thing wrong."

Tilting back my head, I searched his face for the answers he wasn't ready to give. "Okay." I gave up. I'd promised him time to figure out his issues. I couldn't blame him for taking it.

"Thank you." He tenderly touched my cheek.

"For what?"

"For being patient. For being you."

"You *are* sweet." I insisted, returning to our old argument.

He rolled his eyes. "Don't tell. You'll ruin my reputation."

I laughed. "Your reputation is safe with me."

At the word safe, his expression changed, grew wistful. "More than anything, I want *you* to be safe with *me*."

This again. "I am safe with you," I insisted. "I know it."

He kissed my forehead, then turned on his heels and strode toward the door.

"Enjoy your run," I called.

He raised a hand in farewell.

A minute later, I walked over to a window and looked into the yard, just in time to see a beautiful wolf with a mixture of gray, brown, and white fur bound toward the woods.

A desperate desire to call home filled me. I longed to hear my sister's voice and to ask Marit about a wolf shifter's behavior during courtship. I wanted to assure them that I was well and safe. To ask about Harrison. To find out if the coyotes had calmed down. I wanted to tell my closest friends that every day I was falling more and more in love with Zane, yet he held me at arm's length.

I glanced longingly toward the bedroom, where we'd tucked the bag of burner phones into the closet. I could do it. I could call and check in. I hadn't promised Zane that I wouldn't, but I was pretty sure he assumed I knew better. But if I called, I'd have to refuse their demand to reveal our location. I couldn't tell them about Josephine being a lynx without giving away that we were in Aldrich.

Shoot.

So what could I do while I waited for Zane to finish his run?

Practical things, I decided. We hadn't done laundry while we were on the road. I could start that. Inventory the cupboards and fridge and make a shopping list.

I recalled Jo's reaction when she hugged me. Tugging the collar of my pajamas away from my body, I buried my nose in the opening and sniffed. Not bad. Not bad at all. But even if my nose couldn't detect any funk, there were few things in life I loved as much as soaking in the tub.

Laundry could wait. The shopping list could wait. Up the hall, there was a bubble bath with my name on it.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



COURTNEY

School had bored the crap out of me. Year after year spent listening to teachers yammer on about subjects I didn't give two shits about. Algebra. Sentence structure. Chemistry. Most of it went in one ear and out the other, lingering in my brain just long enough for me to pass a test, before I kicked the unwelcome knowledge onto a mental trash heap.

Sometimes, though, the damnedest things stuck with me.

Flat on my back, I squinted up at a long jagged crack in the ceiling, a line intersected by other cracks. It reminded me of something just out of reach in my memory. What was it? I thought hard and it came to me. The map of the United States, with the Missouri, Arkansas, and Ohio Rivers flowing into the mighty Mississippi.

The Mississippi River, *that* was it.

Where the hell had that memory come from?

The mattress squeaked and Lance panted heavily on top of me, bringing me back to the here and now.

“Oh, baby,” I crooned. “So good. You feel so good inside me.” I rubbed my fingers over his skinny flanks, moaning as if transported to heaven by his touch.

Lance grunted with satisfaction and redoubled his efforts. Sweat dripped down onto me from his face and narrow chest. A pulse hammered in his throat. His lips parted and he sucked in air, like he'd been running for miles.

The old fart better not die on me, not before we married and he made me his queen. I tossed my head to one side, exposing my neck, hoping he'd take the hint and bite. It couldn't be a mating bite—his mate had died years ago—but the urge to mark a partner demonstrated a genuine connection between two shifters. If he bit, I'd make damned sure everybody saw that I wore his mark.

No such luck. He ignored my neck, screwed his eyes shut, and continued to pound.

We had to finish this before his heart gave out. Groaning loudly, I arched my hips and met his frantic thrusts. “Yes, baby, yes. Give it to me.”

I sounded like an actress in a bad porno. Which, I suppose, wasn’t far from the truth. This was a performance, after all, and I had to sell it to my audience of one.

“Ohhhhhh.” I let out a protracted moan, undulating beneath him. “You’re a god, Lance. A sex machine.” I bit my lips to stifle a snicker.

He dropped his head, veins popping in his temples. He was close. All I had to do was tip him over the edge. Digging my fingernails into his scrawny ass, I contracted my pelvic muscles, pretending to come.

Lance arched his back and jerked inside of me, finished at last.

Thank fuck.

He flopped onto his back. “You good?” he gasped.

“Never better, darling,” I purred.

God, I needed a shower. And a stiff drink.

I glanced at Lance. His mouth had gone slack. He was already half asleep.

I counted to one hundred, giving him time to go completely under, then slid from bed, grateful to abandon damp sheets that reeked of old-man sex.

I used to like sex, especially with Bryce. My soulmate. My true love. If he’d lived, I know I could have talked him into mating me.

All my dreams would finally have come true if that cunt hadn’t murdered him. When I’d made my move against her behind the bakery, I’d had the perfect little setup waiting in the basement of an abandoned house, complete with plastic sheeting—the type painters use—and bleach to make the

cleanup easier. Who knew the bitch carried pepper spray, or that she'd make a mad dash to the dumpster? Then the damned wolves hid her. Never mind. Sooner or later, she'd get what was coming to her.

All the Hagen bitches would get what was coming to them.

With the grizzlies' help, we'd slaughter every member of the wolf pack and take possession of the Black Rock. I shivered, imagining how much shifters would be willing to pay for just a sliver of the rock. Oh, we'd keep enough for ourselves, then we'd sell the rest to the highest bidder. Millions. We'd make millions.

I tiptoed to the bathroom, turned the shower on low, and rinsed the sweat and stink from my body. Clean again, I slipped into my silk robe, cinched it at the waist, then moved furtively across the bedroom to the hall, leaving behind a snoring Lance.

Time for that drink.

Lance kept the premium liquor on a bar cart in his study. After my performance tonight, I'd more than earned the good stuff. I padded the length of the hallway and quietly made my way down the curved staircase to the ground floor.

I headed toward Lance's study. The sound of muffled voices drifted my way from the back of the house. I paused, tilted my head, and listened. Daniel and his brother Drake were deep in conversation. They had the night off. When Lance and I went to bed at eleven, his sons were out at a club. They'd come home, and from the sound of it, had retired to the study for a nightcap.

"Landry." I heard the name of the wolf alpha clear as day.

Interesting.

The plush carpet muffled the sound of my footsteps as I stealthily made my way toward the back of the house. I stopped next to the door to the kitchen, close enough to eavesdrop on their conversation, but far enough away that if they poked their heads out of the office, I could claim I'd come downstairs for a late-night snack.

“Daddy wore me out,” I’d tell them with a wink.

“Stevens and Hicks are with us,” Daniel said, naming two of Lance’s lieutenants.

“How about Tad Sweeney?” Drake asked.

Daniel snorted. “Not a chance. Didn’t even approach him. He’s loyal and will stick with Dad till the end.”

What *were* the Vilhauer boys up to?

“What did Landry say?” Drake asked.

“He told me that an alpha who acts against the best interests of his pack deserves to be removed,” Daniel replied.

“Well, he would say that, wouldn’t he?” Drake pointed out. “What better way to get rid of an enemy than to have his pack do the dirty work for you?”

“I don’t know about that. I think he’s sincere. I think he wants the same thing we do—peaceful coexistence.”

“Hell, brother. Maybe so, but any way you slice it, it’s a risky venture you’re proposing,” Drake said.

“You’ve heard the rumblings in the pack. We aren’t the only ones worried about an unwinnable war,” Daniel said. “We’re not the only ones who think Dad’s being led astray by a hot piece of ass.”

A hot piece of ass? I preened. Maybe I should have made a play for Daniel instead of the old man. Except he made it clear from the start that he didn’t like me.

“I don’t know.” Drake sounded skeptical. “How did you leave it with Landry?”

“We’re going to meet face-to-face next week and hash out a plan.”

“When?”

“Thursday, 11 p.m., at the gazebo in Brenner Park.”

I’d heard enough and couldn’t risk being discovered by the traitorous brothers. I stole back upstairs and crept into bed, my heart pounding with excitement. They say knowledge is

power. I'd put this piece of knowledge in my pocket and bring it out when it would best serve me. Maybe I'd tell Lance right away. He'd put a stop to their plot. Or maybe I could round up some of Lance's loyalists—like Tad Sweeney—and lay in wait at the park, and ambush Daniel and the wolf alpha. Present their heads to Lance on a platter. I bet he'd be so grateful that he'd drop to his knees and propose.

So many ways to turn this to my advantage, to destroy my enemies. To secure the power and position that I craved, that I deserved.

If only Bryce were at my side instead of Lance.

“You will be avenged, my love,” I whispered into the darkness. “And payback will be sweet. Bloody, but sweet.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



ZANE

Half an hour after Annika fell asleep in my arms, I carefully untangled our limbs and scooted across the mattress. She gave a small whimper of protest. I froze and held my breath, waiting to see if she'd wake up. She wriggled backward, as if seeking my warmth, then settled down.

Good.

I carefully slid out of bed, but instead of sneaking out of the room, I watched her sleep.

A few weeks ago, Emma had begged me to read her a story from a book of classic fairy tales. She'd jutted out her lower lip and made puppy dog eyes at me. I couldn't think of a single acceptable reason to say no, other than I'd rather get my claws torn out one by one than read a damned fairy tale. I couldn't say that to a kid. We sat together and read a story about a beautiful princess and a handsome prince who woke her from her cursed slumber with a kiss.

Watching Annika now put me in mind of that story. She was a real-life sleeping beauty, with her skin flushed pink, her soft lips parted, her pretty hair spilling across her pillow. She was no princess, thank fuck. And I was no high-minded, noble prince. If I woke her now, it wouldn't be for a chaste fairy-tale kiss. Oh, it might start with a kiss, but it wouldn't end until I had her naked beneath me, crying out my name while I pounded into her.

Annika had asked for our nightly, sexless, squeaky-clean spooning. I'd give the woman anything she asked for, no matter what it cost me. And keeping my hands to myself cost me both a good night's sleep and my peace of mind. Especially since I knew that Annika wanted me as much as I wanted her, and the only thing preventing us from being together was my concerns over my wolf.

What would it take to put done to my worries? How could I ever be sure that my wolf was safe, and I wasn't simply

rationalizing a way to get what I wanted?

Shaking my head, I hiked my discarded jeans up over my hips and shoved my feet into my boots. I backed from the room and closed the door with a quiet *snick*.

I'd stashed a burner phone at the back of a kitchen drawer. I padded down the hall, grabbed the phone and a beer from the fridge, then headed outside.

Dropping down onto a step, I took a long pull on the icy beer and punched in my brother's number. Above me, stars twinkled in a cloudless sky. In the distance, an owl hooted. Small animals scurried through the underbrush of the nearby woods, no doubt freaked out by the presence of a predator nearby. Heavier footfalls signaled a lynx running patrol.

Remy answered on the fourth ring.

"Who the fuck is this?" he croaked, clearly only half awake.

Oh, shit. Since it was three hours earlier on the West Coast, I'd figured Remy would still be up. With me gone, he must have been pulling extra patrols that messed with his sleep schedule.

"Remy—" I started.

"Zane!" The sleep cleared from his voice. "Where are you, man?"

"Can't tell you. Don't want you to have to lie if Adam asks."

Silence while he chewed on that then, "Why are you calling? You need something, brother?"

I shoved a hand through my bed head. "Just checking in. How's Harrison? What's happening with the coyotes?"

"Harrison is gonna be fine. Coyotes are madder than hell that Annika disappeared—especially Courtney—but Vilhauer finally bought that Adam doesn't know where she is," he said. "We're still running extra patrols and enhanced security, but no new attacks since you left."

“Good.” Relief punched through me. “That’s all good.”

“This situation... it’s not workable in the long term. You know that, right?” Remy asked. “Annika can’t spend her life on the run. And the pack needs you here.”

Yeah, I knew all that. “Annika was so desperate to stop the violence that she wasn’t thinking long term. Shit, she was ready to turn herself over to Vilhauer.”

“Wouldn’t that have been a damfool disaster?” Remy said.

I bristled, neither man nor wolf liking to hear Annika called foolish. “Watch it,” I cautioned.

Another brief silence. “Have you guys... um... moved forward with your relationship?”

“Moved forward? You sound like a prissy old lady,” I deflected.

“Have you mated?” Little brother cut straight through my bullshit.

“No. We haven’t mated.” Saying the words hurt.

“Why not?” Exasperation filled Remy’s voice. “Annika looks at you like you hung the damned moon. And if you think you don’t love her—that your wolf doesn’t know she’s the one—then you’re fooling yourself. Everyone can see it. Shit, man, you willingly worked in a fancy bakery—selling *cupcakes* to humans—to keep her safe.”

“You were there that night.” I cut through the bullshit, too. “You saw how Dad lost control of his wolf. He threatened you. He threatened Mom. He bit me.”

“What’s that got to do with—?”

“I’m afraid I’m gonna lose control of my wolf, too. That I’ll hurt somebody. That I’ll hurt Annika.”

Remy sighed. “Your wolf can be a stubborn asshole. No surprise there. Doesn’t mean he’s going to go feral and hurt somebody you care about.”

“He’s slipped the leash recently—”

“I’ll let you in on a little secret, brother. Everybody’s wolf slips the leash at least once. But only Mr.-Gotta-Be-Perfect sees it as the end of the world.”

“But Dad—”

“Has your wolf ever shown the slightest inclination to hurt Annika?” he asked.

“No.”

“Then why are you borrowing trouble? Why are you letting a worst-case scenario dictate your life and steal your joy?”

“Steal my joy?” I snorted.

“Yeah, your joy. If you learn how to ease up on yourself and everybody else, you’ll be a lot happier. And you deserve to be happy, Zane.”

“You sound like Grandpa,” I muttered.

“Yeah, well, Grandpa is a smart man.”

I blew out a long, slow breath. “I’ll think about what you said.”

“You do that.”

Another silence, broken only by rustling in the forest’s undergrowth. I took another swallow of beer.

“Has Daniel Vilhauer reached out to Adam?” I asked.

“He has. They’re gonna meet next Thursday for a face-to-face.”

Annika trusted Daniel. He seemed sincere, but you never knew. “Could be a trap. Be careful.”

“Don’t worry. I know how to run security.”

There I went again, telling someone how to do their job. “You’re right. You got this. Listen, I’m gonna sign off. I’ll check back in a couple of days.”

“All right. G’night. Brother.”

“G’night.”

I disconnected the call and laid the burner on the step. I was in no hurry to get back inside. The chill air felt good on my bare chest. The conversation with my brother left me with a lot to think about.

Tilting my head back, I studied the night sky. Jupiter glowed like a bright beacon. Thanks to Grandma Katia and her love of the stars, I recognized several of the constellations. There was Pegasus, the winged horse. Aquarius, the water bearer. Orion, the hunter, my favorite because we shared a name. Sort of. The queen of the night, the full moon—the Hunter’s Moon—rode high in the starry sky.

From nearby, twigs snapped and leaves rustled as something or someone walked through the forest. Sitting up straight, I turned my head toward the disturbance.

Thomas Morrow—naked after a shift—strode out from the treeline. Bright moonlight fell across his long limbs and cast shadows in the hollows in his cheeks. He came to a stop a dozen feet away. Beneath lowered brows, his eyes glittered yellow-green. His nostrils flared. He puffed out his chest and clenched his fists, practically vibrating with anger.

Well, hell. Was he challenging me to a fight?

A full grown male lynx burst from the trees. His massive paws slapped the ground as he bounded toward me. Thomas held out a hand, and the lynx skidded to a stop next to him.

I took a long, idle pull on my beer. “What crawled up your ass and died?”

Thomas stepped forward, the lynx at his side. “You need to go, Hunter.”

I took another swallow of beer. “And why is that?”

“I heard you. Your wolf is out of control. You’re afraid he’ll hurt Annika.” He took another step forward and jabbed a finger in my direction. “I won’t allow that to happen.”

Nothing more damning than hearing your own words—your own fears—repeated back to you. Rage and shame heated my blood, but I kept my voice even. “Cats are sneaky. Guess I shouldn’t be surprised you’d eavesdrop.”

“I mean it, Hunter. I want you gone. Now.”

Ordering me to get lost? Who the hell did this little shit think he was?

“You want me out of the way so you can have a clear path to Annika. That what you mean, kitty cat?”

Thomas sneered. “She’d be better off with me than with a crazy-ass wolf.”

Annika is ours, inside me, the wolf howled.

Desperate to break free, my shadow brother hurtled himself against my skin. His growl rumbled from my chest, outraged and possessive. Bloody images of carnage—spawned by the wolf’s fury—flooded my mind. I saw fangs sinking into soft flesh. Claws ripping into muscle and bone. The coppery tang of imaginary warm blood filled my mouth.

The heady promise of violence swallowed me whole and subsumed the man into the beast.

I slowly rose to my feet, the wolf’s jealous rage a drumbeat that drowned out reason. I swallowed, my throat thick, my human tongue barely cooperating.

“Annika is mine.”

Thomas jutted out his chin. “Over my dead body, asshole.”

The air around him shimmered as he summoned his cat. His bones snapped and his limbs contorted. Next to Thomas, his lynx companion lowered his head. He drew back his upper lip and snarled, shifting his weight from paw to paw.

Two against one, huh?

Laying a finger on my black rock, I drank in the jolt of power emitted from the chunk of meteorite. Buzzed, I kicked off my boots, stripped off my jeans, and shoved my bracelet into a pocket for safekeeping.

I’m ready, brother.

Throwing back my head. I allowed the wolf to take me. It hurt. It always hurt, but it was a welcome pain, and I gloried in the change, in my shift from man to wolf. Shuddering, I settled

into my canid form. I leapt off the porch and landed on the ground on four paws.

Without the power of the black rock to spur his transformation, Thomas was still midway through his change. Incensed and bloodthirsty as I was, I held back and waited for my opponent to finish his transition. Only a craven coward—a coyote or grizzly—would attack a vulnerable enemy before he stood on four legs ready to fight.

Now a lynx, Thomas snarled and dropped to the ground next to his packmate. They separated, flanking me, then lowered their heads like rams preparing to headbutt a rival. Shriill, god-awful screeches erupted from their throats. Thomas darted forward, claws extended, and slashed at me. I danced sideways, then lunged, sinking my teeth into his leg. Thomas screamed. The second lynx leapt onto my back.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



ANNIKA

An inhuman, hair-rising wail tore me from a sound sleep. I awoke instantly, my heart jackhammering against my ribs. Sitting bolt upright, I reached for Zane. My fingers found only smooth sheets and an empty space where he had fallen asleep hours earlier.

Another nightmarish cry, half scream, half squawk.

Oh, dear lord. Had the coyotes found us? Terror propelled me into motion. I jumped from the bed and stumbled down the hall, throwing on lights as I ran.

“Zane?”

No response.

From somewhere outside, a ghastly, discordant screech rent the night.

No time to call for help or to search for a weapon. I ran to the door, pausing only to grab an umbrella from the wooden stand in the foyer. As a weapon, it left a lot to be desired, but carrying a pointy stick was better than going out completely unarmed. I threw open the door and ran across the porch.

In the bright moonlight, I saw a wildcat clinging to the back of a large wolf. A cat, not a coyote. Attacking Zane. One of Jo’s pack? What the heck was going on?

Blood seeped from gashes in the wolf’s side, staining the animal’s fur. The sweet, metallic smell floated to my nose, sickening me. Fear cramped my belly. Zane was hurt.

No. No. No.

I hurtled down the stairs. “Get off him,” I shrieked, bringing the umbrella down hard on the lynx’s head. The cat jumped off the wolf and whirled on me, his lips pulled tight in a menacing snarl. I staggered backward, waving the umbrella as if it was a sword.

The wolf had sunk his fangs into the leg of a second lynx. Dragging the injured cat behind him, the wolf—Zane—crawled between me and the first lynx, putting his body between me and the furious shifter I'd struck with the umbrella. He growled low, as if daring the lynx to make a move.

“Stop it,” I begged, tightening my grip on the umbrella handle. “Everybody stop it right now.”

The angry lynx blinked twice and shook his head, as if clearing his vision. Recognition dawned in his eyes, and his rage evaporated. Shimmering lights surrounded him, then a naked Jamie Morrow sat up on the ground. His gaze traveled from me to Zane. He held up both palms.

“Let go of my brother,” he told the wolf.

The bleeding lynx was Thomas? Oh, God. I had no idea how this fiasco had unfolded—who attacked whom—but it had to end.

“Zane,” I said in my most smoothing voice. “You need to let go of Thomas.”

The wolf shook his head no, the side-to-side movement wrenching the injured lynx's leg. The cat whined. My stomach turned over. Both Zane and Thomas were hurt.

I knelt down next to the wolf and placed a hand on his heaving shoulder.

“Don't get so close to him,” Jamie warned. “The wolf is in control right now, and he's tasted blood.”

“It's all right,” I murmured, looking into the wolf's agitated blue eyes. Whatever happened here had pushed the animal to the brink. He was a dangerous beast, close to feral. An unlikely combination of rage, fear, and love sizzled in his glacier-blue gaze.

The wolf loved me. I felt his desperate need to keep me safe.

“Dammit, Annika,” Jamie said between clenched teeth. “Get away from him.”

“Zane would never hurt me,” I said firmly.

“You don’t know that.” Jamie slowly stood and sidled closer. Moving with shifter speed, he grabbed my arm, hauled me to my feet, and thrust me behind him. I stumbled, fell onto the ground, then scrambled back up.

The wolf lost his shit. Releasing Thomas’s leg, he bounded to his feet, snarling and snapping. Murderous eyes locked on Jamie. Blood and saliva dripped from his muzzle. He lowered his head, swaying from side to side. Any second now, he’d lunge.

Enough was enough. Stepping around my old friend, I lifted the umbrella. “Cut it out, Zane.”

The wolf’s head reared back. He turned startled eyes from me to Jamie, focusing his attention once again on the cat. Another low growl rumbled from his chest.

“For Pete’s sake.” Exasperation flooded my veins. I swung the umbrella and smacked the wolf’s nose. “Behave yourself.”

Clearly shocked, the wolf blinked. Before my eyes, the feral beast retreated. His ears flattened. He tucked his tail, then plopped down onto his haunches.

“You going to be good?” I asked, shaking the umbrella for emphasis.

He whimpered, looking for all the world like a chastened and repentant puppy.

“What the actual fuck?” Jamie muttered, staring at the wolf like he couldn’t believe his eyes.

I tossed aside the umbrella, dropped down on the ground next to the wolf, and threw my arms around his shoulders. Lowering my face close to his, I whispered, “Thank you, Zane.”

Whining, he licked my cheek. The air around him began to sparkle. I scooted a few feet away. Through the haze of shimmering lights, I watched in awe as his wolf form reshaped itself into a man, a naked man with five angry red slashes across his ribs.

Rising to his feet, he pointed to the porch. “Get my clothes, will you, please?” he asked in a voice not fully human.

I fetched his jeans and boots. He fastened his leather bracelet around his wrist, sucking in a breath when the black rock touched his skin. He hiked the jeans up over his hips and shoved his feet into the boots.

Behind him, Thomas shifted back to his human form, too. A bite mark clearly showed on his upper thigh.

I took up position next to Zane, a protective hand on his shoulder. His injury might have made him woozy. And the fight might not be over. If Thomas or Jamie tried to attack Zane—old friends or not—they’d have to go through me. I painted a stern expression on my face and looked from one man to the next.

“Are you guys ready to settle down?”

Headlights cut across the lawn as a car drove up the driveway. A van emblazoned with Morrow Garden Design on the door parked in front of the A-frame. Jo and Karl jumped out and ran over to us.

Jo’s eyes cut from Zane’s bloody ribs to her grandson’s bite mark. “Does somebody want to tell me what happened here?”

A moment of silence.

“I want to know, too,” I said.

Zane sighed and pointed at Thomas. “Your boy ordered me to get out of town and told me to leave Annika behind with him.”

“What?” I sputtered, swinging outraged eyes at Thomas. Where did he get off interfering in my relationship with Zane?

Thomas jabbed a finger at Zane. “And I heard him tell somebody on the phone that he’s lost control of his wolf and is afraid that the wolf will hurt Annika.”

And there it was, the reason Zane questioned whether it was safe for us to be together. He thought his wolf might hurt me.

Zane grimaced and looked down at the ground. I was no shifter. I couldn't scent emotions, but even I sensed the shame and embarrassment that rolled off him.

"Zane." I touched his cheek. Never a coward, he raised misery-filled eyes to meet mine. My heart splintered. This good, proud, very private man didn't deserve to have his secret fears torn from him and laid bare before an audience. Straightening things out with the Morrrows could wait. "Let's go inside and I'll clean and bandage your wound. We can talk there."

"Aren't you afraid to be alone with me?" he asked, his expression bleak.

I knew enough about wolves and their possessive and protective nature to understand what had happened here.

"Listen to me." I cupped his face with both hands. "By telling you to leave me, Thomas pushed all your buttons and sent your wolf into a frenzy."

"Yeah," Zane agreed. "And it got bloody."

"When I tried to stop it, when I hit Jamie with the umbrella, what did he do?"

"Turned on you and snarled." Zane shot a dirty look at the young lynx.

Jamie screwed up his face. "Sorry about that."

I tossed Jamie a quick, forgiving smile, but spoke only to Zane. "That's right, baby, he threatened me. And your wolf put himself between me and Jamie."

"Of course, he did. We'll always stand between you and danger."

"And then, when I smacked your wolf across the nose with an umbrella, what did your pissed-off, out-of-control wolf do?"

"Nothing," Zane said, understanding arising in his eyes.

"Not true," Thomas interrupted. "He practically went belly-up and whimpered."

“Thomas, be quiet.” Jo’s voice carried an alpha authority that danced across my skin and raised the fine hairs on the back of my neck.

Zane ignored Thomas’s provocative words, focusing solely on me. “I want you to understand. My dad lost control of his wolf. He threatened my mom and brother. He—” His gaze dropped to the scar on his right forearm.

I traced a fingertip over the old puncture marks. “Your father did this?”

“Yeah.” He sucked in a breath, then pushed the next words out. “Dad and I have a similar temperament. ‘Peas in a pod,’ Mom used to say. I’ve been afraid I inherited a fatal flaw, a... a genetic propensity for my wolf to get violent.”

“Zane,” I said softly. I didn’t believe for a minute that a propensity for violence could be inherited. Modeled, yes, but not inherited.

“My wolf loved you from the start,” he said. “I resisted and he slipped the leash. I finally figured out that the wolf was right, that you are my mate, but by then I didn’t trust the wolf.”

“A sort of vicious cycle,” I murmured.

“Yeah.”

There was too much here to unpack all at once, so I focused on the most important thing. “I’ll never be afraid of your wolf, and neither should you. He’s never threatened me. And he just showed you that no matter what—even if he’s out of his mind with rage—even if I hit him with an umbrella—he doesn’t lose control, and he would never hurt me.”

“If you’re right—”

“I am,” I interrupted.

Zane slid his hands over my hips and pulled me snug against his groin, our bodies a study in contrasts. The night air had chilled me, but he radiated a heat that penetrated the thin cotton of my pajamas. My breasts pressed against the cut muscles of his chest. Cold and hot. Soft and hard. Human and

shifter. Different but linked by a complex web of shared connections, respect, desire, and love. It *was* love, wasn't it?

I needed to say the words. "I love you, Zane."

The grouchy, taciturn mask he usually wore cracked, revealing an almost boyish smile, an open-hearted expression meant for me and me alone.

One of his hands slipped to the hollow of my back. His fingers traveled a leisurely journey up my spine, from vertebrae to vertebrae, stopping only when his palm cupped my nape.

Scarcely able to breathe, I licked lips that tingled with anticipation. Soon. Soon, his mouth would descend on mine. My body rocked, swaying gently in rhythm with my heartbeat. Beneath the smooth cotton of my pajama top, my nipples pebbled.

He lifted my hair off my shoulder and pushed aside the collar of my pajamas, exposing my neck and throat. His expression shifted, the boyish smile morphing into something darker, primal, something that smacked of raw possession. His fingers slid once again to my nape, then tunneled into my hair. He tugged, angling my head to one side.

Bending over me, he pressed a gentle kiss to my temple. Warm lips skated down my cheek, across my jaw, and down to my throat. His tongue fluttered against the skin at the juncture of my neck and shoulders. I felt the soft scrape of teeth against tender flesh, not a bite, but the promise of one. The mating bite.

Marit carried the scar from her mating with Adam. I ached to wear one of my own.

I shivered and gasped, goose bumps erupting across my body. Somehow, I managed to ignore the fact that we had an audience. All my attention fixated on the shifter whose touch held me in thrall.

Zane's fingers tightened in my hair. He tilted my face back, and his lips descended on mine in a ferocious kiss, a kiss that sent sparks zinging through my body. I moaned into his

mouth. A wolfish rumble rose from deep inside his chest, a vibration I felt down to my bones. After a minute or an hour—I couldn't tell—he broke off the kiss. I lifted heavy eyes to meet his. His fierce expression gentled. He loosened his grip on my hair.

“I promise to love you and protect you till my end of days. If you're willing to put up with a grump like me, I'd be honored if you'd take me as your mate.”

That had to be the most words I'd heard Zane string together at one time. I blinked back happy tears.

I twined my arms around his neck. “Yes. A million times yes.”

Zane turned to face Jo. “In case you're still wondering, ma'am, I've staked my claim.”

CHAPTER TWENTY



ZANE

Annika's brow furrowed and she shot me a questioning look. "Staked your claim?" she mouthed.

I lifted a shoulder. The concept of staking a claim was probably foreign to a modern human woman, but that's exactly what I'd done.

My fellow shifters got the message loud and clear, even Thomas, who didn't like it one bit. He twisted up his mouth and pointed at the bleeding bite mark on his thigh.

"Grandma, are we gonna forget that his wolf bit me when I came to Annika's defense?"

"I don't need defending against Zane," Annika said quickly.

"Well, I didn't know that, did I?" Thomas sounded peevish.

"No, I guess you didn't," Annika conceded. She was nothing if not fair. "Your intentions may have been good, but man oh man, you bungled the way you handled the situation."

"Really screwed the pooch." I bit back a smile, remembering how Liv accused me of the same thing.

Josephine turned to her grandson. "Ordering a wolf shifter to abandon his mate will always end in blood. Yours. His." She pointed first at the wolf bite on his thigh, then at the claw marks on my side.

"We're lucky nobody died tonight." Karl spoke for the first time.

"Do we have a problem?" I asked. I'd bloodied a member of the lynx alpha's family. In some packs, that was considered an automatic declaration of hostilities. It'd be suicide for the small lynx pack to go to war against my wolves, but sometimes hotter heads prevailed.

"I think we all understand how the situation went off the rails tonight," Josephine said. "As alpha of the Morrow Pack, I

disavow any demand for retribution. I don't want to go to war with the Black Rock Guardians." She smiled fondly at Annika. "And I don't want to get in the way of my sweet girl mating a wolf she so obviously loves."

"Grandma," Thomas protested.

Josephine raised a hand. "It's over. And I think it's time for us to clear out and leave these two alone. Jamie, you're running patrol for the rest of the night. Thomas, you're coming back home so your granny can tend to your wound."

"Yes, ma'am," two voices replied. Jamie looked relieved at the way things turned out. Thomas spoke the words grudgingly, through clenched teeth.

Annika ran to Josephine's side and threw her arms around her friend. "Thanks, Jo."

Josephine dropped a kiss on Annika's forehead. "I want you to be happy." She turned her eyes to me. "I suspect you'll knock yourself out to make Annika happy, won't you, Zane?"

I grunted my answer to her insulting question. Josephine laughed, then clapped her hands. "Let's go."

Annika returned to my side and slipped her small hand into mine. The Morrows climbed into their van and drove away. Jamie retreated to the woods, leaving Annika and me standing alone in the yard beneath the stars and the bright Hunter's Moon.

"Turn into the light," she ordered in a no-nonsense voice. "I want to check out your injury."

"Yes, ma'am." I twisted around so moonlight slanted across my ribs, then raised my arm, allowing her a better look.

Wincing, she touched the skin next to a bloody gash. "Does it hurt a lot?"

"This kitty cat scratch?" I scoffed. "I can hardly feel it."

Annika had agreed to mate me. I could scarcely feel anything beyond anticipation of the act. A shifter mated only once. It was the pivotal moment in their life. Already my blood had heated, and my body had grown hypersensitive. Her

fingertips brushing across my skin sizzled like the kiss of a live wire. She bent forward and her long hair grazed my arm. I trembled from pure pleasure.

“You’re shaking. It’s got to hurt. Maybe we should wait a day or two and give the wound time to heal.” She took my hand again and tugged, pulling me toward the house. “Let’s go inside. I’ll clean and bandage the scratches, then we can get some sleep. We’ll see how you’re feeling tomorrow.”

She was so damned sweet. Her sincere concern for my well-being, her desire to take care of me, touched my stony heart. No way in hell were we waiting to mate. My wolf huffed in agreement. Neither man nor beast could relax until she finally wore my mark, the unmistakable sign that she was mine to care for and to protect. A warning that anybody who messed with her would face the wrath of a wolf shifter.

“You can clean and bandage the scratches. I don’t wanna get blood on you or the bed. But darlin’, we’re mating tonight.”

That declaration stopped her in her tracks. She whirled to face me.

“Unless you’d rather wait,” I said slowly.

Shit. Maybe she wasn’t ready to mate. Maybe she was thinking we’d entered something like a human engagement, where the couple plan a fancy wedding a year in advance. Not the shifter way, but Annika wasn’t a shifter. I swallowed and forced out the question.

“Do you want to wait?”

“No, Zane. I’m done waiting. In fact, I’m more than ready to have my wicked way with you.” Eyes dancing, she yanked hard on my hand, as if dragging a reluctant groom to the altar.

All I needed to hear. I dropped her hand, then bent forward and—careful to avoid the bloody claw marks—threw her over my shoulder. Unleashing a triumphant cry, I charged up the steps and into the house. I ran down the hall to the bathroom, where I deposited her on her feet. I dropped down onto the edge of the tub.

“The quicker you clean me up, the faster you can have at me,” I said, playing along with her brazen words.

Annika washed her hands, filled the sink with warm water, and gently wiped the blood from my side. All the while, she made soft, sympathetic noises, as if afraid she was hurting me. Shifters healed fast and we weren’t vulnerable to infections, but I had no desire to stop her ministrations. She was a natural caregiver, and it gave her satisfaction to tend my wounds.

Frowning in concentration, she carefully spread antiseptic cream over the scratches. That done, she placed a gauze pad over the wound, then wrapped a long bandage around my rib cage to hold the pad in place. She washed her hands again and sat down on the closed toilet seat. We faced each other in silence for a long minute.

“Not exactly a romantic setting, is it?” I observed.

She made a face. “I’ve fantasized about being with you, but now that the moment’s here, it feels awkward,” she confessed. “I don’t know what to say, what to do.”

She didn’t know what to do? That raised an obvious question. “Annika, are you a virgin?”

“What? No.” She shook her head, sending her golden-brown hair flying. “I’ve had sex, but never with—” She hesitated.

“A shifter?” I guessed. Was she worried about having sex with a man who wasn’t strictly human? “No worries there. Same basic equipment, same basic mechanics.”

“Except for the cock locking in place and the comes-like-a-geyser part.” She grinned.

Wait. Was she telling me she *had* had sex with a shifter? Who? When? Had to be in the last couple of months. Irrational jealousy speared into me. Once we mated, we’d be it for each other. I’d be one hundred percent faithful, and I’d eviscerate any man who looked at her that way or who made a move on her. Who she slept with before me was none of my business. Even if it was a shifter. Dammit. I needed to get a grip before I messed things up between us.

Annika leaned forward and touched my knee, sympathetic understanding in her pretty brown eyes. “One night after too much tequila, I asked Marit what it was like to have sex with a shifter.”

“Why’d you ask? General curiosity?”

“No.” Pink colored her cheeks. “Even back then, I wanted you. I wanted to know what it would be like.”

Beneath my skin, the wolf preened and strutted.

“Glad to hear it,” I said. “Because I’ve wanted to take you to the floor for months, too.”

The pink in her cheeks turned to scarlet. She touched her heated face, as if to confirm the fact, then sighed. “I’m a blusher.”

No shit. It was beyond adorable. “So I see.”

“But I’m not shy, or delicate. I don’t want you to be too careful with me.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I don’t want you to hold back or treat me like I’m made of glass,” she said earnestly. “I want all of you.”

“I’m stronger than a human man,” I reminded her. “I need to be careful so I don’t hurt you.”

“A little hurt is okay.”

I raised a brow. “Excuse me?” Surely I didn’t hear her correctly.

That blush again. She twined her fingers together in her lap. “I know what I like. I like sensations to be... intense. I like to feel... overwhelmed by a man.”

I narrowed my eyes, my brain spinning a million miles an hour as I tried to make sense of her words. “Annika, are you telling me you like to be dominated in bed?”

She squirmed and the scarlet in her cheeks and neck turned brick red. “Um... yes. Not everywhere. Not all the time. But in bed, sometimes, yes.”

I sat back, my thoughts a chaotic jumble. I did not see *this* coming. I'd assumed sweet, gentle Annika would like sweet and gentle in bed.

"Say something," she begged. "I'm sitting here feeling like a giant, self-conscious dork."

I hopped off the edge of the tub and dropped onto my knees in front of her. She fixed her gaze somewhere over my shoulder.

"Hey." I touched her cheek. She swung her eyes to meet mine. The embarrassment and hesitation I saw on her face cut me to the quick. "You can tell me anything, anytime. No holds barred."

"Okay." Her uncertain expression remained. "So, what do you think? Are you shocked? Is it a deal-breaker?"

I almost laughed. "Seriously. I'm bossy, opinionated, and pushy. Do you think there's a chance in hell that I'd object to being in charge in bed?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I mean, maybe. Sometimes the bossiest, take-charge guys like to submit in bed."

My brain stuttered. The little human possessed a font of unexpected knowledge.

"Not me," I said firmly. "No judgment, but I'm not wired that way."

"So we're compatible." She sunk small teeth into her plump lower lip. I swallowed a groan, desperate to feel those teeth bite into my flesh, marking me the way I planned to mark her.

I cleared my throat. "I interrupted you just now. You were telling me that you'd never had sex with..." My voice trailed off.

"Oh, right." She blinked. "I've had sex with men I like, but I've never had sex with a man I'm in love with." She brushed a fingertip across the bristles on my chin. "You'll be my first. And I guess my last."

Dear God, her sweetness utterly disarmed me and laid waste to my soul.

“Same here,” I confessed, my voice thick. “You’re my first and last love, too.”

Her expression turned playful. “Then why are we hanging out in the bathroom?”

Damned good question. I stood and held out a palm, an invitation to come with me, to be mine. She jumped to her feet and took my hand. Side by side, we crossed the hall to her bedroom.

I could see fine in the dark, but she couldn’t. “Do you want light?”

In answer, she clicked on the small lamp on her dresser. She pulled a lacy scarf from the top drawer and draped it over the lampshade, casting a mottled pattern of shadow and light across the room.

I reached into the same drawer and rummaged around till I found what I was looking for, a long, thin rectangle of silk. I held it loosely between my hands, then snapped the soft fabric.

Annika licked her lips. “What are you going to do with the scarf?”

“You’ll see,” I promised. Crooking my finger, I beckoned her to my side.

Without hesitation, she stepped closer.

Did she mean it when she said she liked to be dominated in bed? Only one way to find out.

“Strip.” I growled the order.

Eyes locked on mine, she freed the top button on her pajamas. With slow, deliberate motions, her fingers worked their way down the row, from her collarbone to her belly. When she reached the bottom, the pajama top hung open, exposing her throat, the valley between her breasts, and her navel. She shrugged, and the pajama top fell onto the floor. Slipping her thumbs into the waistband of her pants, she did a little shimmy. The pants slid down her hips and legs and

pooled on the floor at her feet. She kicked them and the top aside.

Annika stood before me, gloriously nude. Tossing back her hair, she squared her shoulders and lifted her chin, standing tall and proud. Her lips parted. Her perfect breasts rose and fell as she panted.

My predator's gaze fell on the hectic pulse that beat at the base of her throat. I sucked in a breath and tasted the heady tang of feminine desire.

"So fucking beautiful," I breathed. I touched the pulse point on her throat. Through the thin, delicate skin, her heartbeat tapped against my fingertips, proof positive of her life and vitality. A strong spirit animated her body. But as a human, she was vulnerable, her skin soft and fragile, her bones easily broken, her life far too easy to snuff out.

And my enemy wanted her dead. I tamped down the rage that knowledge gave rise to. No way would I spoil our mating by thinking about Lance Vilhauer and the damned coyotes.

Resolve filled my chest. No matter what it cost me, I'd keep my human mate from harm. How I'd balance that with her desire not to be cosseted, with her unfortunate predilection for putting herself in harm's way, *that* I hadn't figured out yet. But I would.

First, I had to make her mine.

"Undress me," I ordered.

She knelt on the rag rug, unfastened my boots, and set them aside. Standing up on her knees, she worked the zipper on my jeans. I'd gone commando. When she tugged the pants down my legs, my cock—already at half-mast—sprang free. She tossed the jeans on top of my boots, then sank back onto her heels, awaiting instructions. Her eyes sparkled and a small smile touched her lips. Annika was having fun. We were on the right track.

"Take it in your mouth," I ordered, my voice full of gravel.

She licked her lips.

I groaned and settled my weight firmly on both feet. A man who promised to dominate a woman in bed couldn't wobble at the sight of her tongue swiping across her plump, pink lips.

"May I use my hands?" she asked.

"Yeah," I croaked.

She rose up on her knees again and wrapped both hands around the base of my cock. Her tongue lathed the tip, then the sides, leaving the shaft slick and slippery. With a taut mouth, she slid the head between her lips and paused to lavish attention on that sensitive spot on the underside.

I groaned. Good. It felt so damned good.

Instead of bobbing up and down, her mouth slowly, deliberately glided down the shaft. She paused now and then to drag another breath in through her nose. When she'd gone as far as she could—when she started to choke—she pulled her mouth back up. Her tight lips popped over the ridge on the tip, and I nearly lost my mind.

Bleary-eyed and panting for air, she rocked on her heels. With the back of her hand, she swiped at her shiny wet lips and chin. "Again?" she asked.

I bit back a *hell, yes*. My self-control hung by a thread. I didn't want to traumatize the woman. I didn't want her introduction to shifter sex to be me coming like a fire hose in her mouth. We'd figure out the best way to manage blow jobs later.

Before I could change my mind, I pulled Annika to her feet. I tunneled fingers through her hair and tilted her head back so she had no choice but to meet my eyes.

"You're going to do exactly what I say, aren't you?"

Pupils huge, she nodded as much as my grip on her hair would allow.

"Tonight, I'm gonna give you all the intense sensation and dominance you crave. I promise that I'll *always* listen to what you want. But me being in charge in the bedroom means that

we do it my way. Sometimes my way is gentle. Sometimes intense. It's not one thing. You get me?"

Her lips curved. "I like it when you're bossy."

"Say it," I ordered. "Tell me you understand."

"I... I understand," she faltered.

"And I always want you to participate. Don't ask permission to touch. Kiss me. Scratch. Bite. Have your wicked way with me, like you said."

"That's what I want, too. Just don't hold back. Don't be afraid to be a little rough."

"I hear you." I pinched a rosy-pink nipple, not enough to hurt but enough to get her attention.

Silently holding her gaze, I squeezed, rolling the taut nub between my thumb and forefinger. Her lips parted and she inhaled a slow, quivery breath. The pupils of her eyes grew impossibly large. Her lips curved in a tremulous smile that told me everything I needed to know.

"Zane." The word came on a contented sigh.

I let go of her nipple and swatted her butt.

"Get your ass on the bed, darlin'."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



ANNIKA

I've climbed onto a bed thousands of times in my life. You'd think the simple act would be second nature, effortless, a deed requiring neither thought nor skill. Nope. My body refused to cooperate. My limbs were as floppy and disjointed as those of a newborn foal. I scrabbled awkwardly to the middle of the mattress, then sat up, my heart pounding, to face Zane.

I'd fallen in love with a shifter whose gruff, crabby persona concealed a warm heart. I trusted him—shoot—I'd come right out and told him *exactly* what I needed, and he said he'd give it to me. Still, I was standing on the edge of a cliff, about to jump into the unknown. Shifter sex with a man who promised to dominate me in bed. A mating bite. Building a life with this good man. A whole new world was opening up before me. No wonder I was twitchy.

Zane stood predator-still at the foot of the bed. His intense gaze tracked my every twitch, my every nervous blink. Frowning, he narrowed his ice-blue eyes. “You having second thoughts, Annika?”

“No.” I shook my head to emphasize my denial.

All grace and easy strength, Zane crawled onto the bed and knelt next to me. With his powerful body and piercing eyes, he was beyond beautiful. Dappled lamplight fell across his tawny skin, highlighting the delectable play of muscles as he stretched the silk scarf between his hands. Entranced, I drank in the vision of masculine perfection, then my gaze shifted back to the scarf.

Was he planning to blindfold me? God, I hoped not. I wanted to see everything.

“Please don't cover my eyes,” I said before I could think better of it.

Zane tilted his head to one side. His brows lowered and he made a tut-tut sound. “You forgetting who's in charge here?”

I bit my lips together and shook my head again.

“Hold out your hands,” he ordered. Palms up, I extended both hands. Zane used one end of the long scarf to bind my wrists. “Lie down with your arms over your head.”

I complied.

He tied the other end of the scarf to the wrought iron headboard, then hopped off the bed. He dragged the tall cheval mirror from the corner of the room and positioned it next to the bed. “Since you’re so eager to watch,” he explained, angling the mirror to catch my reflection.

He’d told me he wanted me to participate. I couldn’t just lie here like a silent, inert lump. “Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome,” he said with what could only be called a wicked smile.

I wriggled and tugged on the scarf, testing my restraints. It held fast. I could lie flat on my back or roll over onto my stomach, but I wasn’t going anywhere. At that knowledge, everything in me relaxed. All anxiety fled my body. I slipped into a dreamy languor.

Zane knelt beside me again. With both hands, he smoothed stray hairs back from my forehead. He brushed his knuckles over my cheek, then his hand slid down to encircle my throat. His focus was absolute. Unblinking raptor eyes took in my shallow breaths and my fluttering eyelids, then honed in on the pulse hammering against the side of my neck. His nostrils widened and he slowly inhaled.

Was he scenting the air for fear?

He wouldn’t find it.

Under his firm hold, under his intense scrutiny, I let go of the world.

Safety and comfort juxtaposed with a hint of danger was my happy place. I loved to lie in bed, listening to rain strike the roof, secure in the knowledge I was warm and dry and safe from the elements. I devoured true crime shows, heartsick for

the victims, grateful I didn't share their fates, but glad to be reminded that, in a world fraught with risk, I was all right.

Now, Zane's powerful hand wrapped around my throat. His thumb rested against a carotid artery, the vessel that carried blood from my heart to my brain. If he squeezed... if he squeezed, I'd be in trouble. But he never would. His strength would never be used against me. Danger existing side-by-side with safety. Like I said, my happy place.

I sighed, perfectly content. "I love you, Zane."

That open-hearted, boyish smile lit his face once again. "Love you, too, Annika."

We grinned at each other like saps, then the smile faded from his face. He held up his right hand and flexed his fingers. Claws burst from the fingertips. I gaped, unable to look away from the sharp points.

"Did you forget I'm a wolf?" he asked.

"I think I did," I confessed.

"I will never allow harm to come to you." His blue eyes turned deadly serious. "But if my mate wants a little hurt, I'll give it to her."

"Safe from harm, but not safe from hurt. That sounds like heaven," I said, my nerve endings humming in happy anticipation.

Zane bent over me, and the tip of one claw traced the contours of my lips, electricity sizzling in its wake. He tapped my chin. I tilted my face up, baring my throat. The pads of his fingers stroked my neck, then a claw touched the small notch in my collarbone. He slowly dragged the claw from my collarbone to my right nipple.

"You like?" he asked in a low voice.

"Ohhh... Yes." I shivered and moaned at the exquisite sting.

His hand returned to my throat, and a sharp point scraped a similar path to my left nipple. I held my breath as he dragged a claw straight down between my breasts, over my stomach, all

the way to the dark tangle of curls at the apex of my thighs. A fine red welt blossomed beneath his hand, a starburst of lines radiating from my throat, down my torso, across my breasts.

I arched my back, mindless from pure pleasure.

“You want more?” Zane breathed into my ear.

“God, yes,” I whimpered.

The tip of a claw followed an undulating trail over my stomach and across my breasts. It stung as it rasped across my nipple. Tomorrow, my breasts and stomach would look like a road map of intersecting lines. Tomorrow, I’d stand in front of a mirror and press my fingers into the welts, reanimating the small bites of pain. The marks would soon fade away, leaving my skin smooth and unmarred. Their very impermanence made them more precious in my eyes.

“That’s enough, darlin’.” He flexed his hands and the claws retracted. Leaning forward, he kissed my eyelids and the tip of my nose. His lips descended on mine in a kiss that gradually morphed from tender to possessive.

“Mine.” He nipped my lower lip.

He pressed open-mouthed kisses down my neck and across the curves of my breasts. “Mine,” he repeated, gently squeezing the mound.

“Yes, yours,” I repeated breathlessly.

Liv would have a fit if she heard us. I couldn’t imagine my sister ever submitting to a man. But I couldn’t allow her disapproval and judgment—anybody’s disapproval or judgment—to keep me from being my true self.

His hands slid down over my stomach and hips and came to rest on my thighs. Shifting positions, he nipped at my navel, then sketched a line of kisses to the small triangle of curls at the juncture of my thighs. He glanced up at my face, the wolf glittering in his bright-blue eyes. Inhaling slowly, he breathed in my scent.

“Mine,” he growled, his voice unexpectedly deep.

“Yes,” I whispered, arching my hips in an unmistakable invitation.

Strong hands pushed my legs apart. He scraped his chin over my inner thigh, the stubble a delicious sandpaper kiss. I whimpered. He swept his tongue up over my sex. It was Zane’s turn to groan now. He lapped at me like I was his favorite flavor of ice cream cone.

I tugged on the scarf, wanting nothing more than to tunnel my fingers through his blond hair while he ate me out. The tip of his tongue fluttered against my clit. My muscles locked and my nipples formed diamond-hard peaks. My fingernails dug crescents into my palms. He licked again, and I fell headfirst into a spine-shattering orgasm. I couldn’t contain the cry that welled up in my throat.

Zane’s body slid over mine. With one swift move, he drove his cock into my still-spasming core. I shrieked again as the broad head of his shaft battered the walls of my pussy.

My muscles were spent, my clit hypersensitive, yet as Zane moved relentlessly inside me, desire once again began to lick at the edges of my consciousness.

“Oh,” I gasped, as a tendril of lust wound through my weary body.

Zane pressed his forehead against mine. “You good?”

What a question. I was beyond good. I was floating on a sea of bliss. A small laugh escaped me. “I’m so damned good. You?”

He smiled down at me. “Never better.”

He struck a leisurely pace, his thrusts now slow and undemanding, coaxing pleasure from my exhausted body.

“I want to touch you,” I said.

A single claw slid from the tip of his index finger. He reached over my head and sliced through the silk scarf binding my wrists. The fabric fell away.

“Have at me, darlin’,” he offered.

I raised a hand to his face, parted his lips, and traced the hard edge of his perfect white teeth. “You’re going to bite me,” I marveled aloud.

“I am,” he agreed, the wolf flashing in his eyes again. “And soon.”

I ran my palms over his shoulders and across his chest, admiring well-defined muscles.

“You’re beautiful,” I murmured.

He grunted a dismissive protest.

I slid my hands around his lower back and pressed my fingernails into his ass. Beneath my hands, his muscles flexed and released as he rocked inside of me, picking up the pace of his thrusts.

My nerve endings caught fire. Lust blazed through me. I lost the capacity for coherent thought and raked my fingernails from his shoulders down to his ass. Zane hissed and reared back his head, his chest heaving as his gaze burned into me. I stilled. Some primitive part of my psyche recognized the folly inherent in goading a predator.

“My mate has claws,” he said with a slow smile.

Without warning, he pulled out and flipped me onto my stomach. Seizing my hips, he yanked me up onto my knees. A heartbeat later, his thick cock drove into my core. My hands clenched on the sheet as he pounded into me, a relentless barrage of thrusts that staked claim to me, body and soul.

Zane licked the spot where my shoulder curved into my neck, then blew a warm breath over my wet skin. Goose bumps broke out on my arms. His teeth closed over the spot, a bite firm enough to hold me in place without bruising the skin.

“Hmm...” he growled, the vibration rumbling from his throat, to his teeth, to my skin.

I’d never been more turned on.

“Do it,” I begged.

Lightning fast, he struck. Razor-sharp fangs pierced my skin, penetrated muscle and tendon, and embedded in bone.

I thought I was ready, but no one could prepare themselves for *this*. It didn't matter that I wanted it—that I'd begged for it—my instincts for self-preservation and avoiding serious pain roared to life. I bucked, trying in vain to shake him off.

Supporting his weight on one hand, he reached beneath me and cupped a breast. He scraped the pad of a finger across my nipple. A tendril of sensual pleasure wound from the aching tip to my sex. I stopped fighting.

His hand slid down to my clit and stroked the swollen nub. I shuddered as pleasure and pain swirled together and became something new, something all-consuming.

Zane groaned. His cock expanded inside of me, grew impossibly large. He jerked against me, his orgasm pushing me over the edge into my own. Hot cum flooded my sex and spilled down my thighs.

“Comes like a geyser,” I mumbled, repeating Marit's words.

Zane's shoulders shook with laughter. He retracted his fangs, then swiped his tongue across the bite mark, sealing the wound. “Comes like a geyser. Remind me to thank Marit for planting that lovely description in your head.”

He rolled onto his back and threw an arm around my shoulders and tugged me to his side.

“You do that.” I snuggled close. “I'm going to thank Marit for falling in love with Adam. If she hadn't, I never would have met you.”

Mated. We were mated, bonded together forever.

He wrapped a tendril of my hair around a finger. “I don't know about that. I suspect that fate would have brought us together, no matter what.”

I angled my head back to look into his face. This nonsense, laconic man believed in fate? “You really think so?”

He shrugged. “Shifters believe in fate. Don’t get me wrong, sometimes we fight it.”

“Like you did.”

“Yeah, like I did.” He yawned. “Didn’t think I’d be so happy to be proven wrong.”

“What? A laid-back, easy going guy like you doesn’t like to be proven wrong?” I teased.

He growled. “Watch it, mate.”

Mate. I wriggled with happiness, then splayed my fingers across his chest. Beneath my hand, his heart beat a steady rhythm.

“I love you, *mate.*” I tried out the word.

“Love you, too.” He stroked my hair, petting me.

My mind wouldn’t stop racing. “Zane?”

He grunted.

“Thank you for indulging my ... um... my proclivities.”

“There’s a fancy-ass word,” he mumbled, his eyes half-closed.

“I meant what I said. I like to be dominated in bed, and I love what you did with your claw. Just don’t expect me to follow orders outside the bedroom.” I remembered my other promise and amended my statement. “The bedroom or the battlefield.”

His eyes snapped open. “You’re the sweetest woman I’ve ever known.” He turned his head and squinted at me. “But you’re *still* gonna be a pain in my ass sometimes, aren’t you?”

“Probably,” I conceded with a rueful smile.

He heaved a deep sigh. “Life with you will be interesting.”

I frowned, an old proverb coming to mind. *May you live in interesting times.* It was a curse, based on the notion that danger, uncertainty, and conflict were inherently more interesting than peace and calm.

“I’ll take peace and calm, please,” I whispered into the semidarkness.

“Huh?” Zane grumbled, his eyelids once again closed.

“Nothing.” I sat up just enough to press a kiss over his heart. His lips curved in a sleepy, satisfied smile.

Peace and calm. I cast my wish out into the universe.

I shivered. What was it Grandma Freya used to say?

A goose walked over my grave.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



COURTNEY

Sitting cross-legged on the bed, I gleefully spread the contents of the jewelry box across the silk coverlet.

“What do we have here?” I muttered, holding up a gold charm bracelet.

Dozens of charms dangled from the chain: a baby rattle, a cowboy hat, a parrot, the coliseum in Rome, and more. Souvenirs from the dead mate’s life. Sentimental crap, if you asked me. Nothing I’d wear. But if the bracelet was genuine 14 karat—and seriously, would Joan Vilhauer own anything else?—I could melt it down into a solid gold nugget.

I set the bracelet aside in the *yes* pile.

A pair of gold-and-diamond chandelier earrings caught my eye. I held one up. The stones sparkled in the light.

“Now we’re talking.” I could definitely see myself wearing those. The earrings were keepers. Into the *yes* pile with them.

Humming happily, I slid the real prize onto my finger, Joan’s ring, a three-carat, oval-cut diamond mounted in a platinum setting.

“Jackpot,” I cried, holding out my hand to admire the bling. I was so busy gloating over the big stone that I didn’t notice the men standing in the open bedroom doorway.

“What the hell are you doing with my mother’s jewelry?” Daniel stomped across the room, Lance on his heels.

Busted, damn it. They weren’t supposed to be back from their meeting with Medved’s reps for hours. I thought I had the place to myself.

Ignoring Daniel, I smiled sweetly at Lance. “I saw the pretty box on the dressing table, and I couldn’t resist looking inside. You don’t mind, do you, darling?”

Daniel’s lip curled, like he smelled something bad. “See, Dad? It’s just like Drake and I have been telling you. Your

whore is trying to take Mom's place."

"Nobody can take your mother's place, son."

I didn't like the sound of that, or Daniel's insult. Maybe an appeal to Lance's vanity and sense of chivalry was in order.

"Lance," I sniffed. "Are you going to let Daniel talk to your woman that way?"

"His woman, Jesus." Daniel shook his head.

Lance walked closer to the bed, frowning at the piles of jewelry, the good stuff I intended to keep on one side and the less valuable costume pieces on the other. I nonchalantly stuck the hand wearing the ring under my leg. Best not to aggravate the coyote alpha with the sight of his dead mate's ring on my finger.

Lance reached out and yanked my hand out. "Why are you wearing Joan's ring?"

"Why do you think?" Daniel snorted. "She's trying Mom's life on for size. She's counting on marrying you and getting her grubby hands on all of Mom's nice things."

"Don't be ridiculous, son," Lance said. "Courtney knows what's what. All that's going on here is a little casual fun and games between consenting adults. No way in hell will I ever get married."

"What did you say?" I hissed. Fun and games between consenting adults? There was nothing fun about the time I'd spent underneath that sweaty old man.

My mother always warned me that my temper would be my ruin. I held my breath for a good five seconds, trying to force it down.

"Lance, darling, this isn't casual for me. I've fallen in love with you." I actually managed to conjure up some tears. I blinked prettily while a single teardrop trickled down my cheek.

Brava. If I could have gotten away with applauding myself, I would.

“Love was never in the cards for us, honey,” he said. “I told you that from the start.”

Yes, he had, but I didn’t for one second believe that I couldn’t get him to change his mind.

Behind Lance, Daniel—the asshat—smirked. “You heard her. She’s in love with you. It isn’t fair to give a woman false hope. You’re a better man than that, Dad.” His voice reeked of phony sincerity, but pure malice shone in his eyes.

If Daniel fucked this up for me, I’d get payback. And I knew how. With the little ace in my pocket, I could destroy him.

“Trying on my mate’s jewelry.” Lance shook his head. “You got a little too big for your britches, honey. I think it best we go our separate ways.”

“No,” I wailed.

He lifted a hand. “I won’t send you away empty-handed. I’ll give you \$5000 to help pay the bills when you go back to Seattle and start up your event planning business again.”

What the hell was happening? I turned on the waterworks, for real this time.

“Please, Lance,” I sobbed. “Ask Daniel to leave so we can talk privately.”

So I could fall on my knees and offer him a blow job, I meant. Lance couldn’t resist my blow jobs. With my eyes watering and my nose running, it would be sloppy going, but I could manage if I had to. I’ve done worse.

He shook his head, regret deepening the lines on his face. “Daniel, call the Belle Reve Inn and book a suite for Courtney.”

“Yes, sir.” Daniel offered me a mocking salute as he pulled his phone from his pocket.

Lance turned to me, his wallet in hand. He pulled out a pile of hundreds and pressed them into my palm, then tugged the beautiful three carat diamond ring from my finger.

“Pack an overnight case,” he said. “You’re too emotional to get behind the wheel. I’ll have one of the boys drive you to the Inn. We’ll send your SUV and the rest of your things to you tomorrow. I’ll transfer the \$5000 into your checking account right away.”

I stared at him, dumbstruck, while my plans for a perfect future unraveled. I wouldn’t be queen of the coyotes. I wouldn’t pocket millions from the sale of the Black Rock. All the hours spent with Lance were for absolutely nothing. What did that leave me?

Vengeance. Daniel had moved to the top of the list, right below Annika Hagen.

I tuned out Lance, who was yammering about parting as friends.

With as much dignity as I could muster, I climbed off the bed. I came this close to telling Lance what I truly thought about him—about his saggy old body and his stinky morning-breath kisses—but stopped myself, remembering the money.

Head held high, I marched to the closet and threw some clothes into a bag, then to the bathroom to grab some toiletries. When I walked back into the bedroom, one of the company drivers was waiting for me. Bet Daniel sent him to make sure I didn’t help myself to anything on my way out. I slipped my laptop into a carrying case and smiled at the driver.

“I’m ready.”

He carried my bags downstairs, and we rode in silence to the Belle Reve Inn. Well, not exactly in silence. We didn’t talk, but I sniffled loudly all the way. It never hurts to have a sympathetic man in your corner, and some men couldn’t resist a damsel in distress.

When we parted, I laid my hands on his chest and thanked him for being so kind. The chump looked stupefied. If I needed a way back into the house, I’d remember his name. Craig. Or Greg. Damn it, I’d already forgotten.

It was offseason and Daniel had booked me into the honeymoon suite. The asshole probably did it on purpose, just

to rub it in my face that Lance and I would never get married.

“Laugh it up,” I muttered under my breath, dropping my bags onto the king-sized bed.

I checked my bank account. True to his word, there was a \$5000 transfer from Lance Vilhauer pending. I wasn’t hungry, but on principle I ordered room service, a lobster salad and a bottle of Cristal champagne. When the food came, I picked at the salad but drank two glasses of the yummy bubbly.

Afterward, I took a long bath in the spacious tub. Swigging straight from the bottle, I polished off the champagne. I lay back in the water and allowed my claws to slide in and out of my fingertips. Not every coyote could manage a partial shift, but I could. I smiled to myself, imagining those claws raking across Annika Hagen’s smug little face.

I’d make the bitch bleed. That was number one on my list. And I’d destroy Daniel, a gratifying number two. At the exact right moment—sometime during the next few days—Daniel would get what he had coming.

I soaked so long that the water cooled and my skin pruned. I toweled off, slipped into a fluffy white hotel robe, and stumbled into the suite’s main room. I flopped across the bed, the room spinning around me. Whoa. Maybe I’d had a little too much champagne, but who could blame a girl after the day I had? And it would be a shame to let it go to waste.

I hiccuped, pulled out my phone, and punched in the number of a friend in Seattle.

“Courtney.” He sounded surprised to hear from me.

“Bradford,” I cried, as if hearing his voice was the best thing that had happened to me in eons. “How have you been, darling?”

We exchanged the requisite pleasantries, then I got down to business.

“I have to ask you for a teensy-weensy favor.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



ZANE

I woke early the next morning and couldn't resist pulling back the sheet to admire my still sleeping mate. She lay on her back, naked, with one arm thrown over her head. Sunlight fell across the bed. Her golden-brown hair glowed like a halo. I smiled. A halo. That fit, because I swear she was as sweet as an angel.

The morning air must've chilled her skin. She frowned and scrunched up her face in an adorable protest. Her hand slapped the bed, reaching for the sheet.

I was about to cover her back up when my gaze fell on her stomach and breasts.

Holy-fuck-damn-it-all-to-hell-what-had-I-done?

My hand froze in the air as I gaped at my mate's torso. Pink puffy welts crisscrossed her skin. Dammit. Did it hurt to lie on her stomach? Was that why she was sleeping on her back?

A shifter heals quickly. The gashes on my side were already fading. The claw marks I'd left on Annika's skin looked fresh. Humans were more fragile than shifters. I knew that, yet I chose to play along with her desire for what she called intense sensations.

And look at her now.

Guilt cramped my stomach. I jumped to my feet, ran to the bathroom, and found the antiseptic cream she'd rubbed onto my cuts last night. Sitting on the edge of the bed, I carefully spread the cream over one of the pink scratch marks.

Annika's eyes fluttered open and she sat up on her elbows. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to fix my mistake." I couldn't keep the bitter self-recrimination out of my voice.

She placed her hand on top of mine. "It wasn't a mistake."

Yeah, it was. A scar left from a mating bite was one thing. Welts were another.

I shook my head, too disgusted with myself to answer.

“Zane,” she drawled in her I-mean-business voice. “Stop for a minute and talk to me.”

“All right.” I set the antiseptic cream on the nightstand and folded my hands together, waiting for her to speak.

“Remember what we said last night? About the difference between hurt and harm?”

I pointed at the marks on her stomach and breasts. “You trying to tell me that isn’t harm?”

“That’s exactly what I’m telling you. In a day or two, these marks will fade away. No permanent harm done.” She laid a hand on my thigh. “It means the world to me that you didn’t judge me. That you were willing to do what it takes to make me feel good.”

As her mate, it was my duty to both provide Annika with what she needed to be happy *and* to protect her. “I don’t know how to do this,” I confessed. “I thought I knew what it meant to be a mate, but now—”

“You’re already an amazing mate.” Annika rolled onto her knees and reached for my face, cupping my cheeks between her hands. “And I’m glad you told me how conflicted you’re feeling. I don’t want us to hold back and keep secrets from each other. That’s why I told you what I like in bed.”

“I want honesty, too,” I said.

She lifted up on her knees, planted a light kiss on my lips, then drew back. Glancing down, she ran a fingertip over the pink line on her left breast. “For me, sensation play is like ghost pepper salsa.”

Huh?

“You lost me,” I admitted.

“I get a craving for it now and again, but I wouldn’t want it every day. As long as I know I can ask you for intense

sensation every once in a while, I'll be perfectly happy.”

Aw, shit. She made it sound so simple. I still had to wrap my head around the difference between hurt and harm, but at least we had time to figure this stuff out.

I pushed aside her hair to get a good look at the mating bite, which was healing nicely. The torn skin had closed. The bite mark had faded from angry red to a pink. In time, it would fade to flesh color. Shifter magic at work.

Wait a minute.

“Lie back on the bed,” I ordered.

With a smile, Annika obeyed,

Bending over her, I slowly dragged my tongue across the scratch mark that went from the notch in her collarbone to her left breast. I sat up straight and watched closely. The pink line slowly faded.

Holy shit. If she'd fallen down and broken her arm, I couldn't do a damned thing to help her mend. Not even the alpha could, because his healing power didn't extend to humans. But apparently the same wolf shifter magic that allowed me to heal a mating bite made with my fangs extended to a cut made with my claws.

I went to town, licking all the welts.

Annika squirmed, shrieking with laughter. “We said no tickling.”

I lifted my head and met her eyes. “I'm not tickling you. I'm healing your welts, the same way I healed the mating bite.”

Annika lifted up on her elbows, looked down at her stomach, then back at me. “Did you know you could do this?”

“Nope. Not a clue.”

“Hold on.” She touched my shoulder. “Leave one behind, please.”

“Seriously?”

“Please.”

I nodded. That was a compromise I could live with. By the time I was finished, except for one small welt, her skin was once again smooth and unmarked, and I was rocking some serious wood.

“You wanna—” I started.

To my surprise, she pushed against my chest.

“Yes, but give me a minute. I wiggled so much I need to pee.” She hopped out of bed and streaked to the bathroom. Two minutes later, she returned.

For the next hour or three, I showed my mate that shifter sex could be a gentle and tender thing, too. Afterward, while Annika showered, I yanked on a pair of jeans, then brewed a pot of coffee. I padded out to the wooden deck, sat on a wide Adirondack chair, and sipped the dark java. The bright sunlight that bathed the porch did little to dispel the chill, but the cold autumn air felt good on my still-overheated skin.

A lynx loped out of the woods and halted when he saw me. I lifted my cup in a silent greeting. We’d made our peace and there was no point in holding a grudge. He nodded, then sprinted back into the trees. I was glad to see that Annika’s old friends were keeping an eye out for the coyotes.

A minute later, Annika joined me. She’d thrown on a pair of black leggings and a pink sweater. Her damp hair fell around her shoulders. She carried the afghan from the couch in one hand and a mug of coffee in the other. I set my cup down and held out my arms. She dropped onto my lap and burrowed into my bare chest while I spread the afghan over her legs.

“You really don’t feel the cold?” she asked.

“Nope.”

“Does that mean you won’t mind if I put my icy feet on you when we’re in bed in the winter?”

“Darlin’, winter, spring, summer, or fall, I won’t object to anything you wanna do to me in bed.”

She sighed happily. “You really are too sweet.”

I snorted. “If you say so.”

“I do.” She stretched up and kissed my chin. “What do you want to do today?”

“You have anything in mind?” I asked.

“How about some sightseeing? I could show you my favorite places around town.”

“Sounds good.”

We lingered over our coffee, talking and laughing. Beneath my skin, my wolf stretched out, lazy and contented.

Grandpa always told Adam, Remy, and me that there was no greater joy than finding your mate. And no greater pain than losing her. My arms tightened around Annika as I remembered how devastated he was—we all were—when Grandma Katia died. Grandpa was our alpha at the time, duty bound to care for the pack. He had no choice but to suck up his pain and find a way to move forward.

Annika and I had been mated for less than a day. Already I wasn't sure I'd survive losing her. Her shining spirit brightened all the dark corners in my soul. She deserved to live her life in comfort and peace, not hiding out with a death warrant hanging over her head. She was a true innocent in our conflict with the coyotes. Sure, she'd killed Bryce, but the fucker asked for it. He was the one who dragged the Hagen women into our war. The damned coyotes better keep far away from my mate. If they got past me and she suffered, I'd rain hell on their heads.

“Earth to Zane.” Annika poked me in the ribs. “Where are you?”

I smiled but held my peace, unwilling to spoil the moment with my worries about the coyotes. “I'm gonna take a quick shower, then I'll be ready to go.”

By the time I got out of the tub, Annika had dried her hair and put on her boots. She'd looped a long flowery scarf around her neck, no doubt to cover up the pink bite mark. I shoved the scarf aside and kissed the spot, which made her rise up on her toes. Her whole body shivered.

“Wow,” she cried. “Will the bite mark always be so sensitive?”

“Only when I touch you there.” More than a little smug satisfaction filled my voice.

“Really? I mean, if somebody else kissed the spot, I wouldn’t get tingles?”

I leveled a stern look at my mate. “Just to clear things up, shifters don’t share. If anybody else kisses the spot, I’ll gut him.”

“Humans don’t share, either. Well, at least *this* human doesn’t.” She tossed her hair. “If any other woman kisses you anywhere, I’ll scratch her eyes out.” She curved her fingers into a claw and slashed through the air.

I bit back a grin. “My fierce little mate.”

“You said it yourself. Make me mad and I’m more vicious than a junkyard dog.” Her expression sobered. “Seriously, I’m curious. If, say, Buttercup Mittelmänn nuzzled my neck, is the bite mark so sensitive now that I’d get a shivery thrill, or is it only for you?”

“If the damned dog licks *my* mating mark—” I stopped and shook my head in disgust. “Listen, you and I are connected through the bite. When *I* touch it—with my hand or my mouth—you’ll get what you call a shivery thrill. Nobody else, not even Buttercup Mittelmänn, could provoke that strong of a response.”

“I like that it’s something special, just for us.” She took my hand and pulled me toward the door.

We climbed into my truck and headed toward town, a route that took us through an old red covered bridge. I couldn’t help but smile at Annika’s delight when the truck bounced over the timber plank floor. She asked me to pull over on the side of the road next to the Wild Turkey River. We walked down to the riverbank and watched the water tumble over a series of stone ledges. Hand in hand, we made our way out onto a wide rock and sat with our feet dangling over the water while we admired the surrounding woods.

Near Belle Reve, tall evergreens dominated the landscape. Around Aldrich, the forests were a mix of evergreen and deciduous trees. We were in peak foliage time, according to Annika, when the forests were a patchwork of red, gold, and orange leaves. Shifters felt a kinship with the outdoors, and the beauty of the place calmed me.

“I’m getting hungry,” Annika said after a while. “Would you like to see the old country store?”

“I could eat.” I hopped up and offered her a hand. Back in the truck, we drove half a mile into the heart of Aldrich’s small downtown. I parked in front of the Wild Turkey Country Store. It was painted red, like the covered bridge. The building had to be more than a hundred years old. Even the gas pumps out front looked vintage, although they appeared to be functional.

Walking into the store, I paused just inside the door. The unmistakable woodsy tang of moose shifter—stronger even than the potpourri and scented candles displayed on a nearby shelf—tickled my nose. From behind the deli counter, a silver-haired man stopped what he was doing. His head snapped toward us. His gaze lit first on me, then on Annika. He stepped out from behind the counter, a big man wearing striped overalls and a leery expression.

“Annika, sweetheart, it’s been years since I’ve laid eyes on you.”

Annika stood on her tiptoes and kissed his grizzled cheek.

The old man gently returned her hug but kept wary eyes locked on me. In nature, wolves were predators and moose were prey. In my wolf form, I’d eaten plenty of them. Natural moose, not shifters. Shifters didn’t eat each other, but still, the old man had to feel threatened by the presence of an apex predator in his store.

“Milton, I’d like to introduce you to my—” Annika hesitated, probably wondering what to call me in public. The only other customers in the place were a couple of human women in the back of the shop, oohing and aahing over a display of pottery.

Milton was important to Annika, so I'd do my level best to set him at ease. I stuck out my hand and pitched my voice low enough that the human women couldn't hear. "Zane Hunter, Annika's mate. Pleased to meet you, sir."

He shook my hand. "Milton Cranberry." His still-uneasy eyes moved back and forth between Annika and me. "Her mate, huh?"

I slung my arm around her shoulders and pulled her to my side. "Yes, sir."

"You remember my cousin, Marit? She used to come here with us sometimes," she whispered.

Milton nodded.

"She's mated to a wolf alpha back in Washington. Zane is his cousin. That's how we met."

"I see." The old man had questions; I saw it in his eyes, but he was holding his tongue.

Milton cared about Annika. When it came to keeping my mate safe, I'd take every ally I could get. "I'd appreciate it if you'd keep your eyes open for any coyote shifters who might show up in town."

"Coyotes?" Milton frowned. "Why?"

"They want me dead," Annika said simply.

The human women walked toward the counter, one of them carrying a pottery platter.

"Josephine Morrow and her lynx pack are keeping an eye out, too," I added.

The women drew near.

"Zane and I stopped by for lunch," Annika said in a loud voice.

"Menu's on the blackboard." Milton pointed, then walked over to the cash register to ring up the platter. "Lydia will come and take your order."

We took seats at one of the small round tables in the back of the store. A teenaged girl—a human—took our order.

“Turkey and provolone on sourdough with a side of fries,” I said.

Annika smiled at the girl. “Veggie quiche and raspberry lemonade with no ice.”

When the food arrived, Annika took a bite of her cheese-and-vegetable pie. “It’s good.” She dropped her voice to a whisper. “But mine is better.”

“First time I met you, you fed me quiche,” I reminisced.

“That’s right,” she said. “And you wanted nothing to do with the quiche or me, but Adam made you behave.”

“I was *not* happy when I first met you,” I admitted. “Adam had just told me that he was in love with Marit, even though mating her was against pack law. And you...” I shook my head at the memory. “You were wearing a frilly apron. You had pink bunny slippers on your feet that looked like a kid’s stuffed animals. You were relentlessly cheerful. I didn’t know what to make of you.”

“You remember what I was wearing?” Annika looked surprised.

The wolf rose to the surface and looked at her through my eyes. “I remember everything about that day.”

A pleased smile ghosted across her lips. “I thought you were crabby and scary, but you were important to Adam, so I was determined to win you over.”

“When we shook hands at the end of the meal, something happened,” I confessed.

“What?”

“As soon as we touched, my wolf sat up and took notice. He liked you. A lot. My palm tingled for the rest of the day.”

She leaned back in the chair. “I’m irresistible.”

Absolutely no point in pretending otherwise. “That you are.”

She hopped up, rounded the table, and sat on my lap, which I took to mean I was irresistible, too. I took a French fry from my plate and raised it to her mouth. Her lips parted and her teeth closed around the fry. I fed her another, and another. After the last one, she licked the salt from my thumb.

I felt Milton watching us. Looking up, I caught his eye. He nodded, a wordless exchange between two shifters. In our culture, feeding a mate from your hand was a sign of devotion and love. I might make the man uneasy, but he couldn't question my commitment to my mate.

He approached the table, a white business card in hand. Holding it out to me, he said, "You need anything, anything at all, call me, night or day. I'll keep my eyes peeled for any sign of trouble."

"Thank you, sir," I said solemnly. "Glad to have you on our side."

"Coyotes better not show their faces in town." He flashed his teeth, reminding me that even though moose were herbivores and prey, they didn't go down easy. Sometimes—not often, but sometimes—they even bested a wolf.

"They come, they die." I wrapped an arm around my mate's waist.

"Amen to that." Milton clapped me on the shoulder, fished in one of the overall's pockets, and dropped two peppermints on the table. He turned on his heel and retreated to the counter.

"He's a good friend." Annika swung her feet onto the floor and started to stand. I tightened my grip and held her back. "What are you doing?" she asked with a laugh.

"Don't want to let you go," I said, reluctant to allow any distance between us, as if I'd lose her forever if she slipped from my hold.

A ridiculous notion. So why did a shiver crawl up my spine?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



ANNIKA

Jo and Karl invited us to their place for dinner Monday evening, a Morrow family weenie roast in their backyard screen house. Zane and I ran to the market to pick up a pack of veggie dogs for me and the makings for a big potato salad. I usually baked something when I was invited to a party, but in the Morrow household, desserts were Karl's domain.

Thomas volunteered to stay behind at the A-frame, patrolling the grounds in case a coyote showed up while Zane and I were away. It was probably for the best. I suspected that an undercurrent of tension would always exist between the two men.

We ate a casual dinner, topped off by Karl's apple crisp and homemade vanilla ice cream. After dessert, Jo sent her kids and grandchildren inside, leaving Zane and me alone with the alpha couple.

Zane had been on his best behavior all evening, polite and helpful, even hauling extra chairs out to the screen house. Still, I sensed that hours spent in the company of near strangers—lynx shifters to boot—was wearing on him. My new mate was both a pack animal and a loner. Too much time spent with people and not enough solitude made for a crabby shifter. With the coyote threat hanging over my head, he was reluctant to leave my side.

“Why don't you shift?” Jo suggested to Zane. “It'll do your wolf good to get out and run. We'll keep Annika safe from any coyote, I promise.”

He glanced at me. I gave him an encouraging nod.

“Thank you, ma'am. I'll do that.”

A few minutes after Zane retreated to the house, a beautiful gray wolf trotted out through the open kitchen door. He nudged open the door to the screen house and strutted to my side.

“Hey, baby,” I said, holding out my hand to my mate’s second self.

He nuzzled my fingers, then laid his head on my lap. I stroked his shoulders. Beneath my fingers, the fur felt dense and coarse, a little oily, not at all like petting a dog. A wolf was a wild creature, not a house-trained pooch. There was nothing domesticated about him, nothing except the love for me that shone in his eyes.

“You need to stretch your legs and run,” I told him. “I’ll be fine here with Jo and Karl.”

The wolf ran from the enclosure and disappeared into the trees.

Jo handed me an outdoor blanket. I pulled it up to my shoulders and snuggled under its welcome warmth.

“Who would have believed that our little Annika would mate a big bad wolf?” Jo marveled aloud.

My hand flew to the bite mark, still hidden beneath the scarf. The skin prickled when my fingers brushed over the spot, the sensation not nearly as intense as when Zane touched it.

“Can I see?” Jo asked.

The request surprised me, but I saw no reason to refuse. Jo and Karl had run power to the screen house. Strings of fairy lights illuminated the interior. I pulled the scarf away from my neck and tilted my head to one side, leaning into the light. Jo squinted at the bite mark.

“Do your parents know that you and Marit mated wolves?” Karl asked.

“Grandma Freya never told her boys about their father,” I said. “They think Grandma got pregnant at Woodstock. As far as I know, Dad and Uncle Nick have no idea shifters exist.”

Karl frowned. “It’s their heritage. They should be introduced to the pack.”

“If you or Marit have children—with your quarter shifter DNA mixed with that of their fathers’—the kids will be able to

shift,” Jo added. “Could get awkward if that happens when they’re visiting clueless human grandparents.”

Babies. Zane and I hadn’t talked about children. Not so long ago, he’d sworn off mating. I’m sure he’d thought children were out of the question. And now? My imagination flashed forward several years. In my mind’s eye, I saw wolf pups playing together in the yard of Grandma’s cabin on the shores of Shooting Star Lake. I imagined the pups shifting into small children and running into the cabin. Cousins, like Liv, Marit, and me. Like Zane, Adam, and Remy.

A pang of longing pierced my heart. Zane and I needed to talk about children.

“We plan to invite all our parents for a visit next summer,” I said. “Adam wants to meet them before deciding if he tells Dad and Uncle Nick about their father.”

Jo, Karl, and I chatted for another hour. A wolf howl silenced our conversation, a solitary cry with no pack to answer. A minute later, Zane’s wolf galloped from the woods. He made a beeline toward me, butting his head against my legs until I took the hint and petted him again. He sprawled at my feet and dozed for a while. When I yawned, the wolf lifted his head.

“I’m getting sleepy,” I told him.

He jumped up and trotted into the house. A few minutes later, a fully clothed Zane walked out the kitchen door. We thanked the Morrows for their hospitality and drove back to the house. Thomas stood on the edge of the trees as we drove up, the truck’s headlight reflected in his lynx’s glowing yellow eyes. I waved at him. He dipped his head, then retreated back into the woods.

The Hunter’s Moon hung high in the starry sky as Zane and I walked hand in hand up the path and into the house.

“I have a proposition for you,” I said as he flipped on a light and locked the door.

His eyes lit up. “I like the sound of that.”

I hung my jacket on the coat-tree and toed off my boots. “How about if we stick close to home tomorrow? Sleep in. Laze around the place. Maybe take a walk in the woods if we get restless or bored.”

Zane’s smile turned positively feral. He prowled toward me, each step slow and deliberate. Relentless. Inescapable. Glittering, ravenous eyes locked on mine. My breath caught. Never mind that I knew he loved me and would never do me harm. My primitive hindbrain recognized a predator and shrieked a warning. I couldn’t stop myself. Wide-eyed, I backed up until my shoulders struck the wall.

“Darlin’.” His expression softened. He unwound the long silk scarf, revealing my mating bite. His fingers gently traced the two crescent-shaped scars. Bending forward, he kissed the bite mark, then his teeth grazed the spot.

“Mine,” he growled.

At his possessive tone, my knees wobbled. Pleasure rippled throughout my body. If I hadn’t clutched at his arms, I would have slid to the floor.

That sound I made was a whimper, right?

With a low chuckle, Zane bent forward and tossed me over his shoulder. The air burst out of my lungs. I dangled upside down, held in place by a strong hand across my thighs, as he strode quickly up the hall to the bedroom. He kicked open the door, then deposited me in the middle of the bed.

I bounced, laughing, and pushed messy hair off my face. I watched with barely suppressed eagerness as he yanked his shirt off over his head. My fingers itched to touch the hard curves of his powerful shoulders and chest, his chiseled abs, and to trace that glorious V-line that directed the eye southward from his hips.

He kicked off his boots, shoved his jeans down his legs, and planted one knee on the bed.

“You really think there’s a chance in hell we’re gonna get restless or bored?”



Boom.

An explosive bang jolted me awake. My body jerked and my eyes flew open.

“What was that?” I croaked.

Zane was already off the bed and running naked down the hall. I slapped myself awake and stumbled after him. He stood in front of the large picture window. Outside, down by the road, flames lit up the night sky, and smoke billowed into the air.

“Oh, crap,” I moaned. “I bet somebody was speeding on Dead Man’s Curve. They must have hit a tree, and the car caught fire.”

“Maybe.” Zane frowned. He turned on his heel and ran to the bedroom. Thirty seconds later, he was back at my side, jeans hitched up over his hips. He handed me a burner phone. “I’m gonna run down to the road and see if anybody needs help. Lock the door behind me, call 911, then stay put.”

“Be careful,” I said.

“I will.” He pressed a quick kiss to my forehead and dashed out the door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



ZANE

I raced toward the accident, my bare feet pounding against the gravel. At the end of the driveway, I hung a right. Another thirty seconds brought me to the scene of the accident. Just as Annika suspected, a car had gone off the road and smashed into a tree. The impact had crumpled the grill and hood. Flames engulfed the front of the vehicle. The driver's-side door hung open.

Did the driver get out?

Coughing and holding my arm up to protect my face, I edged closer to the car. Smoke stung my eyes. Broken glass cut into my feet. I hoped to hell I wouldn't see a body slumped over the wheel, or worse yet, a child's frightened face pressed up against the rear window. I got as close as I dared before the heat and flames drove me back.

Dammit. If the driver hadn't escaped the car, they were probably dead.

Thomas—naked after his shift from lynx to human—ran up beside me. “The driver?” he asked.

“No sign of 'em.”

“The door's open. Maybe they got out and collapsed nearby.” Twisting his head from side to side, he scanned the roadway.

“Yeah, maybe. We should look,” I said.

Thomas and I searched the road and forest floor around the burning car. The driver was nowhere to be found. In the distance, the lights from the oncoming emergency vehicles lit up the darkness.

“You might wanna get some pants on,” I suggested.

He glanced at the approaching lights then down at his crotch. Without a word, he sprinted into the woods, then

returned wearing jeans a minute before the police and fire truck rolled up.

While the firefighters put out the flames, we told the police officers what we saw when we arrived on the scene. Aldrich was a small town. Thomas knew the cops and volunteer firefighters by name, so I hung back and let him take the lead in the conversation.

“Chet, Larry, you need to see this.” A firefighter beckoned the police officers over to the car. Thomas and I followed. The firefighter pointed to the floor in front of the driver’s seat. “This was no accident.”

A metal pole was jammed between the seat and the gas pedal.

My chest squeezed so tight I couldn’t catch a breath. I was a fucking moron. I left Annika alone to face danger. Again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



ANNIKA

I locked the deadbolt on the door, then rushed back to the big window. Running at shifter speed, Zane had already disappeared from sight. Smoke and flames roiled into the sky. I knew Zane. He'd risk his life to rescue anybody trapped inside a burning vehicle. If the car's gas tank exploded, he was *right there*.

I took a deep, calming breath and made the call.

"911, what's your emergency?"

"This is Annika Hagen." I rattled off the address. "I think there's been an accident on Dead Man's Curve. We heard a big boom, and now flames are shooting up into the sky."

Another question or two, then the operator told me help was on the way.

I ran back to the bedroom. With shaking hands, I threw on my leggings and sweater and looked around for my boots. Where were they? Oh, right. I'd left them by the front door. I dashed to the foyer and slipped on the boots, then ran back to the picture window. I pressed a hand against the glass. It was too soon for the emergency vehicles to arrive. Zane—and probably Thomas—were on their own with the fire.

"Please be safe. Please be safe. Please be safe," I chanted.

Behind me, the floor creaked. A sharp pain as something jabbed the side of my neck. An odd warmth spread throughout my body. I wobbled and pressed both palms against the glass.

"What—" I mumbled.

My knees buckled, and I sank to the floor.

Somebody crouched down next to me.

It took all my waning strength to turn my head toward the person. My vision hazed and fractured. I could barely make out the familiar face.

"C... C..." My thick tongue couldn't shape the sound.

“That’s right,” a chipper voice declared. “It’s Courtney, bitch.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



ZANE

Thomas clapped a hand on my shoulder, probably warning me not to turn and run from the human authorities. “I’ll answer any more questions you have, Chet,” he said. “My buddy needs to get back to the Hagen place and tell his girlfriend what’s going on.”

“All right.” The cop waved me off.

I wheeled around and raced back up the road and driveway to the house.

C’mon Annika. Be standing in the big window waiting for me.

No sign of her behind the glass.

I leapt onto the porch and tried the door. Locked and dead bolted.

“Annika!” I pounded on the wooden surface with my fist.

No footsteps. No welcoming cry. Nothing but silence.

I kicked the door in and stumbled into the living room. Pausing, I sharpened my senses, threw back my head, and drew air into my lungs.

I followed my nose to Liv’s bedroom in the back of the house, avoiding the broken glass that littered the floor underneath the window. The cold air that blew in over the sill carried a faint whiff of coyote, probably from where the enemy touched the window frame while climbing in.

“Fuck.” I moaned, my heart sinking.

I crossed the hall into our bedroom. The clothes Annika had tossed aside last night were missing. Looked like she’d dressed before the coyote grabbed her. Walking back through the kitchen, I spied the burner phone on a counter. A quick check showed that she’d dialed 911 right after I left the house. I slid the phone into my pocket. Something on the floor in

front of the big window in the living room caught my eye. I picked up the empty syringe.

God damned coyote had staged the accident, broke into the house, drugged Annika, and dragged her away, all while I was outside playing Good Samaritan. The scent of Annika's coconut shampoo lingered in the air, a reproach for my damned carelessness. I shoved my feet into boots, threw on a sweatshirt, then jogged outside and around the house.

Desperate to find Annika, my distraught wolf snarled and scrabbled to escape the confines of my skin.

Easy, brother. We'll find her.

The coyote had a ten or fifteen minute head start. Smoke and burning gasoline fouled the air, but beneath that smell, a trace of coyote stink persisted. With some luck, I might be able to track the bastard who'd made off with my mate. A few yards from the treeline, Thomas jogged up beside me.

"Annika?" he asked. Whatever problem the lynx and I had with each other, we were united in our quest to find and rescue my mate.

"Coyote took her," I said grimly.

"Aw, damn." He matched my pace as we ducked under a tree branch. "I called my folks. They're on their way."

"Good." I stilled, sniffed the air and studied the forest floor for shoe prints, then veered left. The coyote wore small shoes, lending credence to my suspicion that it was Courtney. Her shoes left deep indentations, indicating that she was carrying the weight of an unconscious Annika.

We followed a more-or-less straight path through the trees. A few strands of Annika's golden-brown hair—glinting in the moonlight that pierced through the forest canopy—were tangled around a bramble. I snagged the hair as I ran past and clutched it in my hand, a tangible connection to my missing mate. A few hundred yards from the house, the trees gave way to a country road. Fresh tire tracks marked the soft dirt on the side of the lane. Both the shoe prints and the smell of coyote disappeared.

I pointed at the impressions left by the tires. “My burner doesn’t have a camera. Can you take some pictures of the tracks?”

“No problem.” Thomas pulled out his phone and crouched down to get a good angle.

I slid the burner phone from my pocket and punched in Adam’s personal number. It was just after 10 p.m. on the West Coast, and he picked up on the second ring.

“Landry.”

The sound of my cousin’s voice was an unexpected punch to my gut. My breath caught, and for a moment, I couldn’t speak.

“Who is this?” Adam demanded. Then a few seconds later, “Zane?”

“I fucked up,” I said. “Annika... Courtney got Annika.”

“Tell me everything,” he ordered. Even over the phone, I felt the alpha power resonate in his voice. Hearing it calmed me, centered me, reassured me that I had the pack at my back.

I recounted everything that had happened since we arrived in Aldrich.

Adam must have put the phone on speaker. In the background, Marit and Liv gasped and exclaimed over my story, especially the part about the Morrows being lynx.

“What’s the closest airport to you?” Adam asked.

“Portland, Maine,” I said.

“I can’t leave the pack right now,” Adam said. “But I can put Remy on a flight out of Seattle this morning. He can help with the search.”

Every minute Annika spent with Courtney increased her risk of harm. Beneath my skin, the wolf’s hackles rose at the prospect of our mate in the enemy’s clutches for an entire day.

“It’s three thousand miles from Washington to New Hampshire,” I pointed out. “That’s got to be a nine, ten hour flight. I have allies, the lynx pack and a lone moose. We’ll tear

the state apart to find her. The search will be over by the time Remy could get here.”

“Even so, I want him there to help.” I caught the unspoken meaning behind Adam’s words. In case we didn’t find Annika, or in case we didn’t find her alive, he wanted my brother at my side. When I didn’t reply, he continued. “No arguments. Remy will be there tomorrow evening.”

“All right,” I choked out.

“I’m coming, too,” Liv piped up in the background. “I want to be there for my sister after you find her. And I *know* you’ll find her, Zane.”

“Yeah, I will.” I had to.

“We’ll book a morning flight for both Liv and Remy,” Adam said. “What else can we do?”

Something occurred to me. “Thomas?”

“Yeah?” The lynx jogged over to my side.

“Can you send the photos here?” I rattled off Remy’s email address.

“No problem,” Thomas said.

“I’m sending Remy pictures of tire tracks from the car Courtney’s driving,” I explained to Adam. “Maybe he can ID the make and model.”

“Anything else?” Adam asked.

“Marit, by any chance do you have a picture of Courtney, maybe from when she was planning your wedding to Bryce?”

In the background, Adam growled at the reminder of his mate’s near-fatal relationship with the coyote shifter.

“She was at our engagement party. I’m pretty sure I can find a picture of her.”

“Send it to me, will you? I’ll forward it to the Morrrows.”

“I’ll go look for it right now. Please bring Annika back to us.” Marit’s voice shook.

“I will,” I vowed. No matter what it took, I’d find Annika and bring her home safe. Any other outcome was unthinkable.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



ANNIKA

“Wakey, wakey,” a cheerful voice intoned.

The words barely penetrated my mental fog. My heavy eyelids cracked open a slit. Bright light burned my retinas. My head throbbed. I felt queasy.

No. No. No. Whatever was going on here, I wanted no part of it. Groaning, I squeezed my eyes shut and slipped gratefully back into unconsciousness.

The icy slap of cold water shocked me awake. Fluid went up my nose, and I sputtered. I tried to lift my hand to wipe my face, but my wrist was tied down. I tugged on both hands. The bindings held fast.

“C’mon, you can’t sleep through the party. Not when you’re the guest of honor. It’s *rude*.”

That voice. I knew that voice. Memory flooded back and with it came dread. I forced my eyes open. My vision consolidated and the world swam into view. Courtney leaned over me, her eyes dancing and her face wreathed in a gleeful smile.

“There you are.” she said brightly. “You’ve been out for almost twelve hours. I was starting to think I gave you a bit too much animal tranquilizer.”

She jabbed me with *animal tranquilizer*? Holy shit. I could’ve died without ever regaining consciousness, my last thoughts before the needle slid into my neck my last thoughts ever. I’d always imagined that if I faced death, I’d spend my final moments thinking about the people I loved, sending a mental farewell out into the universe. Instead, when death came calling, when Courtney accidentally gave *a bit too much* animal tranquilizer, I’d been wondering when the firetruck would show up.

Life could be snuffed out without warning, without time to say goodbye or think your final thoughts. At least, whatever

happened now, death wouldn't catch me unawares.

Lifting my head an inch, I peered down at my body. While I was unconscious, Courtney had stripped off my leggings and sweater. I was pinned down naked on a long kitchen table, secured in place by wide strips of what looked like plastic wrap. My uneasy gaze darted around the room.

"I rented a vacation house," Courtney explained. "I needed privacy so, you know, we wouldn't get interrupted."

I'd watched enough true crime documentaries to recognize exactly what Courtney intended. She'd taped plastic sheeting to the walls, ceiling, and floor. Plastic swathed the kitchen cupboards, too. A mop leaned against the back door, on the floor next to it a bucket and a gallon of bleach.

No doubt about it. This was a kill room.

A veil dropped and my mind splintered into two parts. One, a dispassionate observer who took in all the details of the scene with surprising composure, as if this were make-believe, as if nothing that happened here could possibly affect me. Another part of my mind, terrified and panic-struck, threatened to come unglued.

Panic wouldn't serve me. If I was going to get through this—escape—or survive long enough for Zane to find me—I had to keep a clear head.

Zane.

Oh, God. I suppressed a groan. If I thought about him now—about how much I wanted a life with my fierce, loving shifter—I might break down. Courtney would just love that, but it wouldn't help me. I deliberately shoved all thoughts of my beautiful man into the darkest corner of my mind.

Think. What can I see?

On one wide kitchen counter, Courtney had created a shrine to Bryce's memory. A sterling silver framed photo of her dead lover took center stage. In it, he was wearing an expensive gray cashmere sweater and smiling his smug, self-satisfied smile. I'd taken the picture at Marit's birthday party last year. Bryce had liked it so much he'd had it printed and framed.

Four smaller photographs of Bryce flanked the big one. A dozen votive candles surrounded the pictures, flames of remembrance for the man who planned to kill my cousin and who threatened to kill my sister.

And now his coyote lover intended to kill me.

Once again, panic reared its head.

Biting my teeth together to stop them from chattering, I bucked and strained against the plastic wrap. I made fists and tried in vain to punch through the cellophane. I shot my knees up, kicking with all my might.

Courtney watched me, an amused expression on her face. “I know, right? Who would think thin plastic wrap would work so well? I learned how to do it from TV. The trick is you have to wrap it around your victim several times. Turn them into a sort of human burrito.”

“A human burrito,” I repeated numbly.

She groaned. “Why did I have to mention food? I’m starving. I haven’t had a bite all day. I thought you’d come to hours ago and we’d be done by now.” She shot me a dirty look, as if it was my fault she’d injected me with a bit too much animal tranquilizer, as if it was my fault she hadn’t planned ahead and brought food. “Speaking of burritos,” she continued. “Do you know if there’s a good Mexican restaurant in town?”

I blinked. My captor and would-be killer was downright chatty. This had to be the most bizarre conversation ever. I shook my head. “No, no Mexican restaurant in town.”

She pouted, then her face lit up with a positively alarming expression.

“Guess what I brought?” She pointed across the kitchen. A small piece of hard-sided luggage sat on another counter, a powder-blue vinyl train case from the 1960s. Grandma Freya had owned an identical one. I loved vintage things. Grandma had given me hers a few years ago. It sat on shelf in my bedroom closet in Belle Reve.

“This one’s yours,” Courtney said. “I broke into your place and took it before I flew to New Hampshire.”

“Why?” I gaped.

“I wanted to bring something that would remind you of home. After I got off the plane—before I drove to Aldrich—I went shopping at a hardware store for party toys. Then I put all my party toys in *your* little blue suitcase. I like to think of it as poetic justice. My toys in your suitcase.” Her eyes sparkled. “You want to guess what I bought at the hardware store?”

I shook my head. No, I absolutely did not want to guess what she bought at the hardware store, but I had a pretty good idea.

“Well, they say anticipation is half the fun.” She cocked her head to one side. Her expression sobered. “You know I’m going to hurt you, right? That I’m going to make you pay for killing Bryce?”

I jerked my head in a yes.

“He was the love of my life, and you took him from me. It’s only fair that you suffer for your crime. And you will.” She leaned over and tapped me on the nose. “I want you to have some time to think about it. I want you to lie back, helpless and hopeless, and imagine everything I’m going to do to you.”

That way lay madness.

Think.

If Courtney wanted to prolong the experience, to gloat over my fear and dread, that had to be a good thing. It gave Zane and our friends more time to find me. Courtney loved the sound of her own voice. Keeping her talking had to be a good thing, too.

“How did you find me?” I asked.

Courtney rolled her eyes. “Bryce and your bitch cousin Marit hired me as their wedding planner, remember?”

I *wish* I could forget Bryce’s plan to marry my cousin, arrange for her “accidental” death, then inherit the lease to

Grandma's cabin on Shooting Star Lake. Bryce had introduced Courtney as a close family friend and event planner. Thank God Marit walked in on her scheming fiancé having sex with Courtney and called the whole thing off.

"I remember," I said.

Courtney flashed her teeth in a triumphant smile. "I still have all the records, including the guest list. I figured you'd go crawling to mommy and daddy for help. Your parents are on the list, Michael and Sandra Hagen of Portland, Oregon. I had a friend look into their property holdings, and what did I find?" Her self-satisfied smile grew wider. "Mommy and Daddy own a vacation house in a Podunk town on the opposite side of the country."

"Still, you took a big chance flying all the way out here," I said. "What if you were wrong?"

"Nah." Courtney tapped her temple. "I inherited a touch of my Grandma's second sight. I got chills as soon as I heard the name Aldrich and knew I was on to something."

"Lucky for you," I muttered.

"Lucky for me, super unlucky for you," she agreed.

Keep her talking.

"You staged the car crash, didn't you?" I asked.

"Why, yes I did." She preened. "People in a hick town like Aldrich aren't as careful as they should be about locking their cars at night. After I parked my rental car close to your place, I ran into town and found an unlocked one with the keys tucked behind the visor." She spread her hands. "Easy peasy."

"How did you make the crash happen?" I asked.

"I jammed a metal rod between the front seat and the accelerator, steered the car toward a tree, then jumped out."

"And the fire?"

She made a dismissive face. "Simple. I splashed gas around the car and tossed a lighter at it."

“You thought of everything.” I infused a note of grudging admiration into my voice, as if I couldn’t help but be impressed by her genius. “What’s next for you? Back to Washington to be with the coyote alpha?”

She scowled. “No. Things didn’t work out between Lance and me. Time to move on, after I make sure that everybody who did me wrong has paid for their sins, that is.”

There was an ominous finality to that statement that made me think she was ready to get this show on the road.

“Death row prisoners get a last meal, you know,” I said quickly.

She quirked one dark brow and laughed. The notion clearly tickled her funny bone. “You want a last meal?”

“You’re hungry, too, right?”

She shrugged. “Yes.”

“Like I said, there’s no Mexican restaurant in Aldrich. There’s a nice steak house, but it isn’t open for lunch. The very best place in town to get a meal during the day is at the Wild Turkey Country Store. They have a small restaurant in the back. Everything is made from scratch and is top quality. You could call and place a to-go order.”

“Let me look at the menu.” Courtney pulled out her phone and searched for the country store’s website. She scanned the offerings. “Not bad. Not bad at all. I’ll order pick-up. What do you want for your very last meal?”

“Veggie quiche and raspberry lemonade with no ice.” I tried to keep the excitement out of my voice.

Milton had to know I was missing. I’d ordered the exact same food and drink yesterday. I ordered it almost every time I ate at the country store. If he took the call, he’d understand that it was me reaching out for help.

Courtney dialed the store. “I’d like to place a to-go order for lunch. A French dip sandwich, veggie quiche, raspberry lemonade, no ice, and a big cola. Ten minutes? Fine. What’s

your name?" A brief pause. "Thank you, Lydia. Be a doll and add a chocolate chip cookie to the order, will you?"

My heart sank. The teenage girl took the order, not Milton.

Courtney dropped down onto a kitchen chair. She held out both hands, to all appearances admiring her French manicure. Her hands flexed, and claws slid out from each fingertip.

"Pretty nifty trick, huh? I brought some really fun toys, but I plan to end the festivities with these." She wiggled her claws.

Was she waiting for me to say something? "I wish you wouldn't."

"You know what my mother used to say? 'If wishes were horses, beggars would ride.' You, sweet Annika, are shit out of luck."

She hopped off the chair and crossed over to me. With the pad of her thumb, she tilted my chin up, exposing my throat. "What a pretty mating bite. It looks fresh. Just imagine how crazy your new mate will go when he finds your body." I held perfectly still as she outlined my lips with one razor-sharp claw. "I'll have to remember to leave your face intact, so he's sure it's you."

The blind panic I'd managed to hold at bay ripped through me with a vengeance.

Courtney's eyes widened in delight. Her lips parted and she inhaled. "I can taste your fear. It's sweet, just like revenge."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



ZANE

Calling the cops was out of the question. Shifters handled their own problems without bringing in the human police, especially when violence was the likely outcome. And violence was inevitable. Nothing but Courtney's death would satisfy my wolf. We both saw the world in terms of right and wrong, but the wolf possessed a temperament even more stark and unforgiving than mine. To hurt or frighten his mate invited death. I couldn't hold him back if I wanted to, and I didn't want to. Truth be told, my fantasies ran red with Courtney's blood.

But nothing—not even the quest for vengeance—rivaled my desperate need to find my mate and bring her back safe.

Every minute that passed gave Courtney the opportunity to hurt Annika, to kill Annika. As hour after agonizing hour ticked by, fear and frustration ate a hole in my gut. I swallowed acid and nearly bit Thomas's head off whenever he spoke to me.

How the hell do you conduct a search without alerting the authorities?

My vow to tear the state apart hunting for my mate came from the depths of my soul. Translating that vow into action proved tricky. I couldn't bust down doors or demand to search properties. I had no clue if Courtney and Annika were still in town. Courtney could have a hidey-hole anywhere in the surrounding countryside.

The lynx didn't know me the way they knew Annika. Josephine watched me with wary eyes, as if afraid I'd go off half-cocked and blow her family's life in this nice human town out of the water. I saw something else in her eyes—something she wouldn't put into words—the fear that our quest to save Annika was hopeless.

If Courtney wanted to play it safe, she would've pulled over on the side of the road and killed Annika within minutes

of taking her. None of the Morrows put that fear into words, but I saw it on their faces and in the glances they exchanged.

Annika was my mate. The bite created an unbreakable bond. If she were dead, I'd know it, wouldn't I? When I stilled my raging spirits and cast my senses out into the world, I felt her heart beating. I wasn't imagining it. It wasn't wishful thinking. My mate lived and I wouldn't stop searching till I found her.

Before catching his flight to New Hampshire, Remy called and told me what he discovered about the tire tracks. Courtney was driving a late-model Japanese import. Thomas and I took my truck and wended our way through all the roads and parking lots in Aldrich, searching for a Japanese import with a sticker barcode from the rental company on the back window.

The Morrows were longtime Aldrich residents and respected members of the community. Townsfolk were more likely to talk to a local than to a scary, intense stranger, so the Morrows took the lead interviewing people who owned rental property. While Jamie fixed the A-frame's busted front door, Josephine and Karl reached out to their neighbors.

Josephine called me a little after noon. "If Courtney rented a vacation house in Aldrich, it's from somebody we don't know. Karl and I also asked around at all the hotels, inns, and B and Bs, and nobody recognized her from the photo Marit sent."

"Dammit." I huffed out a disappointed breath.

"No sign of her car?" Josephine asked.

"Nope." A window popped up on my phone screen. "Milton Cranberry is calling. Gotta take it." I disconnected the call with Josephine, swiped to answer Milton's, and put the call on speaker so Thomas could hear.

The old man's voice shook with excitement. "I'm heading north on Baxter Notch Road, following a woman driving a rental car."

Thomas pulled a u-ey and hit the gas.

"You think it's Courtney?" I asked.

“Twenty minutes ago, Lydia took a to-go order at the restaurant, including a slice of veggie quiche and a raspberry lemonade with no ice.”

“That’s what Annika ordered yesterday,” I told Thomas.

“I was in the back room, and Lydia was watching the front of the store. She said a woman pulled up to a gas pump, started filling her tank, then stepped inside. She had long dark hair and was wearing a pink jacket. She told Lydia she was there to pick up a lunch order. Lydia said that as soon as the woman got a few feet inside the store, a funny look came over her face. She whirled around and ran from the store.”

“She smelled moose shifter,” I guessed, my pulse racing. My clever mate had somehow managed to send Courtney to a place where both a shifter and Annika’s lunch order would be recognized.

“Lydia ran to the door. I heard her call out, ‘Hey, you gotta pay for the lunch and gas.’ I rushed out from the back room as the woman was pulling the nozzle out of her gas tank. She dropped the nozzle on the ground, jumped into her car, and took off. My truck was out front. I followed her.”

“Don’t follow too close. You don’t want to spook her,” I warned.

“I’m old, but not stupid,” Milton said. “I’m hanging back. She just passed Haymarket Road.”

“How far away are we?” I asked Thomas.

“Three minutes tops.”

Thomas called Josephine and gave her a heads-up. She promised to call Jamie and meet us on Baxter Notch Road.

“The woman just pulled into a long driveway.” Milton voice came through the speaker. “I can’t see the house through the trees. I’m parking.”

“Almost there,” Thomas said.

A quarter mile ahead, Milton stood next to an old pickup parked on the side of the road. Thomas pulled up behind the truck. We jumped out and rushed to Milton’s side.

“Courtney will be pissed that Annika set her up,” I said. “We have to hurry.”

“Let’s go through the woods, so she can’t see us coming,” Thomas suggested.

We took off at a dead run, weaving around trees and boulders and leaping across a small creek till we skidded to a stop at the edge of the woods. A gray sedan was parked next to the porch of a two-story cottage. Courtney must have been in a hurry. The front door stood wide open.

“Think she’s still inside?” Thomas asked.

“Only one way to find out.” I led the way across the yard to the porch and snuck up to the front door. Cocking my head, I honed my senses and listened hard for any sound coming from the house. Voices. Breathing. A beating heart. I heard nothing, but my nose detected a faint whiff of coconut shampoo, proof positive that Annika had been here.

That knowledge propelled me into motion. “Check the upstairs,” I called over my shoulder to Milton. Thomas and I dashed through the empty living and dining rooms and into the kitchen. What I saw when I rounded the corner almost brought me to my knees.

Thomas groaned and bent over double.

Annika’s sweater and leggings lay in a heap in a corner.

Plastic sheeting covered every surface—floor, ceiling, walls—as if Courtney had anticipated cleaning up a torrent of blood. A small suitcase spilled its contents across the floor: pliers, an ice pick, a screwdriver, a hammer, a hacksaw. Bile crawled up my throat. A utility knife lay on the floor next to the kitchen table. No blood smeared the blade, thank fuck. Long strips of plastic wrap surrounded the table. I got a mental picture of Annika tied down to the surface, the plastic strips hastily tossed aside when Courtney cut her free.

Milton jogged into the room. “Nobody’s upstairs.”

“They can’t have gotten far.” I started toward the back door.

“Hello?” Josephine called from the front room.

“Back here, Grandma,” Thomas replied.

Josephine, Karl, and Jamie ran into the kitchen. Jamie’s eyes widened as he took in Courtney’s preparations.

“Dear God.” Karl pressed a hand to his mouth.

Expression grim, Josephine scanned the room, then met my eyes. “There’s no blood. Annika is still alive.”

We had no time to waste, but I knew how to give my allies an advantage. Sharing the secret broke pack law. I’d worry about that later. I waved a hand, beckoning them to join me.

“Everybody gather around.”

“What?” Thomas shot me an incredulous look. “You wanna lead us in a prayer circle?”

I ignored him. Holding my arm straight out in front of me, I touched my leather bracelet. “This black rock works magic on shifters. If you touch it, it’ll give you a temporary boost in speed and strength. You’ll be able to shift faster, too.”

Milton moved first, laying a finger on the stone. He shivered and glanced at Josephine. “I feel it.”

“For fuck’s sake, hurry,” I snapped.

The rest quickly tapped the black rock. I launched through the kitchen door and into the yard, Milton and the Morrrows close behind.

We followed our noses across the yard and into the trees. If Annika were on her feet, no doubt she’d be dragging her heels and struggling to slow down the coyote’s progress. Only one set of tracks led into the woods. Courtney had to be carrying her.

With a five minute head start, even in human form, a shifter running at top speed could be miles away. Thanks to the black rock, my allies and I would catch up with her, but that meant squat. Courtney was a vengeful bitch. She might take it in her head to win the war by killing Annika.

Fear gave my feet wings.

CHAPTER THIRTY



ANNIKA

Most professional bakers kept their fingernails clipped short and neat. Long nails might put a dent in fondant or smear the icing when you're decorating a cake. My short nails were fine for working in a bakery. When I needed to claw my way through layers of plastic wrap before a homicidal coyote shifter got back from the country store, the short nails put me at a definite disadvantage. Try as I might, I couldn't scratch a hole through the plastic.

Fifteen minutes after Courtney left, brakes squealed out front. The front door hit the wall with enough force to rattle the windows. Footsteps pounded across the floor.

"You sneaky cunt!" Courtney shrieked, stomping into the kitchen. Anger flashed bright in her blue eyes.

I instinctively reacted like cornered prey. Holding my breath, I froze in place, as if I could somehow make myself invisible to the scary predator who had me in her sights. Sympathy for every deer or rabbit or elk my wolf shifter friends had chased down and eaten coursed through me.

Shaking with rage, Courtney threw open my small blue travel case. She pawed through the contents till she found what she was looking for. Smiling, she held up a box cutter. One click and a blade locked into place. She knocked the travel case off the kitchen counter. Its contents spilled across the floor. I knew better than to look at Courtney's "toys," but couldn't stop myself.

Pliers, a hammer, a screwdriver, and—sweet Jesus—was that a hacksaw?

"Sneaky cunt," Courtney repeated, marching over to the table. "You set me up."

Was this the moment when Courtney would decide to end the game, to seize the closest thing to victory she could still achieve?

Maybe. Probably. Dear God, I didn't know. Pinned down to the table and helpless to defend myself, my prospects looked grim.

Still, I refused to beg. It had nothing to do with dignity or self-respect. The only thing I could do to strike back at Courtney was to deny her the satisfaction of hearing me plead for my life. Instead of begging, I squeezed my eyes shut and summoned the image of Zane's face. If I had one minute left to live, I'd spend that time thinking about the man I loved.

I love you. I love you. I love you. I sent my farewell out into the universe. In my mind's eye, I saw the smile that lit up his face the first time I said those words.

The box cutter slashed through the air. I braced myself, anticipating the moment when the blade bit into my skin. Instead of pain, the tight plastic grew slack. My eyes flew open. I watched her cut the final strips of plastic away. After twelve hours immobilized on a table, my limbs were as weak as a kitten's. She pulled me into a seated position, leaned down, and slung me over her shoulder.

Courtney took one step toward the front of the house, then froze. "Dammit," she cried, her sharp shifter senses catching something my human ears couldn't pick up. Whirling around, she dashed out the back door and sprinted toward the woods.

I lifted my head, searching in vain for any sign of pursuers. The house disappeared from sight as she wove through the trees. Her feet slapped against the ground, crushing ferns and mushrooms underfoot.

I hung upside down across Courtney's back, getting a cockeyed view of the world as it flew past. Tree trunks, branches, boulders, and slivers of blue sky swirled together to form a dizzying visual kaleidoscope. With each bounding step, her shoulder bumped against my stomach. My long hair caught on brambles. I twisted my face away from slapping branches.

Umph.

I grunted when Courtney bounded over a creek, jostling my entire body. Saliva flooded my mouth and I swallowed back nausea.

“Stop.” I pressed my hands against her back and lifted my head up.

She ignored me.

“I’m going to throw up. I mean it. Put me down.”

Courtney skidded to a stop. “Listen, bitch. Don’t you dare puke on me.”

The world swam drunkenly around me. I burped. “Oh, God.” I moaned.

Courtney dropped me hard on the ground. Brittle pine needles and sharp rocks dug into my bare butt and hands. Ignoring the pain, I rolled onto all fours next to Courtney’s feet and dry heaved.

“Not on my shoes,” she screeched, jumping backward.

Turning my head, I squinted blearily at my captor. Ridiculously squeamish, wasn’t she? The longer I stalled—giving Zane and our friends time to catch up—the better.

My best bet? Hamming it up. I felt a little better now that I was on the ground and my stomach had stopped bouncing, but there was no point in letting Courtney know that. On my hands and knees, I lurched toward her, jerking my shoulders and making exaggerated retching sounds.

“Get off me,” she squealed. Balancing on one leg, she pulled back a foot, threatening to kick me if I got any closer.

I lunged and grabbed her ankle. Jerking with all my might, I pulled her off balance. She fell backward onto her butt, landing hard on a knee-high boulder. Courtney screwed up her face and howled in pain. I winced. I’d cracked my tailbone when I was a kid, and it had hurt like the dickens.

I had no time to think. Acting on pure survival instincts, I rolled to my feet, snatched up a fallen tree limb, and smacked Courtney across the face. Broken branch stubs scratched her cheeks, and the crumbling bark got into her eyes. I hit her

again. This time, the shock of my assault must have worn off. She wrested the tree branch from my grip and flung it aside.

Seconds, I had mere seconds before she'd find her feet and be on me. Pivoting, I hurled my body into motion. Courtney grabbed a handful of my hair, stopping me short. With a flick of her wrist, she threw me against a pine tree. My shoulder struck the trunk, and I slid onto the ground, dazed and winded.

Courtney touched a bloody scratch on her face, then frowned at the red smear on her fingers. "You made me bleed." Her voice sounded stunned, as if she couldn't believe a mere human had landed a blow. Slowly, she stalked toward me, her frown morphing into a ghastly grin. "Time to end this, bitch."

I refused to die cowering on the ground. Clutching at the tree for support, I wobbled to a standing position and sucked in a breath.

Goodbye, Zane.

A loud, deep bellow. Something crashed through the underbrush. Courtney and I whipped our heads toward the sound. A huge moose thundered past a maple tree, his wide antlers scattering the brilliantly colored leaves. Four lynx cats bounded next to the beast.

A heartbeat later, Zane stood at my side. Strong hands held me upright while fierce blue eyes scanned my body for signs of injury. "You all right?"

"Yes." I threw myself against his broad chest, scarcely able to believe that my mate had found me in time. Powerful arms surrounded me. He pressed kisses on the top of my head, murmuring promises to keep me safe from now on. Shock and relief made me weak. I trembled, clutching at his shoulders.

"You're shivering." He stepped back and peeled his T-shirt off, then slipped it over my head. I slid my arms into the sleeves of a shirt that held the body heat and woodsy scent of my man.

A snarl rolled from one of the lynx, an ominous rumble echoed by the other cats. I glanced toward the disturbance.

Surrounded by a ring of hostile shifters, Courtney had backed up against a tree. She stood ramrod straight, her chin jutting out defiantly. Meeting my eyes, she withdrew a pink-gripped pistol from the pocket of her puffer jacket. How had I forgotten that she owned a gun? She'd threatened me with it in the alley.

She pointed the weapon at me. Malice and determination glittered in her eyes.

“For Bryce.”

She pulled the trigger.

Shimmering light dazzled my eyes. Zane sprang at the coyote, shifting from man to wolf midleap. His jeans and boots fell away before the beast tackled Courtney to the ground. He locked his jaws around her slender throat. Without hesitation, without a shred of pity, the wolf sank his fangs into Courtney's soft flesh. Jerking his head from side to side, he tore out her throat. A fountain of blood sprayed across the forest floor.

I dropped to my knees and buried my face in my hands, unwilling to watch the wolf savage her body. Nothing could block out the sounds, however. The wolf's low, gratified growl. The sickening squelch of a human body ripped asunder and reduced to meat.

Jo knelt down beside me and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. She put her mouth close to my ear. “You mated a wolf, sweet girl. A beast driven by primal instinct. He'll kill anyone who threatens his mate. It's his nature. If you reject the violence, if you turn away from him in disgust, you'll break your wolf's heart.”

Startled, I met Jo's eyes. She was right. Who knew better the workings of a predatory shifter's heart than the alpha of a lynx pack.

I nodded and rose unsteadily to my feet. Jo kept her arm around my shoulders. I knew my limits. I was a vegetarian for Pete's sake. Touching a raw chicken cutlet made me queasy. I couldn't watch the wolf dismantle Courtney. But when he

eventually turned to me, I wouldn't look away. Until then, I fixed my eyes on the beautiful red maple tree whose leaves trembled in the slight breeze. Milton shifted back to human and stood on my other side.

A few minutes later, the terrible sounds subsided. I tore my gaze away from the maple leaves and looked to Zane. The wolf turned his back on his kill and faced me, his eyes filled with a distress and apprehension that hurt my heart. Blood dripped from his muzzle and discolored his coat. His sides heaved and he panted, agitation still riding him hard.

I slipped to my knees and held out my arms. "Come here, baby."

He whined and trotted to my side.

With both hands, I reached out and stroked the blood-spattered fur on his neck and shoulders. "My beautiful wolf. Thank you for coming for me. I love you. I will always love you."

He whined again and an expression of pure devotion filled his bright-blue eyes. Laying his head on my shoulder, he pressed against me. I slid my arms around his neck and held him close. After a handful of minutes, he drew back. The air surrounding him shimmered. A few seconds later, Zane knelt on the ground next to me.

Blood seeped from a round hole in his left shoulder.

Oh, my God. My heart dropped into the pit of my stomach. The bullet Courtney fired had struck Zane.

"Jo," I cried, looking to the wise older woman. "Zane's been shot. Will your alpha healing magic work on a wolf shifter?"

"I'm fine," Zane protested. "It went clean through. No need to fuss over one little bullet hole." His drawn features gave the lie to his bold assertion.

"Karl, Thomas, Jamie, shift," Jo ordered her packmates. She crouched down next to us and examined Zane's injury. "I've never laid healing hands on anyone but a lynx, but it's worth a try. Let's get you on your feet." Without asking first,

she took Zane's uninjured arm and hauled him up. He bit back a hiss.

"Don't hurt him," I said.

He grunted. "I'm fine."

"Thomas, I want you and Jamie to stay here," Jo ordered. "Clean up the house and dispose of the remains. Move all of Courtney's things into her car, then stow it in one of our outbuildings. We'll figure out how to get rid of it later."

"Yes, ma'am," Thomas said.

"Karl, will you drive Zane's truck back to our place, please?"

He kissed her cheek. "I'll be happy to."

"I've left Lydia alone too long," Milton said. "I'm gonna head back to the store."

"Milton," Zane called.

"Yes?"

Zane extended his right hand. "Thanks for your help. I owe you. If you ever need a favor from me or the Black Rock Guardians, all you have to do is ask."

"I've known Annika since she was a baby," Milton said, shaking Zane's hand. "No need to thank me."

"Nonetheless, the offer stands."

Zane retrieved his jeans and boots from the ground and yanked them on. We walked back to the house, the lynx and Milton pausing to put on their own discarded clothes. I couldn't bring myself to walk back into the kitchen—into the room where I was supposed to die—so Zane and I waited outside the back door while Karl fetched my leggings and sweater from the kitchen floor. He brought Zane a kitchen towel to press against his wound. I got dressed, then we walked around the house and to the road. Zane tossed Karl his keys. The two of us climbed into the rear seat of Jo's van.

Zane settled back against his seat for the short ride to the Morrow place. He patted his jeans pocket, pulled out a burner

phone, and handed it to me. “You wanna call Adam and let ‘em know you’re all right?”

I squealed at the prospect of finally speaking to family back home. My hands shook with excitement as I punched in Adam’s private number.

He picked up on the second ring. “Zane?”

“It’s me—” I started.

Adam whooped and called out, “Marit, get in here. Annika is calling.”

Another more distant whoop, then the sound of running footsteps. Apparently my cousin snatched the phone from her mate’s hand. Her breathless voice came over the line. “Are you okay? Is Zane okay? Where’s Courtney?”

I laughed, the realization that I was safe and well finally sinking in. “Zane and the lynx found me in time. I’m one hundred percent fine. Zane has a small injury that Jo’s going to try to heal.”

“And Courtney?”

I laid a hand on Zane’s thigh, Jo’s words echoed in my mind. *If you reject the violence, if you turn away from him in disgust, you’ll break your wolf’s heart.*

“Courtney is dead. Zane’s wolf made sure she’ll never threaten me again.”

Zane laced his fingers through mine.

“Thank God,” Marit breathed. “When are you coming home?”

“I don’t know.” I glanced at Zane. With his enhanced shifter sense of hearing, he must’ve heard every word of my conversation with Marit.

He took the phone from me. “I’d like to fly home tomorrow. I wanna be there for the meeting with the coyotes Thursday night.”

I nudged him. “What about your truck?”

“Thomas and Jamie love nothing more than a road trip.” Jo spoke up from the front of the van. “They’d be happy to drive the truck back to Washington for you. Maybe take the opportunity to flirt with some pretty wolf shifters.”

A low, unhappy growl rumbled from Zane’s chest.

“Behave,” I whispered. If the lynx wanted to flirt with Kyra or any of the other shifters, that was none of Zane’s business.

“Remy and Liv’s flight will be getting in this evening. Bet they’ll just love turning around and flying back home tomorrow morning,” Zane said into the phone.

“Are you kidding?” Marit said. “They’ll be out of their minds with relief. They won’t care about another long flight.”

“Will you do me a favor, Marit?” Zane asked.

“Sure. Anything.”

“Tell Grandpa that he was right about my wolf, and that I can’t wait to see him again.”

Marit’s voice softened. “I’ll go talk to him as soon as we hang up.”

I took the phone back from Zane and spoke to my cousin for a few more minutes, until Jo turned into her driveway. Karl pulled up behind us in Zane’s truck. I hopped out of the van and waited anxiously by the sliding door, ready to lend a hand if Zane needed help climbing out.

My tough guy mate made a face. “Darlin’, don’t hover. I got this.”

I resisted the urge to take his elbow as we walked inside the Morrow’s sprawling farmhouse. Jo led us to the sunny kitchen and directed Zane to sit on a chair. I quickly scrubbed my hands and arms in the kitchen sink, then stood behind him as she carefully cleaned the wound. It felt all kinds of wrong not to get his injury checked out at a hospital, but a bullet wound would draw the attention of the authorities. We didn’t need that, especially since Courtney was about to become a missing person.

Jo and Karl pulled chairs up next to Zane.

“Let’s see if my alpha healing magic works on a wolf,” Jo said. The alpha couple placed hands on Zane’s bare chest. Jo glanced up at me. “Lay your hand on his good shoulder, sweetheart. You’re his mate. That bond carries powerful magic, too.”

Surprised, I gently rested my hand on his uninjured shoulder. I don’t know if it was magic, but at the contact, I felt tension ease from Zane’s body. He sighed and closed his eyes.

Jo and Karl’s eyes fluttered shut, too. The only sound to break the silence was the *tick-tick-tick* of the clock hanging over the kitchen sink. I inhaled a slow breath. The air in the room felt heavy, substantial, as if clogged with fine particles of vapor. Instead of closing my eyes like the others, I watched Zane’s wound for any sign of change.

After fifteen minutes, the tissue surrounding the injury shifted subtly. I held my breath as the bullet hole narrowed, then closed, leaving behind only a dimple on his smooth golden skin. Jo’s lids lifted and she met my astonished gaze.

“Alpha healing magic.” She mouthed the words.

Zane opened his eyes and rotated his shoulder. “Better. Thank you, ma’am.”

“My pleasure.” Jo’s brow furrowed. “Annika, are you all right?”

I gripped the back of Zane’s chair, suddenly feeling woozy.

Zane jumped to his feet, pulled me into his arms, then sat back down on the chair, cradling me on his lap. Frowning, he studied my face. “You’re pale.”

“Courtney pumped me full of animal tranquilizers, then waited impatiently for me to wake up so she could torture me. I think it’s all catching up with me,” I admitted.

Zane spit out expletives and tightened his arms around me.

“When I came to, I realized how much I love you and how much I want to have a life with you. I thought Courtney was going to take it all away.” I swallowed, overcome, but forced myself to continue. “I was scared and sad, then elated when

you all showed up, then scared again when Courtney pulled a gun.”

“We’re gonna have that life together, I promise,” he murmured.

I offered him a wobbly smile.

“You’ve been on an emotional roller coaster,” Jo said. “Of course it knocked you off-balance.”

“And, it’s trivial, but I haven’t eaten since yesterday,” I continued. “I get light-headed when I skip a meal. I’m thirsty, too.”

“That’s an easy fix.” Karl hopped up. “How about some orange juice and homemade honey oat bread?” He cut a slice of bread, slathered it with butter, and brought it to the table on a plate, then filled a glass with orange juice.

“I got it.” Zane lifted the glass to my lips and held it as I greedily drank it down. “Better?” he asked.

I nodded.

He broke off a corner of the slice of bread and held it to my mouth. I parted my lips and accepted it.

Feeding his mate by hand—caring for my needs—soothed some elemental part of his shifter soul. The lines of stress carved across his forehead eased. The tension that had locked his muscles tight loosened its grip on him. I pressed my palm against his cheek, and his expression softened. For a moment, the wolf gazed adoringly at me through his icy-blue eyes.

Gratitude for my brave, endlessly loving mate overwhelmed me. Tears flooded my eyes, tears I tried in vain to blink away.

“Darlin’?” Concern creased his forehead again.

“I’m happy.” The simple words caught in my throat.

“You’re crying because you’re happy?” He looked genuinely baffled.

I nodded. “Happy, grateful, and madly in love with my mate.”

He arched an eyebrow and lifted a shoulder that mere minutes ago had been marred by a gaping bullet hole. “I don’t know what to make of you sometimes.”

I laughed. “Luckily, you’ve got years ahead of you to figure me out. Decades in fact.”

His expression grew serious. “Years, decades, no matter how much time we have together, Annika, it’ll never be enough.”

“Baby.” I stretched up and kissed his chin, savoring the scrape of bristles against my lips. “You’re a romantic at heart.”

“Am not,” he grumbled.

“You totally are.” He snorted, so I piled on. “A romantic, a cuddler, the sweetest, most thoughtful man in all the world.”

“Stop.” He waved a hand. “Don’t go trashing my reputation in front of the lynx.”

With a contented sigh, I tucked my head under his chin and snuggled against his chest. Despite his displeasure at my praise, he held me close, rocking me back and forth and stroking my hair.

Happy was my default setting, and gratitude came naturally to me. But this deep-seated, blinding joy was something new, our connection the most precious thing I’d ever experienced.

I looked at Jo and Karl, the old friends I now saw in a new light. “Thank you for everything.”

Jo walked over and kissed my cheek. Smiling, she turned to Zane. “I think it’s time you take your mate home.”

“I agree.” He stood, set me on my feet, then shook hands with Jo and Karl. We said our goodbyes and walked hand in hand to his truck.

“Remy and Liv won’t be here till this evening,” I remarked, fastening my seat belt.

“That’s right.” He clicked his own. “Hours and hours from now.”

“I have another proposition for you,” I said. “That is, if you’re up to it.”

His grin was positively wolfish. “The day I’m not up to it will be the day they put me in the ground.”

At this reminder of his mortality, I winced.

“No,” he said firmly. “None of that. We’ve got years ahead of us, remember?”

“I remember,” I said, shoving all dark thoughts aside. “What I propose is a long shower and an even longer nap.”

“I’m down for a shower.” He threw the truck into gear. “And I’m definitely down for taking you to bed, but darlin’, I don’t intend to nap.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



ZANE

I'd come *this close* to losing Annika. Another thirty seconds, and Courtney would've killed her, would've ended the life of the most luminous, most vibrantly alive woman I'd ever known. Half a minute spelled the difference between life and death, between hope and despair, between joy and misery.

As soon as we got back to the A-frame I stripped Annika out of her clothes and hustled her into the shower. I couldn't stop touching her, seeking tactile confirmation that my mate was alive and well. Lathering up my hands, I massaged creamy bodywash over her arms and legs, her breasts, back, and her belly. She leaned against me, her body limp, her eyes half-closed while I worked shampoo through her golden-brown hair. My hands slid from her scalp to the base of her skull.

"That's nice," she breathed as my thumbs rubbed slow circles against her neck and shoulders.

"Tilt your head back so I can rinse out the shampoo," I murmured.

She exhaled a slow, contented sigh, then lifted her chin.

The sight of a soapy, slippery Annika smiling up at me beneath a crown of shampoo bubbles took my breath away. It struck me again, what a dark and dreary place the world would be if Courtney had snuffed out her life. If my mate had died, I'd spend the rest of my days a hollowed out shell of a man. Instead, she lived, and I was the luckiest son of a bitch ever to draw breath.

My throat closed. With trembling hands, I pushed wet strands of hair off her face. "If I'd lost you—" My voice cracked.

Annika rose up on her toes and brushed her lips over mine. "But you didn't. I'm right here."

I dragged my knuckles over one velvet-soft cheek, along her jaw, and down the slim column of her neck. I swept the lather away from her mating bite and traced the edges of the scar.

Shivering, she clutched at my waist.

My blood heated, and all of my possessive and protective instincts surged to the fore. I tickled the spot with my tongue, then lightly bit raised flesh that perfectly matched the outline of my teeth.

Ours, the wolf proclaimed with satisfaction.

Yes, brother, I agreed. *Ours*.

My cock jumped. My canines slid out. I yanked my mouth away before the fangs did more than nick her skin. She gasped. I licked away the small drops of blood.

“Zane.” Annika shuddered. Her pupils dilated and the sharp scent of feminine arousal hazed the air, confirming everything I’d heard about the sensitivity of the mating bite. “I... oh God... I need you inside me, right now.”

All I had to hear. Dragging my fingers over her soap-slicked thighs, I hoisted her up.

“Hold onto me, mate.”

With one thrust, I impaled her sweet heat on my ready cock. One step forward, and I pressed her against the tiled shower wall. I wrapped one hand around her skull, to cushion it, while I rocked into her.

Despite Annika’s desperation, this was no frenzied coupling, no rush to the finish line. I wanted to savor every second of this most intimate connection, to wallow in sensory proof that my mate was alive. I needed to breathe in her scent and to swallow her small cries of pleasure. To taste her skin. To feel her writhe against me. To hear the thrum of her quickening pulse.

“Faster,” she begged.

I chuckled. “You already forget who’s in charge?”

“In the bedroom,” she corrected me with a moan. “You’re in charge in the bedroom. We’re in the shower.”

I nipped the shell of her ear, my cock slowly sliding in and out of her tight pussy. “Nice try, darlin’, but the same principle applies.”

She nibbled along my jaw with sharp little teeth, then lifted desire-addled eyes to mine. “Would it be okay if I bite you?”

I groaned. Despite my fine assertion about calling the shots, about controlling the pace, the little vixen spoke the words certain to shoot my lust into the stratosphere. Without thought, I plowed faster and harder into her heated core.

“Where do you wanna bite me?” I demanded.

She raised one lazy hand and touched the spot where my shoulder curved into my neck. “Right here.”

Yes, the wolf within me cried in triumph. A mating bite.

“Same place where I bit you.” I ground the words out, the wolf’s proximity thickening my voice.

“Yes.” She tipped her head back and squeezed her eyes shut, a shudder wracking her entire body. “Please, Zane.”

“Do it,” I growled.

She fell on me like a vampire in a movie. No foreplay, no buying a man dinner, no smooching her way from my mouth to my shoulder. Annika twined both arms around my neck and pressed an open-mouthed kiss to the spot.

Liquid fire surrounded my cock as I pistoned into her.

Her teeth pressed down, the force light and tentative, almost like she was afraid to hurt me. Her chest rose and fell. She panted against my skin. Her warm breath, the small pressure, it wasn’t enough.

“Harder,” I ordered. Without fangs, she couldn’t leave a true mating bite on my skin. But I wanted to see crescent-shaped marks from her teeth, to feel bruised and abraded flesh when I stood in front of the mirror tomorrow and palpated the spot.

Annika bit down and the small hurt tipped me over the edge. Pain and pleasure swirled together as I came. Within seconds, Annika's pussy convulsed around me. Her teeth loosened their grip, but her lips formed a tight circle against my skin. She sucked hard and I imagined capillaries bursting from the pressure.

My shoulders shook with laughter. "You gave me a hickey."

She lifted her face, her expression brimming with self-satisfaction. "Tell the truth. You wanted me to leave a mark, didn't you?"

"I did."

"Well, make sure you show it off before it fades, so everybody in the pack will know that I've staked my claim, and you're mine."

My wolf pranced, delighted by our mate's possessive and playful side.

"What happens if somebody challenges your claim?" I asked, easing her to the shower floor. The water that beat against my back still held a hint of warmth. I detached the sprayer and carefully sluiced the shampoo and soapsuds from Annika's body.

She slicked the wet hair from her face and smiled up at me, so beautiful, so perfect that my heart turned over. "You said it yourself, wolf. Cross me, and I'm more vicious than a junkyard dog. Nobody should mess with Annika Hagen—"

She hesitated, her brow puckering. I guessed what she was thinking.

"With Annika Hagen Hunter," I finished for her. "You're my mate and I'd be proud if you'd take my name. If you like—if it means something to you—we can go to the state and get married, too."

"Annika Hagen Hunter," she repeated. "Zane and Annika Hunter. I like it. I like the idea of sharing a name with my man—" She paused for a few seconds, then plunged ahead. "And

with my children. I want to have them someday. Do you?" She held her breath, waiting for my response.

A month ago—hell, a week ago—I would've said no way to the notion of fathering children. I wouldn't risk passing on my fatal flaw, my inability to contain my wolf's violence. Now, thanks to this entrancing woman, I knew better.

"Nothing I'd like more." I turned the faucet handle, cutting off the now-cool water. I stepped out of the stall first, grabbed a towel, and rubbed my mate from head to foot before drying myself. We faced each other, butt naked, our toes sinking into the plush carpet.

"Sex. Love. Children. Why do we always have our most important conversations in the bathroom?" Annika mused aloud.

"I dunno." I lifted a shoulder, the one that still bore a small dent from the bullet hole.

She stretched up on her toes and pressed a kiss to the indentation. "I'm glad you want to have babies with me."

"I do," I assured her. "Someday, after we've settled things with the coyotes and the grizzlies."

She snaked her arms around my waist and laid her cheek against my chest. "Courtney told me that she and Lance split up."

I wrapped my arms tight around her. "That's good. Means he won't come looking for her. And she was the one pressuring him to kill you. With her out of the picture, he might back off. Don't worry. We'll stay vigilant, but I wouldn't be surprised if he decides to drop the matter."

"And remember, his sons want to make peace." Hope colored her voice. "Maybe they'll remove Lance from power, and the coyotes will end up allies with the wolves."

"You're getting ahead of yourself," I cautioned. "Even if Daniel takes over the coyote pack, we'll still have to deal with Medved's grizzlies out of Alaska. They won't stop till they get their hands on our Black Rock."

She sighed. “You’re right. Looks like it’s going to be a while before things calm down enough to think about kids.”

“Remy and Liv won’t be here for hours,” I said. My hands slid down to cup her ass. “No reason we can’t get in a little more baby-making practice.”

“Practice makes perfect, or so they say.”

“You already are perfect,” I replied.

“Good lord.” She sighed. “You’re so danged sweet. I’ll put the hurt on anybody who says otherwise.”

“Sweet.” I scoffed and swung her up into my arms. “Do I need to remind you who’s the boss in bed?”

She batted her eyelashes. “Why, yes, I believe you do.”

I carried her across the hall and deposited her on the rumpled sheets.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



ANNIKA

“I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.” Liv waggled her eyebrows at Zane and lifted the hem of her shirt.

“Sure.” He pulled the collar of his tee aside to expose the barely there indentation from a bullet hole in his shoulder.

“Not fair,” Liv cried, comparing his smooth golden skin with the raised pink scar tissue running along the side of her torso.

“No, it’s not.” He frowned at her still-healing injury.

I swallowed a groan. Zane took Liv’s complaint personally. The very last thing he needed was to feel guilty about something else beyond his control.

My twin sister and I had always been able to sense each other’s moods. She shot me an understanding look, then patted his arm. “Dude, chill. It’s not your fault you guys have magical healing mojo.” I tossed her a grateful smile. She winked at me. “You’re my brother-in-law now. You’d better get used to me yanking your chain.”

“Yanking my chain,” he muttered darkly. Behind the surly expression, I saw an amused sparkle in his eyes. Liv’s teasing—her refusal to be intimidated by a notoriously grumpy shifter—would be good for him.

“Yep,” Liv agreed. “I’ll yank your chain. Annika will crack the whip. Between the two of us, we’ll keep you in line.”

Zane’s lips parted, but no words came.

The front door swung open. Remy stepped inside and stomped his feet on the mat.

“Car’s packed and ready to go,” he said. “We should get to the airport in plenty of time for our flight.”

The Morrows had stopped by yesterday evening with a big veggie lasagna for our dinner. They lingered until Liv and Remy showed up around nine. We said our farewells and

promised to visit Aldrich again soon. That morning, we got up early and laundered the sheets, remade the beds, and tidied up. Except for the repairs to the front door, my parents might not guess that we'd been here.

I lifted a finger. "Just one more minute." I held out a hand to Zane. He took it and allowed me to tug him down the short hallway to my bedroom. I shut the door and sat on the edge of the bed. Patting the mattress, I invited him to join me.

"What is it?" he asked.

I leaned against him. "This room is where you gave me the mating bite, where we started our life together. I wanted to take a moment and say goodbye to it."

Understanding filled his eyes. He kissed my temple and drew me to his side, as if we had all the time in the world. "My mate is sentimental and sweet," he said against my hair.

I tilted my face up to meet his eyes. "And my mate is sweet, too."

He made a face. "Have I got you fooled?"

"No, you don't," I said firmly. "I see the real you, a man with a good heart who is kind, devoted, and harder on himself than he has any right to be."

The muscles in his throat worked, and he swallowed. "Annika—"

A knock on the door. "We need to hit the road." Remy's voice.

"Hold on a second," Zane called. He caught my chin. "No matter what you think, I'm not an easy man, but I swear I'll do my best to make you happy."

"Ditto," I promised.

He gave a crisp nod and hauled me to my feet. "Now move your ass. We don't want to miss our flight."

Two hours later, we returned the rental car, checked in with the airline, and boarded the plane for our long flight home. We

arrived in Seattle in early evening. A grinning Xander met us at baggage claim.

“Welcome home.” He swept me into his arms and spun me around and around till I got dizzy.

I laughed and pounded on his chest. “Put me down, you big goofball.”

Settling me back on my feet, he pushed my scarf aside, exposing my mating bite. He carefully touched the skin next to the mark. He glanced at Zane.

“Nice one,” he said, admiration in his voice.

“Hands off my mate.” Zane’s words carried no heat, and his expression was positively smug.

“Is this a shifter thing?” I asked in a low voice. “Do you guys compare the size of your...” I paused for dramatic effect. “Bite marks?”

Zane dropped his chin and fixed me with a stern glare. “Behave.”

“Did he say *behave*?” Liv hooted, taking my arm and pulling me toward the exit door. “For that, the boys can carry all the luggage.”

We walked across a skybridge to the parking garage and climbed into Xander’s jeep for the long drive home. Marit had packed a cooler with sandwiches and cookies. We ate dinner on the road. I fell asleep against Zane’s shoulder, waking hours later when we pulled up to the lodge.

Marit’s happy shriek tore me from sleep. Limbs stiff, I crawled out of the back of the jeep and hugged first my cousin and then her mate.

“Thank God you’re safe.” Adam brushed his knuckles over my cheek, then brought his mouth to my ear. “Don’t put Marit through anything like this again.” His voice was gentle, but it carried the authority of the alpha.

Chastened, and unsure of how to respond to a direct order from a man who was both a family member and the alpha, I simply nodded. “I’m sorry I worried you all.”

Loki butted my leg. I dropped to my knees and buried my face in the dog's silky fur. "I missed you, sweet boy."

Kyra raced down the steps and threw her arms around me. Adam's parents, Jason and Leigh, followed close behind. Looking past them onto the porch, I saw at least a dozen familiar faces gathered to welcome us home. Emma and Tory, clad in pajamas, hopped up and down and waved excitedly.

Leigh pulled me in for a hug. "What were you thinking?" she asked. I'd known intellectually that my disappearance and my attempt to turn myself over to Vilhauer had frightened people, but seeing their reaction was a stab to my heart.

It struck me then. By mating with Zane, I'd become a part of something bigger and more all-encompassing than family. I was part of a pack.

At the top of the steps, I spied Matthew, the former alpha, standing on the porch. I untangled myself from Leigh's arms. "I want to say hi to your dad."

Zane joined me as I climbed the steps and approached his grandfather. The old man looked at us, a small smile curving his lips, then he held out his arms to me.

"Welcome back home, granddaughter."

Deeply touched by the endearment, I kissed his cheek. "Thank you... Grandpa."

He turned to Zane. "You've made peace with your wolf."

"You were right, Grandpa," Zane said. "I let fear blind me. My wolf and I were never at war."

"Two grandsons mated." Satisfaction filled Matthew's voice.

"And two more to go," Zane added, glancing over his shoulder at Remy and Xander. Remy stood deep in conversation with Adam, Marit, and Liv. Xander lay flat on the ground, laughing as Loki straddled his chest and licked his face.

Marit caught us watching. She touched Adam's arm, then jogged up the steps to join us. "Do you mind if I whisk Annika

away for a few minutes?” she asked. Without waiting for a reply, she took my elbow and led me inside.

There were only a few people milling about the lobby this time of night. I pointed to the children’s play area in the corner, where the beanbag chairs sat empty. We plopped onto overstuffed fabric chairs.

I angled my head toward Marit and kept my voice low. “Is this about the baby?”

She shook her head. “I’m not pregnant. It was a—” She paused. “I don’t want to call it a false alarm, because I’d come around to the idea of having a baby. It turns out I was just six days late. From stress, probably.”

I squeezed her arm. “I’m sorry.”

“It’ll happen when it’s supposed to happen,” she said. “I wanted you to know.”

We sat in silence for a moment. “What’s going on with the coyotes?”

“It feels like we’ve been on high alert forever instead of just a couple of weeks.” Marit sighed. “Vilhauer warned Adam that he had called his allies and was bringing in grizzly and coyote reinforcements, but so far, we haven’t seen any sign of it. Adam will be meeting with Vilhauer’s sons tomorrow night to talk about making peace.”

Daniel Vilhauer had looked sincere when he stopped Zane and me on the road, but some people can lie convincingly.

“Are they ready, in case it’s a double cross?”

Marit bobbed her head. “Adam says they’re ready for anything and tells me not to worry, but how can I help it? There’s so much at stake. I’m just glad Zane is back in time to go with him.”

“Me, too.” Truth, but not the whole truth. I’d had quite enough of people I cared about being placed in harm’s way.

“Speaking of Zane.” She pointed at my neck. “Show me.”

Shades of Liv's *I'll show you mine if you show me yours* from this morning. I unwrapped the scarf and angled my head to one side so she could see Zane's mating bite.

Marit leaned forward. With one fingertip, she touched the raised pink scar. I shivered uncontrollably, and she smiled. "Welcome to the club, cousin."

Human women mated to wolf shifters—women who proudly wore claiming bites on our bodies—we *were* part of an exclusive club, weren't we?

"Is it wrong to be so freaking happy when things are still unsettled?" I asked.

"After what you went through with Courtney, you deserve all the happiness you can get," Marit said. "Thank God the bitch is dead."

"Marit." I gasped. "Since when have you been so bloodthirsty?"

All my life, I'd believed that people were essentially good, that the quest for revenge was short sighted, that even lost souls might be redeemed. Shifters were less forgiving. For them, bloody vengeance was the inevitable consequence for threatening someone they loved. Marit was starting to sound like a shifter.

"Since I heard what Courtney had in mind for you," she said. "I'm glad Zane's wolf killed her."

"I'm glad she can never hurt anyone again," I confessed. "And I don't want to waste another minute of my life talking about her."

"All righty, then." Marit mimed pulling a zipper across her lips.

The door to the lodge swung open. Zane and Adam stepped inside. When their gazes fell on us, sprawled in beanbag chairs in the children's play area, smiles lit their faces.

"Every time, every blessed time my mate looks at me like that, my heart rolls over in my chest," Marit whispered.

Zane strode toward me with the easy assurance of an apex predator at the top of his game. His brilliant blue eyes locked on my face. He looked at me like I was the center of his universe, his refuge from the storm, his happy ever after. Exactly what he was to me.

“I know,” I whispered back, standing to greet my man.
“Mine, too.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



ZANE

I finished tightening the straps on my shoulder holster, then glanced across the armory at Adam. “I still think you should sit this one out, cousin.”

Adam slid his gun holster into draw position and adjusted its angle. “Nah.” He dismissed my advice. “What would it say to potential allies if I stayed behind and let my lieutenants negotiate?”

“That you’re smart enough to suspect a trap?” I suggested.

Adam shot me a grin. “Whatever happens, we’re ready.”

Hoped to hell he was right.

Brenner Park closed at sunset during the off-season, and we weren’t meeting with the coyote dissidents till eleven. We should have the place to ourselves. Daniel and Drake Vilhauer promised to come alone to meet Adam and one of his lieutenants. If it was a setup, if dozens of coyote soldiers suddenly appeared, we’d have wolf soldiers positioned nearby, ready to spring into action. A few minutes before the meetup, Remy planned to send up drones to keep an eye on the park and neighborhood. If coyotes massed, we’d know it.

No shifter, coyote or wolf, was likely to pull a weapon. Gunfire within the Belle Reve city limits—inside of a park for chrissakes—was guaranteed to draw the attention of the cops. Still, we’d be fools not to come prepared for violence.

“Meet you out front in ten,” Adam said, heading for the door.

“Ten minutes, roger that,” I confirmed.

I followed Adam up from the basement to the lobby, where Marit waited for him. Leaving them to their goodbyes, I took the stairs three at a time all the way to the fourth floor. I jogged down the corridor and threw open the door to my quarters.

All the lights were off, but Annika had lit a fire in the big stone fireplace. She sat on the rug in front of the hearth, Grandma Freya's old quilt wrapped around her shoulders. Firelight danced across her features, bringing out the golden highlights in her hair.

At my abrupt entrance, she turned her head, but didn't stand.

I knelt next to her and ran my fingers through her gleaming hair. "You cold, darlin'?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm not cold. I just wanted to wrap myself up in something that reminded me of Grandma, and to sit quietly and watch the flames." The smile she offered me looked forced.

I sat and pulled her onto my lap. "We'll be back safe and sound in a few hours."

"I know." She bobbed her head, and her strained smile grew wider.

"Hey." I caught her chin and forced her to meet my eyes. "If you're scared or worried, you can tell me."

Her jaw trembled and she sucked in a breath. "Honest to God, I'd like a break from life-or-death situations for a while. But I know that my mate can handle anything that comes his way."

After Courtney's repeated attempts on her life, after Lance Vilhauer's threats, it was no wonder my mate felt a little fragile right now. If tonight's meeting went well, she'd get that break from life-or-death situations that she deserved.

"If anything goes wrong, Adam and I can deal with it. We're not alone. We've got backup."

"I know." Her voice sounded steadier.

"And remember, this meeting is a good thing. It might lead to peace with the coyotes."

"You're right," she said. "I know you're right."

I slid my hand around her nape and kissed her, deeply and slowly, as if we had all the time in the world. Panting, we pulled apart. “I gotta go,” I said, regret heavy in my voice.

Annika lifted her chin. Firelight glittered in her beautiful brown eyes. “The sooner you go, the sooner you’ll be back.”

I stood and walked to the door, then paused to look back over my shoulder. She blew me a kiss. I pretended to catch it and pressed my hand over my heart. Chuckling to myself, I stepped into the hall. Mating had turned me into a romantic sap. Remy would laugh his ass off if he saw me catching a make-believe kiss. I shrugged. Let him.

I jogged down the stairs and through the lobby onto the porch where Adam and my fellow sentries waited for me. Remy and Kyra climbed into the back of Adam’s truck. I slid into the front passenger seat. Rolf and Liam stayed behind with the pack in case... well... in case things didn’t go as planned.

An hour later, we parked on a dark street two blocks north of Brenner Park. Kyra went with Remy to help him set up the drones. Adam texted his soldiers and confirmed that they were in place.

At five till eleven, he turned to me. “Showtime.”

Hoodies covered our shoulder holsters as we trotted up the empty sidewalk toward the entrance to the park. One block up ahead, an oncoming police car waited at a traffic light.

“Keep walking,” Adam ordered as we approached the entrance.

Well, duh. Entering a park after closing time violated city ordinance. Only a fool would do it under a cop’s nose. Only a damned fool would do it under a cop’s nose while carrying a concealed handgun without a permit.

We walked to the corner and waited for the light in the crosswalk to change. When it did, we started to cross the street, pretending we were heading to the bar on the corner. The cop glanced our way and nodded at us as he drove past. As soon as his car disappeared from view, we doubled back

toward the entrance to the park and slipped inside. Tall red cedar trees lined the path and blocked our view of the meeting place, the gazebo in the middle of the park.

I cast out my senses, searching for any sign of Daniel and Drake Vilhauer's presence. I heard no voices, no footsteps, no heartbeats, but I caught a whiff of coyote stench. What was up with that?

Adam paused and turned to me. Pointing to an ear, he shook his head. He touched his nose and lifted one quizzical brow. I nodded. Yeah, I smelled coyote, too. Hands on the grips of our pistols, we cautiously advanced toward the gazebo.

White Christmas lights strung along the roof beams lit up the structure. If Daniel and Drake stood inside the gazebo, we'd see them clear as day. The place appeared empty, but the closer we got, the stronger the smell grew. Few odors could compete with the rancid funk of coyote, but another scent entered the mix, something sweet and coppery. A dozen feet from the gazebo, we stopped.

"Fuck," Adam breathed.

The bodies of two young men lay crumpled on the gazebo floor, their throats slit ear to ear. I saw no pools of blood. Daniel and Drake Vilhauer must have been killed someplace else and transported to the gazebo after death.

By somebody who knew they planned to meet with us.

Had Lance Vilhauer found out about his sons' betrayal, killed his boys, and left their bodies here as a message?

A police siren wailed. Red-and-blue strobe lights cut through the darkness. From the entrance to the park, the sound of squealing brakes.

"Not again." Adam groaned.

He jerked his head toward the opposite end of the park. We took off, weaving through trees at shifter speed. We jogged along the river, then hopped the short fence on the north side of Brenner Park. On the sidewalk, we slowed our pace. Adam reached for his cell and typed a message to Remy and his

soldiers, no doubt ordering them to fall back and retreat from town.

“Whoever killed Daniel and Drake called the cops on us,” I guessed.

“Most likely.” Adam’s expression was grim. “How the hell did Vilhauer find out about the meeting?”

“Don’t have a fucking clue,” I said. “Daniel or Drake must’ve confided in the wrong person.”

Remy and Kyra had to retrieve and pack up the drones. We beat them to the truck. While we waited, Adam checked in with the rest of our packmates. All was well. No sightings of any coyotes other than our two dead, would-be allies.

By a little after midnight, our small caravan of pack vehicles arrived back at the lodge. Annika, Marit, and Liv sat together in the lobby waiting for our return. Marit and Annika jumped up and rushed to our sides, throwing themselves into our arms. I held my mate close, till she pulled back, and frowned.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

Adam raised a hand and summoned Liam over. “Find Rolf,” he said. “Tell him we’re having a sentry meeting in my office in five minutes.”

“Yes, sir.” Liam ran off to track down the senior sentry.

“What happened?” Marit asked, glancing from Adam’s face to mine.

In a few sentences, Adam outlined the evening’s events.

Annika’s eyebrows arched upward in disbelief. “Lance Vilhauer killed his own sons?”

“We don’t know for sure, but it looks that way,” I said.

“I liked Daniel,” she said slowly. “He seemed like a nice guy who had the best interests of his pack at heart.”

Annika didn’t need to hear the bloody details of his death. “Why don’t you go up to bed?” I suggested. “I’ll fill you in on any news in the morning.”

To my relief, she agreed. “I’m going to stop at the kitchen and make a cup of cocoa before I head up. Liv, do you want to come with me?”

“Sure. Goodnight, everybody.” Liv blew us all an airy kiss, which I did *not* capture and press to my heart.

The sentry meeting lasted till almost two. Afterward, I tiptoed into our room and found Annika sound asleep. When I slid between the sheets, she made a happy sound and wriggled back against me, little spoon, big spoon style. The bad dreams that plagued her had decreased in frequency, but around four a.m., her breathing changed. I came alert at once. She moaned and flailed. I stroked her face and murmured soothing words. She lapsed back into a peaceful slumber.

A pounding on the door a little after eight a.m. jolted us from sleep. I stumbled to the door.

“Lance Vilhauer called a press conference in ten minutes,” Remy said. “The local station is going to carry it live.”

“Thanks for the heads-up.”

While Annika was in the bathroom, I fixed two giant mugs of coffee. Morning joe in hand, Annika and I sat side by side on the sofa. I set my laptop on the coffee table and pulled up the station’s live feed. The screen showed an empty conference table. As we watched, Lance Vilhauer and two other men solemnly shuffled into the room.

“Do you recognize the men with him?” Annika asked.

“Yeah, the man on the right is his new second-in-command, Tad Sweeney. The other man is his attorney, Joel Rafferty.”

“Another coyote?” Annika asked around a yawn.

“Yep. Everybody in his inner circle is a coyote.”

Annika frowned at the screen. “Look at Vilhauer.”

Pale and hollow-eyed, the coyote alpha looked like he had aged ten years. His shoulders slumped and his hands shook. He swayed back and forth, as if barely able to stand. If the man was faking his grief, he deserved an award for acting.

Tad Sweeney stepped up to the microphone, cleared his throat, and read from a paper. “As most of you have heard, last night, Daniel and Drake Vilhauer, the only children of Mr. Lance Vilhauer—” he gestured toward his alpha—“were robbed and brutally murdered while driving one of their father’s tow trucks. The perpetrators killed the men and dumped their bodies in a city park.”

Vilhauer cried out and bent over double. His attorney patted his shoulder. I’d accuse him of taking his grief-stricken act too far, but his posture and expression rang true.

“At this time, the police have no suspects. We ask the public’s help in bringing the killer, or killers, to justice.” He set the paper aside and looked directly into the camera, his voice gaining strength with every word. “Whoever committed this heinous crime has a *black rock* where their heart should be.”

Annika shot me a confused look.

Sweeney continued, “To the perpetrators, know that no *guardian* can stand between you and the hammer of justice.”

I didn’t imagine the emphasis he put on the words black rock and guardian.

Annika’s hand found mine. “He just threatened the pack, didn’t he?”

I jerked my head in a yes.

“Mr. Vilhauer has offered a \$50,000 reward for any information that leads to the arrest of the killer or killers,” Sweeney said.

In the background, Lance Vilhauer sobbed.

Sweeney didn’t take his eyes off the camera. “To the guilty parties, listen carefully. You will be caught. You will be punished.” Vengeance laced every word.

The voices of reporters filled the room, talking over each other, calling out Vilhauer’s name, and vying for his attention. Lost in grief, the coyote alpha paid them no attention.

Annika touched my arm, snapping my attention back to her. “I don’t think Vilhauer killed his sons.”

“It’s starting to look that way,” I agreed, my mind racing. I shut the laptop and turned to my mate. Her pale face and frightened expression gutted me. “Come here.” I pulled her onto my lap.

She clutched at my chest, worry radiating from her beautiful brown eyes. “He thinks the Black Rock Guardians killed Daniel and Drake.”

“We didn’t,” I said slowly.

“Then... then who did?”

That was the million-dollar question.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



ANNIKA

ONE WEEK LATER

I stood at the kitchen counter in Grandma Freya's cozy lakeside cabin, piping cream cheese frosting rosettes around the perimeter of a four-layer carrot cake.

Thomas and Jamie Morrow were flying home to New Hampshire tomorrow morning. They'd driven Zane's truck across the country, then stuck around for a few days to visit. Everyone in the pack had been eager to meet the lynx shifters who'd helped Zane rescue me from Courtney, especially Adam. Just as Jo predicted, her grandsons had a grand old time flirting with some pretty wolf shifters.

We'd planned a special farewell dinner this evening in Grandma's cottage. Thomas, Jamie, and all the cousins—including Xander—would crowd around the kitchen table and share a meal. Liv braised a beef brisket and fixed mashed potatoes. Marit made the sides: a salad, rolls, and roasted vegetables. I was in charge of dessert.

I sprinkled chopped walnuts across the top of the cake, carefully slid my masterpiece onto a refrigerator shelf, then glanced at the clock.

"The men should be here in five minutes," I said. "Anybody need last-minute help?"

Liv looked up from mashing potatoes. "Nope. I'm good."

"Me, too," Marit said, pulling a tray of rolls from the oven.

I looked around the well-loved kitchen. Xander was always hungry, so I'd filled the Little Red Riding Hood cookie jar with molasses crinkles. Three bottles of red wine sat open and breathing on the counter. We'd set the table with Grandma's vintage blue-and-white china and her mismatched silverware

and wine glasses. Coral-colored glass candlesticks held white tapers, ready to light before we sat down to eat.

“I’m going to put on some music,” I said, walking over to Grandma’s old record cabinet. Dropping to my knees, I started to thumb through her albums.

“Do me a favor,” Marit called. “Put on Janis Joplin’s *Pearl* album.”

“Why that one?” I asked.

“It’s a sentimental favorite,” she said. “I was singing along to ‘Me and Bobby McGee’ when Adam and Zane snuck up on the cabin and spied on me.”

“Shit. You’d think that would put the poor man off Joplin forever,” Liv marveled.

“Hey.” Pretend outrage crossed Marit’s face. “I’m the alpha’s mate. A little respect, please.”

Liv snorted. “Yeah, right.”

I slid *Pearl* from its sleeve and started the turntable. As soon as the needle touched the vinyl, an irresistible guitar riff poured from the speakers.

I hopped to my feet and held out both hands to Liv and Marit. “Let’s dance.”

“Why not?” Marit agreed.

She grabbed Liv’s hand and pulled my muttering sister over to my side. Once there, Liv abandoned her protests and cut loose. We danced with more enthusiasm than finesse, flinging our arms in the air, shaking our hips, and singing along with Janis’s iconic “Move Over.”

We didn’t notice the cabin door open or the men step inside until Adam appeared at Marit’s side. He swept her into his arms and whirled her around and around. Bobbing his head in time to the music, Xander joined us. He held out a hand to Liv. She curtsied and took his hand. Then, like Grandma used to say, they boogied down. Zane, Thomas, Jamie, and Remy hung back by the door, bemused expressions on their faces. After a moment, Zane walked over to me.

Out of breath, I stopped dancing and leaned against his chest. “It’s okay, baby. I know you don’t like to dance.”

“I never liked much liked it,” he conceded. “But you do, so I’ll give it a shot.”

“I can’t ask for more than that.” I stood tall on my tiptoes, pressed a kiss on his jaw, then slid my arms around his neck. Zane held me close and we slow danced till the next song ended.

“That wasn’t so bad,” he muttered, then glanced at Xander. “Just don’t ever expect me to jump around like a wild man when I dance.”

I brought my mouth to his ear. “As long as you’re a wild man in bed, I’m good.”

Xander stuck his fingers in his ears. “La-la-la. I don’t need to hear that, cousin.”

Crap. I’d forgotten the keen shifter sense of hearing.

Zane grinned down at me, not at all embarrassed. “It’s a deal.”

Xander groaned. “Can we cut out this mushy stuff and eat? I’m starving.”

“You’re always starving.” Marit laughed. “Let’s dish up.”

We filled our plates and squeezed around the table. Adam filled our wine glasses, except for Xander’s, who was underage. Xander popped the top off a can of root beer, then filled his glass with the fizzy stuff.

“I spoke with Josephine Morrow this afternoon,” Adam said. He lifted his glass. “I’d like to make a toast, to our new allies, the Morrow Pack of Aldrich, New Hampshire.”

Thomas and Jamie whooped their pleasure at the surprise announcement. We clinked glasses.

Thomas turned to Zane. “Bet you thought you’d seen the last of the lynx.”

To my surprise, Zane extended a hand to my old friend. “You and I got off to a bad start, but I’ll never forget that when

it counted most, you had my back.”

Thomas shook Zane’s hand. “Had my doubts, too. I’m glad to see I was wrong about you.”

Not exactly an over-the-top declaration of peace and friendship, but extravagant expressions of emotion weren’t Zane’s style. At least not with anybody except me.

Adam cleared his throat and pulled a small box from his pocket. “A gift, from the Black Rock Guardians to the Morrow pack.” He handed the box to Thomas. “Zane suggested it, and I one hundred percent agreed.”

Like a kid on Christmas morning, Thomas shook the box. Something rattled inside.

“Open it,” Marit urged, her eyes bright with excitement.

Thomas took off the lid and stared dumbfounded at the contents.

“What is it?” Jamie asked, leaning over his brother’s plate to get a look. His jaw dropped and he turned to Adam. “Is that what I think it is?”

Adam nodded. “A chip of black rock for each member of your pack. There’s one for Milton Cranberry, too.”

“Holy shit,” Jamie breathed. He reached into the box, touched a rock, then shivered as the magic pulsed into him.

Thomas lifted his eyes to Adam. “I don’t know what to say other than thank you.”

The wolf glinted in Adam’s eyes, and his alpha power swirled throughout the room. “The Black Rock Guardians will never forget what you did for us. If you ever need our help, call, and we’ll come.”

“That goes both ways,” Thomas said. “If you need us—if your enemies make a move—Jamie and I will be here on the first plane.”

At the mention of the coyotes, our mood sobered. Ever since Lance Vilhauer’s press conference, we’d been on edge. Vilhauer blamed the wolves for the murder of his sons. He’d

vowed revenge. We looked for signs that his allies were rallying to his side, watched for more incursions into pack land, but... nothing. Vilhauer was biding his time. Living in a state of high alert was fast becoming our norm.

My gaze traveled around the table, moving from one beloved face to the next. My chest tight, I looked up, as if I could see past the roof beams all the way to heaven.

Grandma Freya, please put in a good word with the Almighty to keep us all safe and sound.

I lifted my wine glass. “To family, friendship, and true love,” I toasted.

“To family, friendship, and true love,” everyone echoed.

We settled in for a fabulous meal. My carrot cake elicited a round of oohs and aahs. Xander and Jamie each ate two pieces, then raided the cookie jar. Nobody puts away as much food as adolescent shifters.

We made short work of the dishes. Afterward, no one seemed eager to break up the party.

“It’s a clear night,” Zane said. “The Orionid meteor showers are in full swing. How about we sit on the deck and watch for shooting stars?”

I squeezed his hand. “That sounds perfect.”

“It’s cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey,” Adam warned.

“That’s okay.” I tossed him a smile. “My big bad wolf will keep me warm.”

“Yes, I will.” Zane wrapped his hands around my hips and hauled me close for a lingering kiss.

Liv groaned and mimed sticking a finger down her throat. “First Marit and now Annika. I’m surrounded by sentimental saps.”

We bundled into coats and headed outside.

Zane had built beautiful teak deck furniture. With all the excitement during the past month, we hadn’t yet put the

furniture into storage for the winter. We dragged the chairs into a circle. I curled up on Zane's lap and slid my hand under his shirt, warming my fingers against his skin. Cold weather didn't faze shifters, but Liv, Marit, and I had each grabbed one of Grandma's hand-stitched quilts to wrap around ourselves over our coats. Zane tucked the quilt under my chin and held me close, petting my hair the way I liked best.

We sat in companionable silence, content to lean back and study the night sky. A breeze stirred the lake waters. Waves gently lapped against the shore. Small animals scurried through the undergrowth. In the distance, a wolf howl shattered the peaceful quiet. I stiffened. A few seconds later, another wolf joined in, then another, until a chorus of howls filled my ears.

I sat up straight and swung worried eyes toward Adam. "Are they calling a warning? Are the coyotes attacking?"

Adam shook his head, a reassuring smile curving his lips. "No, sweetheart. If they were alarmed or agitated, I'd sense it. Wolves are pack animals, and sometimes we need to be reminded of that connection. The first wolf howled because he was lonely. The others chimed in to reassure him that he isn't by himself, that he has a place, that he's an integral part of the pack."

I slumped back against Zane. "That's beautiful."

"It is," Adam agreed. "You, and Marit, and Liv are part of the pack, too. If you ever need to be reminded that you matter, that you have a place, just throw back your head and howl, and the wolves will answer."

I belonged. To my family. To my pack. To Zane. Happy tears pricked the back of my eyes.

"Darlin'." Zane caught my chin and tilted my face up. "Are you all right?"

I swallowed past the ache in my throat. "You're my world, Zane Hunter. I didn't know my heart could hold this much happiness."

I half expected to hear a derisive snort from my sister. None came.

I could lose myself in the love and fierce devotion that radiated from Zane's bright-blue eyes. His hand slid from my chin to my throat. His thumb brushed across my bite mark. I shivered. Dark possession filled his voice. "You're my world, too, Annika."

"Everybody, look fast," Marit cried. I tore my gaze away from my mate and followed her outstretched hand. A shooting star streaked across the dark heavens. "Make a wish before it disappears."

Grandma Freya used to say that, when we sat on the porch watching the night sky. She was gone, but not lost, still bound to us by the countless memories and traditions inextricably woven into the warp and weft of our lives. I heard her now in Marit's words.

Family endures. Love endures.

I squeezed shut my eyes and cast my wish out into the universe.

EPILOGUE



TWO WEEKS LATER

Nobody who knew my twin sister and me would ever accuse us of being two of a kind—birds of a feather—peas in a pod—or whatever lame-ass cliché you might dredge up to describe similar spirits. Annika was a sentimental sweetheart through and through.

And me? More of a snark monster who ate men's souls for breakfast. *Bwahaha*.

I didn't have a single sentimental bone in my body. Or so I thought.

Only a year after Annika and I inherited Grandma Freya's two-bedroom bungalow in Belle Reve, we had to vacate the place. Annika mated Zane and moved into his fancy sentry quarters on the fourth floor of the lodge. Even *I* thought it was too risky for me to keep living in town.

The pack's war with the coyotes had quieted down to a simmer, but it could boil over at any minute. After all, Vilhauer thought the Black Rock Guardians had killed his sons, and he wasn't likely to let go of that notion anytime soon. It wouldn't be fair to ask Adam to divert soldiers and resources to Belle Reve to keep me safe at the bungalow. I griped, but moved into a guest room on the lodge's third floor.

Selling Grandma's bungalow made all kinds of sense, but neither Annika nor I could bear to part with it. There was that sentiment streak I would've sworn I didn't possess. Luckily, my friend, Monica Navarro, had tired of apartment life and was looking to rent a place with a yard. The top-notch security system Remy had installed in the bungalow was a major plus for an attorney with some sketchy clients. She signed a one-year lease, a win all around.

Freya's Bake Shop was a dream none of us were prepared to relinquish. It took a village—or a pack—to keep the dream alive. Annika, Marit, a team of eager trainees, and I got up early four days a week to bake. With backup from a small squad of soldiers, Xander and Kyra ran the shop. Two days a week, accompanied by extra security, the Hagen women worked behind the counter at the bakery. Nobody loved the arrangement, which I guessed was the essence of a working compromise.

Grandma liked to say, "Life turns on a dime." Everything changed after Annika and Zane mated. Where we lived. Where we worked. How we spent our time.

October rolled over into November with a big Halloween celebration in the pack's party room in the lodge. A freaking huge taxidermied grizzly bear named Igor stood in the center of the room. The kids decked him out in a clown costume complete with a rainbow-colored wig and a red nose. It was an undignified look for such an imposing beast, but I guess that was the idea.

Marit let slip that Annika's and my birthday was coming up on November fifth. Xander and Kyra planned a big pack-wide bash. Wolves loved to party. Who knew? Xander and Marit banished the "birthday girls" from the kitchen and baked five of Grandma Freya's specialty cakes, including Annika's favorite, a pink champagne cake, and my number one choice, salted caramel chocolate.

After dinner on November fifth, we gathered in the party room. Remy installed a karaoke machine in one corner. They kept the volume at a level that wouldn't hurt sensitive shifter ears. That worked fine till Marit took a turn. I loved my cousin, but her singing voice could peel paint off a wall. Karaoke gave way to dance music. Kyra, Remy, and I danced the night away. I tried with no luck to lure Zane onto the floor.

"C'mon." I cajoled, tugging in vain on his hand. "Don't you want to make the birthday girl happy?"

"Already have," he said with a cocky smile.

From her perch on Zane's lap, Annika grinned. "He most certainly did. Twice."

"TMI." I groaned, in no mood to imagine Zane naked and busy with my sister.

"I have a present for you," he told me. "It was too big to wrap. You can pick it up in our quarters later."

"Can I tell her?" Annika's eyes sparkled with excitement.

Zane kissed my sister's cheek. "Go for it."

"You know how much you love the rocking chair Zane built for Grandpa?" she asked me.

"Yeah." It had to be the most comfortable chair I'd ever sat on.

"He built a rocking chair for you, too. Out of red oak. It's beautiful and so comfy. I can't wait for you to try it."

I swung astonished eyes at Zane, too thrilled to be anything but grateful. "Whoa. That's amazingly generous of you. Thank you."

He dipped his chin. "Glad to do it for you." He turned to Annika. "I got one last birthday present for you, darlin'."

"You do? What?"

"You'll see." He brushed the tip of his nose against hers, then called out, "Xander, will you go get Annika's special present?"

I shook my head in disgust. "Dude, rubbing noses? I was counting on you to stay a grumpy hard-ass forever. You've gone soft."

Annika conspicuously shifted positions on his lap. "He most certainly has not gone soft."

Oh my ever-loving God. All these happy sappy people and their innuendos would be the death of me.

Xander jogged from the room and returned a few minutes later carrying a cardboard box with round holes poked in the side. He handed the box to Zane, who placed it on Annika's

lap. I glanced at Marit and cocked one brow. Did she know about the surprise? She bit her lips together, suppressing a guilty smile. The wench knew and had kept the secret from me.

Annika opened the flaps on top of the box, then lifted stunned eyes to meet her mate's. "Oh, Zane..."

"Go on, take her out," he urged.

Annika carefully lifted a kitten out of the box, a long-haired orange kitty with yellow eyes and an enormous white ruff.

"Adam and Marit told me you wanted a kitten," he said. "She's a Norwegian Forest cat, the only one in the litter who wasn't scared of me when I visited. She climbed up my leg, then fell asleep on my chest."

Annika's lips trembled as she stroked the kitten's head with one gentle finger. She sniffed and a single tear rolled down her cheek.

Zane's forehead wrinkled. "Don't you like her?" he asked anxiously.

"She's perfect." Annika offered a watery smile. "The best birthday present ever. I love her. Thank you, baby."

"Good. Good." The stress fell from his face. "You'll need to think of a name for her."

"Oh, I know her name," Annika said.

"You do?" he asked.

"Uh-huh. Her name is Eliza. I knew it as soon as I saw her."

"Hello, Eliza." Zane touched the kitten's fluffy fur. She turned her head and nibbled on the pad of his thumb.

"See, Eliza loves her daddy already," Annika said.

"I'm no cat daddy." Zane grumbled and rolled his eyes, but he didn't pull his hand away from the kitten.

"Yes, you are," Annika insisted. "The sweetest, most wonderful cat daddy in the whole world."

Remy coughed into his hand, then turned to Adam. “For Zane’s next birthday, you wanna go in halves on a mug that says Cat Daddy on the side?”

“You know I do,” Adam replied. “We’ll get a T-shirt made, too. Hell, maybe even a baseball cap.” The men bumped fists.

“Just try it, assholes,” Zane warned.

Emma and Tory spotted the kitten and ran over to be introduced. I touched Marit’s arm. “I’m going to step outside for some fresh air. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“Do you want me to come with you?” she asked.

I shook my head. “Nah. Stay at the party. I won’t be long.”

“It started snowing an hour ago. Wear your coat. And stay close to the lodge.”

I laughed. “Geez, woman. Being the alpha’s mate has gone to your head.”

Marit stuck out her tongue, undermining her status as a wannabe authority figure entirely.

I grabbed my down parka from the pile of coats and slipped it on over my sparkly red party dress. I was wearing ankle boots, so my feet should stay warm enough during my brief excursion. Instead of heading out through the lobby door, I made my way to the big communal dining hall, where French doors led to a wide patio.

Light snow fell from the dark sky. The moon and stars hid behind a blanket of low clouds. So much for my hope of wishing on a star. Two exterior lights mounted on the lodge wall illuminated my path as I crossed the patio and carefully picked my way over rocks and down to the shore of Shooting Star Lake.

Across the water, no lights shone from inside Grandma Freya’s cabin. Maybe sometime soon Marit and Annika would be willing to abandon their mates for a night, and we could arrange a girls’ slumber party in Grandma’s cabin.

I sighed. For the first time in my life, I found myself the odd man out, the only Hagen woman without a man. Not that I

needed one, but Marit and Annika's in-your-face happiness with their mates left me feeling—I don't know—a little lonely, a little *deprived*, if you know what I mean.

I walked along the lake shore. The lodge disappeared from sight as I stepped under the branches of a trio of larch trees. Acting on impulse, I picked up a flat rock and tossed it into the water. The cold stone chilled my skin. I blew warm breath onto my fingers and rubbed my hands together. A breeze blew up under the parka, freezing my bare calves and thighs. It was too cold to be outside without gloves and pants. Pivoting on my heel, I turned back toward the lodge, then halted.

A tall man blocked my path, a massive behemoth, bigger than any wolf, his features obscured by the hood of the black sweatshirt that stretched across his broad chest and shoulders.

“Keep quiet. Don't fight, and you won't get hurt.” The menacing gravel of his voice rasped over my senses and chilled my blood. For a split second, I was too shocked to move.

What did he say?

Keep quiet? Don't fight?

The fucker clearly didn't know who he was dealing with.

Adrenaline surged through me. I had no idea who this bozo was, or how he got past the security cameras and patrols. But if he thought his threat would make me meek, make me compliant, he was dead wrong.

I sucked in air, ready to scream, ready to fight.

Before I finished drawing breath, he was on me. One huge hand slapped over my mouth. I bit down hard enough to taste blood and kicked with all my might, but I couldn't shake him off. His other hand closed around my throat.

Who the hell was this guy?

“Don't *want* to hurt you,” he growled in my ear. “Doesn't mean I won't.” My ears rang and my vision fuzzed. He loosened his grip and I dragged oxygen into my lungs. “You gonna be good?”

I nodded numbly. His hand slid away from my mouth.

Chump.

The scream barely reached my lips before his hand clamped over my mouth again. He lifted one boulder-sized shoulder. “Have it your way.” His voice was flat and absolutely devoid of emotion.

With one hand over my mouth, he pinned my body against his. Metal handcuffs slipped around my wrists and clicked shut. He forced a wad of soft cloth past my teeth, then tied a scarf around my head, securing the gag in place. I nailed him in the knee with a boot. Ignoring the blow like I was little more than a pesky fly, he threw me over his shoulder.

“Boss wants me to leave a calling card.”

He pulled something from his pocket, a round metal canister. He yanked off the lid and tossed it on the ground. Dropping down on one knee, he bent forward. I couldn’t see what he was doing, but I heard a familiar hissing sound. He jumped easily to his feet, as if my weight across his shoulder was nothing, then turned around and strode the opposite direction from the lodge. I twisted my head and squinted into the dim light. There, across the rocks that lined the lake shore, he’d spray-painted a message. Giant block letters spelled out a name.

MEDVED

The Black Rock Guardians series continues in *Marked Under the Midnight Sun*.

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