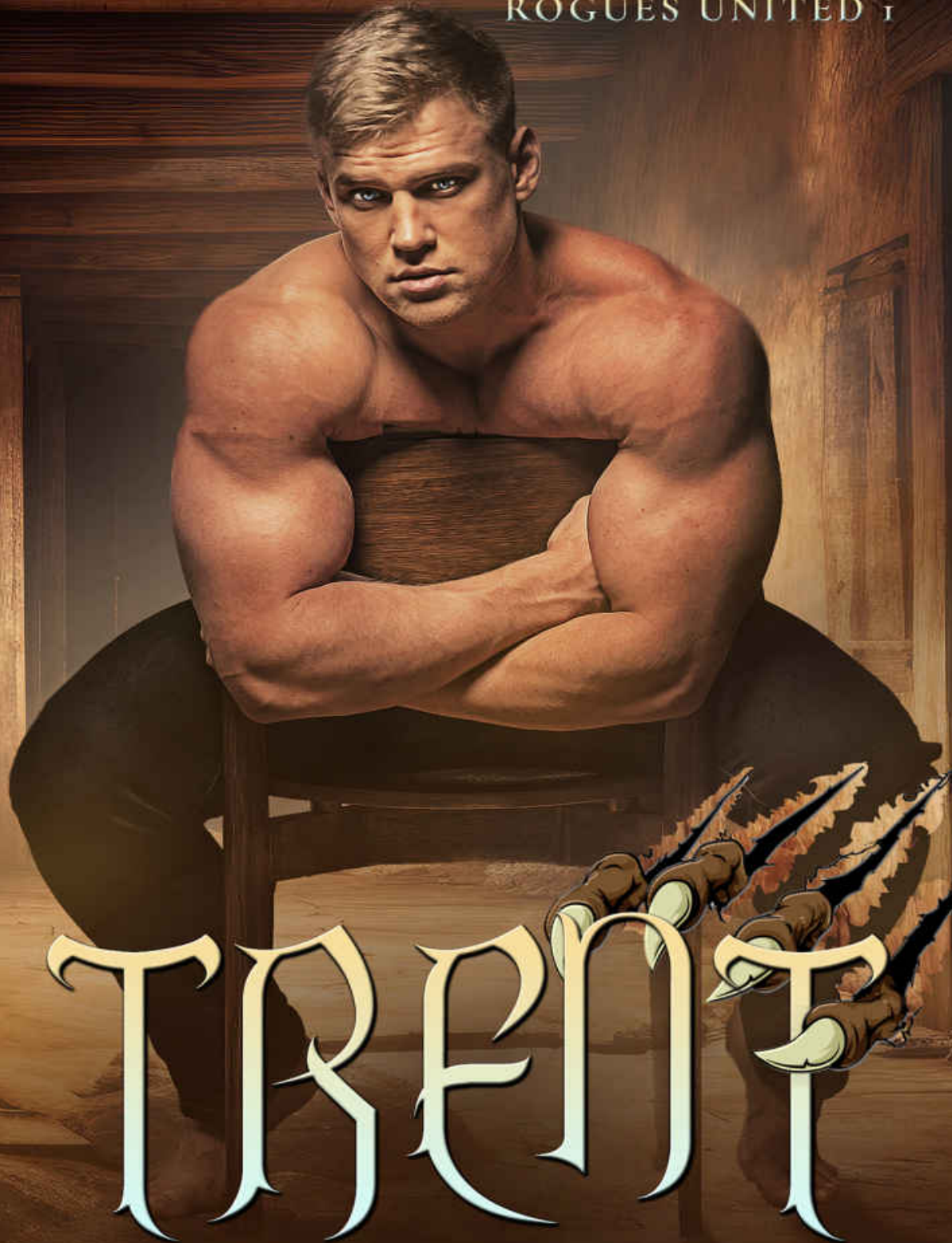


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LAURANN DOHNER

ROGUES UNITED I

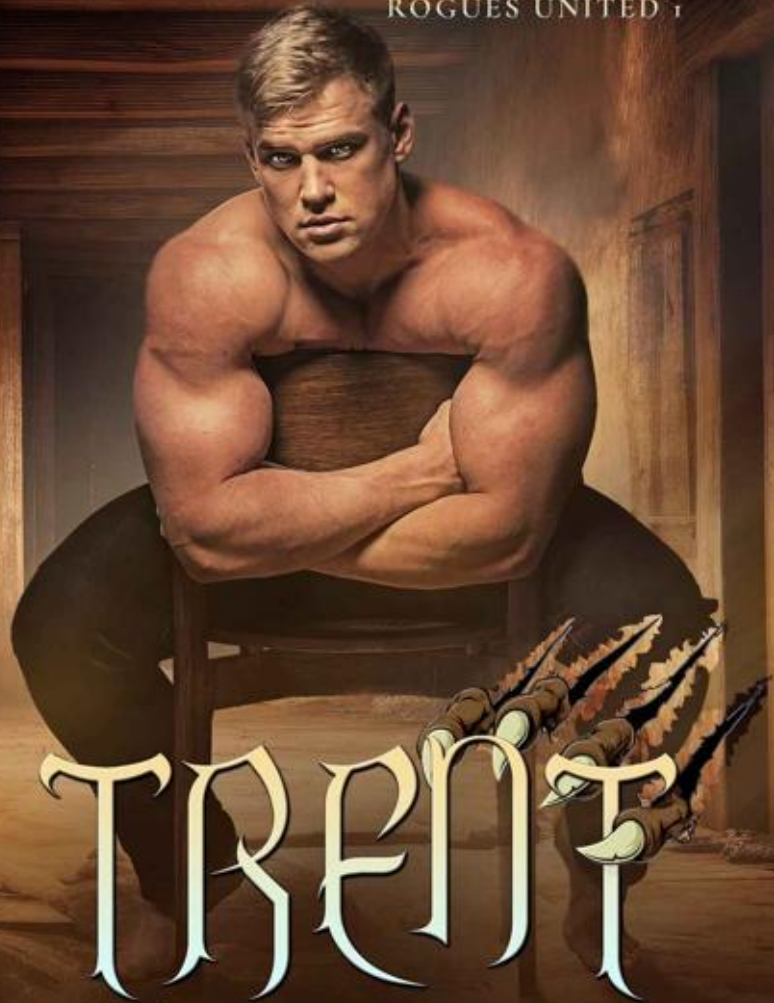


VLB SERIES BOOK 13

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LAURANN DOHNER

ROGUES UNITED 1



VLB SERIES BOOK 13

Trent

VLG – Book Thirteen

Rogues United 1

Vampires, Lycans, Gargoyles

By Laurann Dohner

Trent by Laurann Dohner

Trent had to flee his birth pack as a teenager to avoid being executed for killing someone in self-defense. It wasn't fair and left him all alone, fighting to survive. Over the years, he found other shifters who were unjustly left on their own. Together, they built a pack, making Trent their alpha.

They are Rogues United. Trent's doing his best to make all the right decisions. Then they take out a nest of Vampires who are killing and harming humans—and Trent changes their pack dynamic when he discovers an abused Vamp chained up in the basement. It's a bad idea to take the beautiful Vamp home with them. He knows that, but there's something about her...

Kate was kidnapped and turned into a Vampire against her will. The creatures holding her captive are crazy, trying to force her to pretend to be someone she's not. They keep her locked up, punishing her for refusing to play along with their insanity. Until a sexy Werewolf rescues her...

Did she just exchange one dangerous situation for another? Because not everyone in Trent's pack is happy that he spared her life.

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Graves by Laurann Dohner

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Trent - VLG – Book Thirteen

By Laurann Dohner

Chapter One

Kate screamed, fighting against the chains keeping her arms above her head, as Rupert prepared to hit her again. The whip struck her back and stole her ability to make sound. She couldn't even pull air into her lungs as agony ripped through her.

“You *will* learn,” he raged. “You *will* obey!”

The pain dulled enough for her to gasp, regretting it instantly when her lungs expanded. She didn't need a mirror to know the last lash had torn deeply into her skin. She could feel the blood trickling down her back and wetting her already damp skirt.

“Clean her up. Make certain she doesn't scar,” Rupert hissed. He stormed out of the basement and the metal door slammed loudly behind him.

Kate hung in her chains, resting her cheek against the rough-textured concrete wall. Footsteps sounded as her other tormentor approached. Blair always got a kick out of watching his master cause her pain. His mind was more twisted than a pretzel. She kept her eyes closed, unwilling to see his gleeful expression over her suffering.

“When will you learn, Abigeal?”

“My name is Kate, Blah.”

That killed his amusement when he hissed, “*Blair.*”

“You don’t like being called Blah? Well, I’m Kate Murphy.” She repeated it in her head often enough, trying to keep sane by remembering something about her old life.

A cool hand covered one of the worst cuts on her back and had her whimpering in pain. That drew a chuckle from Blair. “You still defy our master. I don’t know if I should pity you for your utter stupidity or feel a bit of admiration over your sheer stubbornness.” He removed his hand. “Either way, it’s foolish. You *will* break, Abigeal. You’ll become the companion he wants for his son. Rupert won’t allow anything less. He needs you to entice Remi to stay with us the next time he returns.”

She’d heard it countless times before. Rupert had turned his only son, Remi, into a Vampire, after becoming one himself. The son had fallen in love with an Irish Immigrant named Abigeal, but their love story had quickly ended when she’d been killed by a human.

Kate felt no sympathy for the dead Vampire. Some human had been targeted as Abigeal’s meal, and he’d fought back in self-defense. Remi had lost his mind after her death. He kept away from his father, only randomly showing up from time to time, crazier with each visit.

Then Rupert had spotted Kate. It seemed she held a striking resemblance to his son’s beloved dead bride.

She'd been kidnapped coming out of the dry-cleaners, turned into a Vampire, and her bizarre, hellish schooling began. Rupert wanted her to learn to speak with an Irish accent and memorize everything he knew about Abigail's life. The plan was pure insanity. Almost as nuts as his son.

"You *will* break," Blair whispered.

"It won't work. Can't you see that? Remi won't ever believe I'm his reincarnated dead wife, even if I was the greatest actress on Earth."

"You won't need to be. He'll want to believe it's her." He cupped her cheek. "You are just as beautiful."

Kate jerked away and opened her eyes, glaring at him. "Don't touch me."

"Vampirism is a gift you should be thankful for. It's enhanced your looks." His gaze ran down her body. "You were a frumpy, fragile bag of bones before my master bestowed his blood upon you. Do you know how fortunate you are?"

"Fuck off!"

He suddenly grabbed her loose bun of hair and yanked her head back, exposing her throat. She closed her eyes, hoping he'd end her suffering. One of the nest members had pissed off Rupert right after she'd been kidnapped, and he'd forced her to witness how a Vampire dies. Would Blair tear out her throat with his fangs and remove her head from her shoulders? She'd ash in seconds. And her suffering would finally end.

No. Instead, he licked her cheek and chuckled. "It's a tragedy that I'm not allowed to punish you the way I'd like,

pet. I'd have you broken within days. You'd heal, but oh, how you'd suffer first."

It wasn't the first time he'd made that threat, but she didn't want to hear yet again the graphic details he tended to spout in an attempt to scare her. "I'll tell Rupert if you touch me that way. I'm for his *son*, remember? Nutso Remi won't like it, either. Either him or his daddy would kill you. So hands off, sicko perv."

He hissed, backing away. "I hope Remi rejects you when he returns. It could be any day now. That would make you useless. No one will care what I do to you then."

"If he ever returns."

Kate had been hearing about Remi's return for what seemed like forever. Time had no meaning in the dank pit of the basement room where they kept her locked up. It could have been months or years since she'd been kidnapped. But one thing was certain. Remi hadn't shown up once in all that time.

"Remi always returns. Sometimes it just takes him longer to remember our master and come home to us."

Blair moved behind her, and she heard the gross sounds of him biting into his own flesh. Then he rubbed his blood over the whip marks. It would heal the cuts quickly. Her injured skin began to tingle and the pain receded. She instantly breathed easier.

"I think I'll leave you there for the day. My master went to seek female company with what's left of the night. He won't check on you until tomorrow evening." Blair leaned in

close. “Hanging in chains won’t leave marks, but you’ll still suffer.”

“You mean I don’t get to use a garden hose and suffer icy-cold water to wash off, then curl up on the rock-hard pad you call a mattress? Damn. And I was so looking forward to that.”

“Bitch.” Blair slapped her ass—hard.

“Fucking loser! I’m telling your master that you touched me inappropriately.”

He threw back his head and roared.

She knew he’d make her pay for the threat by starving her, but that was the only joy she felt anymore. Defying the assholes who kept her prisoner and saying things that made Blair lose his shit. He wasn’t allowed to harm her. Only Rupert could.

Blair stormed to the door, opened it, and then slammed it closed behind him. Bolts slid into place, and she rested her cheek against the cold wall. Her arms ached from being restrained above her head. That hose sounded good, more as the blood dried, every movement made her feel it crack along her back.

Hours passed. She drifted to sleep, only to jerk awake when her legs began to give way and the restraints dug into her wrists. It was miserable. Blair had been right, but she refused to regret making him leave in a huff.

“Anger is my friend,” she whispered. “I will *not* break. I’m Kate Murphy.”

She knew they'd end up killing her at some point, and she'd lost hope of escaping long ago. The other Vampires were stronger and faster than her, since they fed her so little. She'd tried rushing the ones who opened the door, the few times she wasn't chained to a wall. Not once had she made it out.

Blair didn't return to feed her that night, and eventually dawn approached. That was one of the worst side effects of being a Vampire. As the sun slowly rose, a heaviness settled into her limbs and it became impossible to remain standing. Kate sagged in the chains, her wrists taking the brunt of her weight. Something tickled down her arm and she opened her eyes, glancing up.

A thin trail of blood slowly slid down her skin. The cuff had cut into her flesh. She dipped her head, closed her eyes, and thankfully lost consciousness.

A loud noise jerked her awake. Kate was confused, unable to locate the source. Then the door behind her creaked open. It had to be Rupert. He was the only one powerful enough to be awake. The sun was up, ensuring the others in his nest were asleep. She closed her eyes, sinking back into darkness.

Someone wrapped very warm fingers gently around her throat, part of their hand under her chin to lift her face. Kate managed to open her eyes to slits and stared at a handsome man. He had light blond hair, cut short on his head, and beautiful blue eyes that reminded her of the sky. It had to be a dream, the first one she'd experienced since being turned.

“Fuck. She's one of them.”

His voice was sexy in a rough, husky way. Kate fought harder to keep looking into his eyes. “I never want to wake up.” She slurred the words, her mouth not working properly. Her body feeling too sluggish and heavy.

He removed his hand and she shivered from the loss of heat. Then she felt his lips at her ear. “What?”

“Dreaming,” she got out. “You.” She tried to smile at him, but everything turned black.

Trent watched the woman sag, losing her battle to stay conscious. They’d breached the warehouse right as the sun began to rise in the sky. It was the best time to attack a nest. The master was the only Vampire strong enough to put up a real fight. The timing was important, since the others had crawled out of their hiding spots in a sad attempt to protect him. It ensured that Trent’s pack found them all.

They’d wiped out the nest. That’s when they’d searched the place and discovered part of the warehouse basement had been portioned off with a gate. They’d smashed through, only to discover a sealed-off room. It wasn’t a holding area for human victims, as he’d first suspected.

Kleve softly growled from six feet away. “Should I be shocked that this is how they treat their own women? Fucking Vampires.”

Trent turned her gently, staring at her bare skin. The dried blood told a story, and it wasn’t one he liked. He looked around, studying the room, and saw the discarded whip. He

marched over to where it had been tossed on the floor and snatched it up, sniffing.

“They whipped her.” He threw the whip against a wall.

“I guess that’s why she’s topless and bloody. Vampires are so fucked up. Let’s finish this and get going. We need to be long gone before the surrounding businesses start getting morning traffic and their employees show up for work.”

Trent glanced toward a dark corner and narrowed his eyes. There was a half bath of sorts, with a toilet and sink but without a wall to seal it off from the rest of the small basement. A tiny hose was connected to the faucet and led to a drain in the floor. He turned, spotting the thin mat just feet away. It was like something a kid would use for nap time in school. An adult would have to curl up into a fetal position to fit on it.

He crouched down, sniffing. The female Vampire’s scent clung to the surface.

Kleve flipped on the light in the bathroom area. “Blood cleanup? Nice hose and drain. Fuckers.”

“I think she was kept in here all the time. This is her sleeping mat.”

His enforcer turned and scowled. “She’s part of the nest.”

Trent stood. “Is she? I didn’t smell her upstairs at all. Did you?”

Kleve shook his head. “Only in here.”

“Exactly. That door was locked from the outside with heavy-duty bolts. She’s chained to the wall. I think she’s new.”

Trent pulled out his cell phone but there wasn't a signal. "Go upstairs and do a search for a missing person's report or story on her. Someone would have noticed when she disappeared."

"Why bother? She's been turned. It's too late to save her."

"I gave you an order." Trent stared at him, not blinking.

Kleve lowered his gaze. "Fine. Red hair. What color are her eyes? That will help."

"Green. She's got freckles too." He studied the woman. "Maybe twenty-five years old. Five-foot-six or seven. Go."

He waited until Kleve left before returning to the woman. A thin trail of fresh blood ran down her arm, and he saw where the cuff had nicked her skin. She hung there by her wrists, her head sagging forward to rest against the wall. He growled softly, reached up, and gripped the chains above her wrist. He braced his other hand on the concrete wall and pulled.

His muscles strained but the chains didn't give way.

That's when he remembered seeing something. He searched the hallway and sure enough, found the cuff keys hanging on a nail near the exterior door. Trent returned to her, wrapped one arm around her waist, and lifted her a little as he unlocked her left wrist.

He had to push his shoulder against the wall, adjust her limp body in his arms to free her second wrist. The sun had fully risen outside, and he knew she wouldn't be waking. He gently lay her down onto her back and pulled off his shirt, covering her breasts. They were magnificent, and he felt guilty for noticing.

Kleve returned, frowned when he saw her on the basement floor, and sighed. “Kate Murphy. She disappeared eleven months ago from one state over in Utah. Guess we didn’t hear about it because it wasn’t local. Witnesses said a man grabbed her as she came out of a dry-cleaning shop, she screamed and fought, but a cargo van pulled up and the man holding her jumped inside. They were gone before anyone could do anything.

“At least three men took her. The one who grabbed her, another who opened the van door from the inside, and the driver. No sighting of her since. Her family routinely makes public pleas for her safe return and has offered a reward. She’s got two sisters and both parents are living. It’s weird that the Vamps drove almost two hours away from their nest to take her. Most of them stay inside their own territory.”

Trent stared at the woman’s face. She was a looker, with delicate features, creamy pale skin, red hair, and freckles sprinkled across the bridge of her nose. “Maybe they like to find new members who live far enough away to avoid running into anyone they might know after the fact. Fewer complications that way. It sounds like she didn’t volunteer to be turned.”

Footsteps sounded, and Trent looked up as Cable entered. He held an ax that was covered in blood and ash.

“We definitely found them all. Seven in total.” Cable stopped when he spotted Kate. “Make that eight. Get back. These fuckers make a dusty mess when they lose their heads.”

Trent stood fast, stepping between his lead enforcer and the Vampire on the floor. A snarl tore through the room. He

was shocked to realize it had come from his own throat.

Both males stepped back, their expressions showing just as much surprise.

“What the fuck?” Cable cocked his head.

Trent growled. “I don’t like the idea of killing her.” He glanced down at Kate Murphy. She had a name, a family who obviously cared about her, and she had been kept prisoner inside a Vampire nest.

“We *have* to kill her. These bastards have been preying on women. Two deaths in the last month alone,” Cable reminded him. “Not to mention the poor victims who manage to wake up the next morning after being attacked. They suffered from anemia and no memory of who they’d had sex with them. Rapists deserve to die. That’s exactly what they are when they use their abilities that way, Trent.”

Trent turned, staring down at the female. “She wasn’t out hurting *anyone*. They kept her contained here. Inhale. Did you scent her up there anywhere?”

Cable didn’t say anything.

Trent twisted his head, holding his gaze. “Did you? Answer me.”

“No.”

Trent nodded, making a decision. “Find something thick for me to wrap around her and bring my car as close as possible to the back door. Pop the trunk. It should be safe to transport her inside.”

“What the fuck, Trent?”

He ignored Kleve. “You heard me.”

Cable moved closer. “She’s a *Vampire*, Trent. What are you thinking? Just tell us that much.”

Trent hesitated. “I don’t want to kill her. Call it instinct or plain pity. I want to at least hear why she’s here. That means keeping her alive long enough for her to wake and be able to talk.”

“We don’t have a holding cell or anything to keep her contained back at the pack house.” Kleve scowled at him.

“We won’t need it. At most, she’s only been a Vampire for eleven months. There’s no way she’s going to be alert during the day. Look at her. She’s down for the count. And if we can’t handle a lone Vampire...” Trent arched his eyebrows at them.

“Got it,” Cable said. “We’re her containment until you’re done asking her questions. Who needs a cage when she’s surrounded by our pack, I guess.”

“Exactly.” Trent couldn’t have said it better.

“Bad idea, Trent. I just want to put that on the record.”

He nodded at Kleve. “Noted.” He jerked his head. “Find something that will cover her and move my car.”

Both men left him and he crouched, unable to stop staring at the Vampire. She was beautiful, but that didn’t account for why he felt compelled to keep her alive. The last thing he needed was a complication.

It was difficult already being in charge. He’d never been trained to lead a pack but someone had to step up to hold their

ragtag group together. He was the most emotionally stable. It was all on his shoulders to make sure they succeeded and survived. A Vampire would bring nothing but trouble for his pack.

Cable returned holding a comforter. “It’s the best I could do. It was this or a moldy shower curtain that had some clear spots. I figured you didn’t want any part of her to burn.”

Trent crouched down and gently picked her up.

Cable began to wrap the soft material around the woman, concealing her head to toe and tucked the sides under her body. “What are you really doing, Trent? I appreciate that you’re compassionate, but this?” He nodded at the Vampire. “Mistake. Some of the other guys might have a problem with it. Sworn enemies and all that. Firm believers in never met a Vamp they didn’t want to dust.”

“I want answers.”

Cable blinked a few times before sighing. “She’s hot. I see the draw. But here’s the thing.” He lowered his voice. “I was with one of her kind for a few months after I had to flee my birth pack. I was scared as shit, all alone, and that’s when Vivian found me. She offered me food, a nice place to sleep in a real bed, and she said we could help each other. I guarded her during the day, and she got money from humans to help us live in comfort. She was beautiful and seductive as hell. Do you even remember fifteen-year-old hormones?” Cable wiggled his eyebrows. “I didn’t stand a chance against her charms. I basically became her fuck and suck. It’s embarrassing now to admit this but—”

Trent cut him off. “You don’t have to share the details.”

“I want to. I was in bad shape at the time and hitting major growth spurts. Let’s just say she was more than I could handle at the time. She cheated on me. Vamps like to use sex to gain blood, man. I think she’d have done it even if I’d been stronger. Loyalty doesn’t seem to matter to them, while it’s *everything* to us. We’re also possessive bastards. See where this turns to shit when you put the two together?”

Trent scowled. “What’s your point?”

“Vivian couldn’t understand why I was pissed and hurt when I caught her screwing one of her blood donors.” Cable tapped his chest. “Vamps don’t have hearts. She was ice cold when it came to emotions. I left her, refusing to be with someone who’d cheated on me. That bitch tracked me down and tried to kill me for leaving. Vamps are vindictive fuckers too. This can’t happen, Trent. Nothing good can come of it if you get involved with one.”

“I don’t plan to fuck her.”

His best friend sighed again. “Okay.”

“It’s not like that.”

Cable just stared at him, his expression grim. “If you say so.”

Trent strode toward the door, carrying the woman. “Something is off, and I want answers. That’s all there is to it.”

“Sure,” Cable muttered, following him.

Trent ground his teeth together and took the stairs up to the main level of the building. Kleve was pouring gasoline around the upper floor. It was standard practice for them to

burn down a nest once they wiped it out. It left less evidence for humans to find.

He hesitated at the back door and Cable moved around him, opening it. The restored Nova had been parked there, the trunk open. Trent moved fast, gently tucking her inside, and made certain she stayed covered with the comforter. He slammed the trunk closed and held up his hand.

Cable tossed him the keys he must have gotten from Klevé. “We’ll set this place ablaze and meet back at the pack house.”

Trent nodded. “See you soon.”

He climbed into the driver’s seat and drove away. After a few miles, dark smoke rose in the rearview mirror. He dug out his cell phone from his jeans pocket to call Parker.

He answered after the first ring. “Any problems, Trent?”

“No. It’s done but I’m bringing home a guest. Tell Jay to board up the basement windows. Make sure no sunlight can get in. Also, listen for my Nova. I need you to help me get her inside.”

“Fuck. You’re bringing a Vampire here? Why in the hell would you do that?”

“You idiots made me your alpha, so do what I said.” Trent disconnected the call and dropped his cell on the seat next to him, gripping the wheel with both hands.

One glance at the speedometer had him slowing a little. The last thing he needed was to be pulled over by the cops. He had a woman in his trunk. One that would burn to death if exposed to the sun.

Chapter Two

Kate woke on her side, instantly knowing her circumstances had drastically changed. Her first clue was what she lay on an actual mattress, and it smelled like fresh laundry. Her second hint was when she cracked her eyelids open, and overly bright lights didn't blind her. The lighting was much dimmer.

An exposed wood-beamed ceiling met her gaze instead. She also wore something soft against her skin. She sat up, feeling fear, and she stared at the first thing that caught her attention. There were shelves of bottled water and canned foods nearby. A boarded-up window was located above them.

“Remain calm and make no sudden moves,” a husky male voice ordered.

She twisted her head and stared. It was the face from her dream. Only he looked real enough sitting on a wooden chair a few feet away from the twin mattress she lay on.

Kate glanced down, realizing she was wearing a man's button-down shirt. It was large and someone had rolled up the sleeves to her wrists. A blanket covered her from her lap down. She lifted it and peeked, spotting her bare thighs.

“I cleaned you with a wash rag and gave you one of my shirts. Apologies for that, but there aren't any women here to do that stuff. I tried to be as respectful as possible by not looking when I stripped you down. You had dried blood on you.”

She turned her head to stare at him, heart pounding. She inhaled, picking up a lot of unfamiliar scents. “Who are you?”

“Trent.”

“I saw you.”

He nodded. “I unchained you from the wall and took you out of that basement. No one will hurt you unless you make a run for it. Don’t do that.”

Kate broke eye contact with him to study her surroundings. The floor was concrete. There were thick wood beam supports. She guessed from floor to ceiling was about ten feet. Free-standing shelves were sporadically positioned, blocking off sections of the room. Two single-bulb ceiling light fixtures hung from the rafters. It appeared that she once again was in a basement, but there was no sterile, industrial feel to it.

She also realized she sat on a metal-framed twin bed. The mattress was comfortable. The short headboard and foot rail seemed antique but she would guess the mattress wasn’t old. The bedding had obviously been recently washed. “Where am I?”

He hesitated. “My house in Colorado. The basement, to be specific. There are too many windows upstairs. I figured this was the safest place for you to stay while the sun remained up.”

It wasn’t anymore. At least, not for long. She wouldn’t be awake if it were broad daylight. She adjusted her body, careful to keep the covers over her bare legs but wanted to face him more.

He was a big man. Even sitting, he looked tall, with wide shoulders, thickly muscled arms, and a barrel of a chest. He had on a black T-shirt that stretched tight across his torso and wore faded jeans. A glance down surprised her. His large feet were bare.

“You’re Kate. Right? We found a missing person’s report on you. Kate Murphy?”

Tears filled her eyes. “Yes.”

He leaned forward, concern showing in his eyes. “Don’t cry.”

She reached up and wiped at them. “I’m sorry. It’s just that I haven’t heard anyone call me that in a long time.”

His lips twisted into a frown. “What did they call you?”

“Abigeal. Apparently I looked like some dead woman they were trying to force me to become.”

His eyes widened and his lips parted but he didn’t say anything.

“It was nuts. That’s what I kept saying, but they weren’t listening to me.”

He seemed to recover from his surprise. “Fucking Vampires are all crazy.”

She felt fear again, staring at him. He had a nice tan and smelled outdoorsy. Not like a Vampire. He clearly wasn’t one. Her gut instincts would have told her that, if his scent and appearance hadn’t. She also remembered the feel of his hand on her throat. It had been very warm. Too warm for a Vampire.

“Why do you look so scared? I told you, no one is going to hurt you unless you make a run for it. Because we sure as hell won’t let you hurt anyone else, either. That means staying put.”

She let his words run through her mind. “Do you know what they did to me?”

“That you’re a Vampire? Yes.”

More tears filled her eyes but she blinked them back. “I didn’t want this.”

“I kind of figured that out, considering where I found you and, you know, the chained-to-the-wall part. Why were you kept like that?”

“I told you. They wanted me to become Abigeal.”

“Abigeal is the dead woman?”

She nodded. “A dead Vampire, to be exact. The master’s son had fallen in love with her and turned her into one of them. Then she got herself killed by feeding from the wrong person. Her food fought back and won. Good for them. The son’s name is Remi. I guess he totally lost his mind and left their nest after her death. Then Rupert, otherwise known as his father and master of the nest, saw *me*.

“I was told that I look just like Abigeal, only a few inches shorter. He ranted about that often. Anyway, the crazy asshole thought I could pretend to be her, reincarnated in the flesh, and somehow make his son sane again. They were trying to force me to memorize everything that they knew about her life... even speak with an Irish accent.”

His eyebrows rose and he appeared stunned.

“Right?” She nodded. “That’s probably exactly how *I* looked when they told me this crazy plan. She came to the States back in eighteen hundred and ninety-eight. That’s when she met Remi.”

He straightened in his chair. “So that’s why they turned you?”

She nodded.

“And why did they whip you?”

“I refused to play the part. Rupert punished me often, then he’d have Blah use his blood to keep my back from scarring, since Remi probably wouldn’t have been pleased about that. The only good thing about any of it was that Blah and the other pervs had to keep their hands off me. Rupert said he’d kill anyone who touched his son’s future bride. So rape was off the table. I kept reminding myself that was a plus.”

“Blah?”

“Blair. My main verbal tormentor and caretaker. He’s a total dick.”

“They kept you in that room where I found you?”

“Always. I woke there the night after I was taken and never left...until now. How long did they have me?”

He hesitated.

“It felt like years.”

“Eleven months.”

She fought more tears. “My poor family! They must think I’m dead. Can I call them?”

“I’m not saying never, but not right now.”

Distress hit hard. For a moment, she’d thought she’d been rescued and was safe. His words contradicted proved otherwise. “Why?”

He leaned forward, regarding her with those sky-blue eyes of his. “Your family members are human. The police were involved when you disappeared. Your photo was shown on television and in newspapers. Do you know what will happen if you contact them? An investigation will start. The police and reporters will want to talk to you, find out where you’ve been and who’s responsible. They’ll also take you to a hospital to have you examined. That will include running a lot of tests...like bloodwork. Do you see the problem?”

She stared at him, confused.

“You’re a Vampire, Kate. Did the nest teach you *anything*?”

“Nothing that didn’t involve Abigeal and Remi’s history.”

“Rule number one is to *never* allow humans to know we exist. That will get you ashed faster than you can say ‘fucked’. Everything non-human will hunt you down to silence you forever. It’s how we’ve continued to survive. And the humans will either kill you outright or lock you up like a lab rat to run tests. I can guarantee that what they’ll do to you in a laboratory setting will make what you’ve already suffered seem like the best vacation ever in comparison.”

He sounded sincere...and everything he said terrified her. She bit her lip, studying his face. “You’re not a Vampire, are you? You don’t look or smell like one.”

“Werewolf.”

Her mouth dropped open and she huddled on the bed, pulling the covers closer. Horror movies streamed through her head and fear came with each memory.

“None of that.” He smirked, looking even more handsome while doing it. “Whatever you’re thinking, stop. I rescued you, remember? A monster wouldn’t have taken you out of that hell or killed the ones who turned you.”

That eased some of her fear, replacing it with a flicker of hope. “Rupert and the others are dead?”

He nodded. “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. There’s no coming back from that. We also burned down the building where they lived.”

“Why did you save *me*?”

“I assumed you were a victim. It turns out I was right. The point is, contacting your family will be tricky without launching a full investigation by humans and facing a fuck ton of questions you can’t answer. The press would swarm all over you and try to climb up your ass. That can’t happen. Medical exams are completely off the table. *Ever*. Plus, you’re dangerous to your family. Humans are food to your kind. And it’ll put a target on them by any enemies you make, if you screw up and prove to the human world that Vampires exist.”

He paused, his eyes narrowing. “Don’t even think about turning your family into what you’ve become, either. You’ve been sheltered in that basement. As cruel as nest appeared to be, they were your protection. Other masters won’t tolerate a rogue Vamp roaming around. Anyone you turn into a Vamp

will be executed swiftly. They have rules about that. I'm not sure what they are, but I've heard that Vampires live by extremely strict codes. I *do* know the Vampire council would definitely hunt and kill you if you attempt to make more of your kind, since you're not a master. Masters are much older, stronger Vampires."

"I wouldn't know how to turn someone into...*this*... unless it's like in the movies. Also, I'd never do something so horrible to someone else."

He stood slowly, and she curled into herself. He had to be at least six-four, and he was a massive man in every way. Trent didn't come closer enough to touch her.

"What did they teach you about being a Vampire?"

"Not much. Just that my new body can take a lot of pain but not easily die. I wouldn't call that a good lesson."

"Did they bring humans to the basement for you to feed from?"

She shook her head.

"How were you fed?"

"Blah brought me cold blood."

He looked surprised again.

"In a soup mug. I drank it."

"Cold?"

She nodded. "Like it had been in a refrigerator."

"You also seem uncertain about how Vamps are made. Do you not remember being turned?"

She shook her head. “I woke knowing things were different. My hearing and eyesight were much better. I had a lot more energy. Unless they starved me.”

He sat back down. “They starved you?”

She nodded. “I was told I needed to feed every night, since I’m young. But they’d refuse to give me blood for three or four nights at a time to punish me when I wouldn’t pretend to be Abigeal, or anytime I told them how insane they were.” She looked away. “That happened a lot. It felt like my stomach was trying to claw its way out of my body after two missed feedings, and I couldn’t even find the strength to stand.” She paused. “I’d also black out a lot. Like when you have a high fever and become delirious? That was actually a mercy.”

“When was the last time you were fed?”

“Night before last.” She reached down and touched her stomach, trying to ignore the growing pain there.

“You’re hungry now?”

She nodded.

“I’ll feed you.”

“No fucking way,” a deep, gruff voice snarled from the darkness.

Kate jumped, twisted her head, and watched as another muscled guy stepped out from behind a set of shelves. She hadn’t known he was there, too focused on Trent.

Trent stood. “I told you to stay out of this, Cable.”

“You wanted answers. Now you have them. They turned her for a really fucked-up reason. Mystery solved. Vampires

are insane, Trent. Now it's time to end this. She's better off dead."

Terror hit as she realized they planned to kill her. Kate clutched at the blankets, fisting them. Her gaze darted to Trent. He'd been so nice to her—but it was clearly a lie. For some crazy reason, that made her feel betrayed. She'd already begun to trust him.

"Go back upstairs, Cable. *Now.*"

"She's fooling you! Vampires are good at that. I get it, man. She looks all innocent and sweet, but the bitch would tear out your throat if you offered it. Not happening. It's my job to look out for you. Even when you're doing stupid shit."

Trent growled, and Kate watched in horrified fascination as his light blue eyes darkened. Claws grew from his fingertips. She was too close to him, and she scooted to the other side of the bed to put more space between them.

She was so focused on Trent that she wasn't paying attention to where the edge of the mattress was—until she gasped, falling off the bed and hitting the floor on her ass.

"Yeah. She looks dangerous as fuck." Trent stalked around the bed but stopped, staring down at her. "Are you alright?"

Kate mutely nodded but she couldn't look away from his clawed fingertips. They appeared sharp, as if they could slice right through skin, taking out big chunks at the same time.

Trent snarled. "Go upstairs, Cable. That's an order."

That had Kate tearing her gaze from his claws, toward the man he called Cable. Both men looked furious as they watched

each other. She wondered if they'd come to blows.

“What happens when you get yourself killed? I'll tell you. We're back on the streets trying to survive again. You're the glue that holds us together. We'd be falling apart as a pack within days without you keeping the peace. You promised, Trent. Pack first. Get your head on straight.”

Trent snarled, flashing some fangs. She'd seen plenty of those on Rupert and some of the other Vampires, but his were thicker, slightly curved. There were also more of them, since not just his canine teeth were long and sharp now. She held still, not willing to draw their attention again.

“Return upstairs, Cable. We're not killing her. That's final.”

“You're not giving her your throat!”

“I was actually going to offer her my wrist.”

Cable crossed his arms over his chest. “Have you ever fed a Vamp before?”

Trent shook his head.

“I have. I'll give her *my* wrist if you're determined to feed her.”

“No. She's my responsibility. I brought her here.”

Cable glared at her over the bed. “If you try to hurt him, I'll rip your fucking head off. You got me? He's way nicer than I am.”

A chill ran down Kate's spine, since she believed him. Between the long black hair pulled into a ponytail to show off the shaved sides of his head, and all his stacked muscles,

Cable had a harsh look about him. Despite that, she also noted his appealing features and soulful dark brown eyes. Maybe it was a Werewolf trait that they all had rugged good looks and muscular bodies. She wasn't about to ask.

She jumped when warm hands touched her. Trent gently gripped her upper arms and helped her off the floor. Her legs trembled when she stood, and she felt tiny compared to him. He helped her sit on the bed, crouched next to it, and pulled the blanket back over her exposed legs.

Their gazes locked. His eyes were light blue again, all signs of darkness in them gone. His claws had also retracted from his fingertips.

"I'm going to let you feed from my wrist." He offered his arm, palm up.

She stared at it, not sure what to do.

"Fuck." Cable sighed and walked around the bed.

She flinched, trying to make her body smaller, terrified of him.

"I heard her mention she drank from a goddamn soup mug. Look at me, Vamp."

She did, staring into Cable's dark eyes. They didn't display any sympathy. He still appeared angry about the fact Trent was feeding her.

"Her name is Kate. Use it," Trent growled. "You're pissed at the situation, I get it, but don't take it out on *her*."

Cable sighed again and crouched next to Trent. "Have you ever fed from someone before, *Kate*?"

She shook her head.

Cable glanced at Trent. “Drop your canines again and scratch your arm enough to draw blood. She’ll lunge for it. Trust me, instinct makes them lose control if they smell blood when they’re *really* hungry.”

Kate was afraid, and she hoped Cable was wrong. Trent opened his mouth and she stared at his sharp teeth. He twisted his arm, raised it to his mouth with his gaze locked on hers.

Then the scent of blood filled her nose and she lost the ability to think. He pulled his arm away from his lips—and she saw red.

The next thing she knew, warm, delicious blood coated her tongue and her fangs felt heated and tingly. A moan broke from her throat and her nipples beaded. The warmth spread through her body, and with it came a deep need. It was confusing and overpowering.

Firm, strong hands gripped her upper arms and held her tight.

Cable cursed near her ear. “She reacts like a newbie. They can’t have fresh blood without wanting sex.”

“Shut up,” Trent snapped. “Just hold her steady. Breathe through your mouth.”

Kate heard the words but didn’t understand what they meant. Her eyes were closed and the blood tasted like the best thing she’d ever had in her entire life. She wanted to get closer to Trent, yearned to feel his body against hers.

The hands on her arms weren’t enough physical contact. The urge to rub up against Trent grew stronger. The hunger

pains in her stomach receded, though, and she felt her fangs slide up, leaving his skin.

“Lick, Kate.”

She opened her eyes. Trent held up his still-bleeding arm and she saw the puncture wounds right over the scratch he'd made on his tanned skin.

“Lick where it's bleeding. It'll stop. You have healing ability in your saliva.”

His calm voice had her nodding, and she leaned in, opened her mouth, and ran her tongue over his warm skin. He tasted good, and he was so warm. He tugged his arm away and glanced at it, before holding her gaze again.

“Good job.”

That's when it sank in that he wasn't the one holding her arms. She twisted her head, realizing Cable sat on the bed behind her, and he was the one touching her. She sucked in a sharp breath and tried to jerk away.

He released her and straightened, backing off. He raised his hands. “It was to keep you off Trent. That's all. You damn near tried to climb him.”

She shook her head, denying it.

Cable sighed yet again. She seemed to exasperate him. “I'll be on the stairs. It seems no one told her a damn thing. She's your Vamp. *You* explain the facts of her new life.”

“Kate?”

She tore her gaze off the retreating Cable to peer at Trent. He remained crouched next to the bed.

“I’ll assume drinking cold blood didn’t do anything to you...physically?”

“It made me feel colder than I already was, and it didn’t taste good but it took away the hunger pains.”

He licked his lips. “Well, when you drink from a person, obviously the effects are drastically different. Your body is turned-on big time right now. Vampires seem to like to have sex when they feed. The urge becomes more controllable with time, but you’re new at this.”

That was information she didn’t like. Denial came instantly. “No.”

He arched his eyebrows, watching her with those blue eyes. “Kate, I’m going to be blunt. If you were to reach down between your legs right now, you’d be soaking wet. I can smell your arousal. So could Cable. It’s normal for Vampires to become horny while feeding. If you were a guy, you’d sporting a raging boner at the moment.”

She felt embarrassed and lowered her gaze. He was right. She could feel it without touching herself. She was wet and her clit throbbed. Her nipples felt over sensitized.

“It’s just how it is. No need to blush. Natural reaction. Hell, *I’m* hard. It seems feeding does that to both parties. That doesn’t mean I’m going to act on it. I won’t. And that’s why Cable held you in place. To restrain you while you fed.”

She turned her head to avoid glancing at the front of Trent’s jeans. It was tempting to verify his claim, but the situation was awkward enough.

He stood, walked to the chair, and retook his seat. A good minute of silence passed.

Trent finally cleared his throat. “Did they teach you how to control human minds?”

She lifted her chin to peer at him again, shaking her head. “That’s true? Vampires can do that? I’ve seen it in movies.”

“It’s true. Probably not like in films, but Vampires can trance a human and mess with their memories. You know, stuff like ‘you didn’t see what you thought you did. Instead you saw whatever the hell I tell you. Forget this. It never happened’.” He paused. “I have no clue how to teach you that stuff. Werewolves don’t come with that ability.”

She was curious. “Do you actually shift into an animal?”

He nodded. “Yes. I could strip and shift to show you, but I don’t think you’re ready for that yet. I *will* warn you that you’re in a house with six shifters. Don’t be frightened if at some point you run into a large, furry, four-legged animal. It’s just one of my pack. We’re sentient either way, able to think the same whether we’re in skin or fur. Okay?”

She mutely nodded, stunned. “Your friend seems to want me dead.”

“Cable doesn’t mean it personally. Werewolves and Vampires tend to be enemies. The one time he tried to get close to one, it didn’t turn out well.” He spread his thighs and leaned back in the chair. “I saved you, and I don’t take that responsibility lightly. We’ll make this work, Kate. There will be rules for you to live by. Are you ready to hear them?”

She nodded. Whatever he demanded *had* to be better than how she'd lived since she'd been snatched by Rupert and his goons. Trent called her by her actual name and didn't seem insane, which was a good start. He was also protecting her from Cable.

“This is my house, the five other men who live here are a part of my pack, and the land around the house is our territory. You'll live here, be given our protection, but you won't be allowed to leave.”

Her heart pounded. “In exchange for what?” She was the only woman. Six men, including Trent, and one woman...she didn't like that math.

His eyes narrowed. “You have an expressive face, Kate. Nothing nefarious, I assure you. None of my men will touch you.”

“What about you?”

He scowled. “I won't either. I'm offering you protection, a safe place to live, but that means you stay inside or within sight of the house. No wandering off. No trying to escape. I'm going to be straight with you, other Werewolves and Vampires will kill you on sight...or worse.”

“What's worse than death?” She was genuinely curious. And slightly horrified.

He scowled. “Flat-out death would be the kindest thing they could do. Some would torture you first. A Vampire without a nest is considered rogue. It usually means they were banished by their master for committing heinous crimes, or they ran away because they're bat-shit crazy, and a potential

exposure risk to all of us. My pack is what's going to prevent them from hurting and killing you, and there are basic rules in this house. No going into other people's bedrooms or snooping through their shit. Be courteous. Just general roommate etiquette, because we all live together and have great hearing. You have a problem or a question, come to me or Cable."

A shudder ran down her spine. "He doesn't like me."

"Don't take it personal. He doesn't know you, but he's leery as fuck of *everyone*."

She didn't believe that for a second.

Trent grinned. "I'm not lying. Cable has had a rough time of it. All of us have." His expression grew somber. "Let me tell you something about us. Every man here was handed shit lives by fate and been betrayed by the people we trusted. We found each other and banded together for safety."

She glanced down his body, not sure she believed that, either. He was huge and looked as if he could take care of himself.

"Each member of my pack was once considered rogue, and therefore, targeted by other Werewolves and Vampire nests. None of us did anything to deserve being killed, or hell, even ending up in that situation. Being alone is a death sentence. It's just a matter of time when you don't have others looking out for you."

"Because you're not human?"

"Yes. Remember that, Kate. We're all you've got. That's probably why I couldn't kill you when I found you in that basement. Your scent wasn't upstairs with the rest of your

nest. You were locked up and abused. I have a soft spot for that shit. All of us came from bad places with asshole people, but we're good men. I'm willing to give you the chance to prove you're a good woman, despite coming from a nest of vipers. Don't take advantage of it. I'm generous, but I'm not a fool or a moron. Understand?"

She nodded.

"We'll feed you. Keep you safe." His gaze darted down her body. "Get you clothes that fit. Jay is fixing up a spare bedroom for you once it's sunlight proof. His full name is Jayvis, but he rarely uses it. Bad memories. You'll be next door to my bedroom. None of the men here will hurt you, but you need to stay in the house or in the yard. No farther than that. You're a Vampire who just fed off someone for the first time. That could have ended in tragedy if I was human. Do you get that?"

She shook her head. "I would never hurt anyone."

"You might not mean to, but you would. You've got zero control. We're going to figure out how to teach you everything you need to know, but it's going to take time. You're a baby in Vampire terms. Would you allow a toddler loose on the world by itself?"

She considered his words before answering. "No."

"Whatever your adult mind tells you, when you think you can leave and be fine on your own, mentally picture a toddler, Kate. Thinking like a human would be a mistake. In your head, you might still be the same person you used to be, but your body has become pure Vampire. They need blood to survive and humans are super easy to kill. You don't have

control over your urges yet. Don't put me in the shit situation where I have to ash you. I didn't save you, only for you to become a killer, even if it's by accident. Understand?"

Kate nodded, even though she struggled to accept his words.

"When I scratched my arm, you lunged at me to feed. If I'd been human, you would have knocked me to the ground and broken my arm in both places where your hands latched on. You had no control over your body when you came at me. Again, that's why Cable held you. Do you understand?"

His lecture made her feel sick to her stomach and afraid. He sounded so certain of her ability to lose control and harm others that she believed him. "Yes."

"Okay. Now...you've been fed. How about a tour of the house, introductions to the pack, and then you can take a shower?"

She felt uncertain about everything, but she stood. The borrowed shirt from Trent fell to her mid-thigh. "I'm almost naked."

"You're safe. None of the guys will lay a finger on you. You're under my protection."

She peered up at him. "I still don't understand why you'd do this for me."

He held her gaze, appearing sincere. "I was alone once. I wish someone had guided me through the roughest times. I'm offering you that, Kate." He hesitated. "It's up to *you* if you take our help or force me to kill you. I won't lie—you're too dangerous on your own. If you want to thank me for saving

your life and getting you out of that shithole where I found you, you'll stay here and follow the rules.”

She didn't have to think hard about it. “I'll stay and follow your rules.”

Chapter Three

Trent led Kate to the stairs. She looked afraid, and it was tempting to offer his hand to hold. He resisted. Cable would give him shit about it, accusing him of wanting to fuck her again.

Cable met his gaze from where he sat at the top of the stairs, shaking his head, silently communicating that he still thought it was a mistake to keep Kate alive.

Trent didn't give a shit. The pack had put him in charge. The decision was made and final. His pack would have to deal with having Kate in their home. "Open the door and take the stick out of your ass, Cable."

His lead enforcer stood and threw open the door, backing into the kitchen. "Bad idea," he muttered.

"Noted."

"Fuck your notes," Cable grumbled as he moved out of the way.

Parker stood at the kitchen island making sandwiches. He froze and his eyes widened when he spotted Kate. "You let her out?"

"Keep your cool," Trent ordered. "She's afraid. Don't scare her even more. Her body might be Vampire but her mind is all human. We're her first shifters. Kate, meet Parker. He's our resident computer nerd." He stopped and glanced back at her.

Kate kept close, partially hiding behind him. Her fear showed on her face, as well as in her scent, but she hadn't fled back down the stairs. It was cute when she lifted her hand and gave a slight wave. "Hi."

"Parker's a genius with computers and hacking." Trent watched Parker closely, making sure he showed no signs of attacking. The Were tended to lose his skin and go on a rampage when he found himself in a situation that he wasn't sure how to handle. They were still working on it, and he wasn't as bad as he used to be.

Parker gave her a slight nod. "Hey. I also make food for everyone. They'd starve without me."

Trent grinned. "True. Of course, all Parker can do are sandwiches. We eat out a lot or pick up takeout."

"I grill steaks sometimes," Parker added. "Or heat frozen pizzas. Those are the three things we eat the most at home. Trent's too cheap to take us out to nice places."

"Not with how much you bastards can eat." Trent stepped toward the dining room and noticed how Kate shadowed him, still keeping inches away. He gave her a tour downstairs. It wasn't much. The formal dining room never got used. Dust sat on the long table and a few chairs were missing. One remained in the basement, the one he'd just sat on while talking to Kate.

The living room was large but also highly unused. The smaller rooms—like the bathroom, laundry room, and mudroom—he didn't bother showing her. The family room held a pool table. It was his gift to the pack for Christmas the year before.

The two brothers were playing a game when they entered, both instantly stopping to stare at Kate. She inched behind Trent again, peeking around his arm. He held still, giving them both warning looks.

“Kate, meet Reef and Kleve. They’re our resident brothers, and they do a lot of the legwork for our pack.”

Reef grinned as he set down his pool stick. “Hello, pretty fang-banger.”

Trent snarled at him.

Reef froze in mid-stride.

Trent shook his head. “*No*. Her name is Kate, and there will be no hitting on her. Think of her like a sister. Got me?”

Reef scowled. “Shit. But she’s a redhead. You know I’m a sucker for redheads.”

“Get over it,” Trent ordered. “Reef thinks he’s God’s gift to women, Kate.”

“I warned him not to even look at her,” Kleve said, staying back. “So...we’re letting her just roam around the house?”

“Yes. *Kate* is going to be staying with us.” Trent made a point of saying her name to make it clear that they should too. “Jay is making up the spare bedroom for her.”

Kleve grumbled. “Upstairs? With us? Like that bathroom isn’t overused already. Women take forever in the bathroom.”

Trent hadn’t thought about that. He turned to Kate. “I’ll give you the primary bedroom. It’s got a private bathroom for you to shower in.”

She shook her head. “No. I refuse to put you out.”

Consideration. It was more proof to Trent that Kate hadn't lost her humanity during her transition. “It's probably better if you take my bathroom, anyway. Otherwise, you'll have to share with the guys. There're only three full bathrooms in this house. Two upstairs and one down here. You're the only woman, and you'll need privacy.”

“But you hog the damn shower, Trent,” Reef groaned. “That's why we fixed the one in the primary bedroom.”

“I won't take your bedroom. I'll just be happy with an actual bed to sleep on.” Kate stepped up next to Trent, not hiding anymore. “I grew up in a family of five with only one bathroom in our home. My dad pretty much trained my sisters and I to get in and out of the shower in under five minutes.”

“You have sisters?” Reef flashed a shit-eating grin. “Do they look anything like you, pretty baby?”

“Call her *Kate*,” Trent ground out. “Stop flirting and forget about her sisters. You're not going anywhere near them. That's an order.”

“Spoilsport.” Reef swung around and picked up his pool stick. “Welcome to the pack, Kate.”

Kleve rolled his eyes. “Seriously? Wasn't it bad enough taking in Jay?”

“Shut it. You like him.” Trent didn't appreciate Kleve's timing on the jokes. It would take Kate time to learn their personalities...particularly Kleve's love of sarcasm. He turned to her. “I'll show you the bedroom Jay's preparing for you, and then mine.”

“Hey! You just said we weren’t allowed to hit on her but you’re taking her to your bedroom?”

Trent shot a warning look at Reef. “To give her the option between the spare room or the primary bedroom with a private shower. Mind out of the gutter. *No one* is hitting on Kate.”

He led her up the stairs to the second floor, pointing out which bedrooms belonged to which men. “That’s Cable’s room next to the full bathroom. All the bedrooms on this floor share it, except for the primary one.” He opened his bedroom door, glad he kept it semi clean and had actually made his bed this morning. “You’d probably be more comfortable in here.”

“I’m not making you switch rooms.” Kate shook her head, sounding determined.

He sighed, walking to the next door at the end of the hallway. It stood open with the lights on. It was the smallest of the bedrooms, so no one else had wanted it. Jay waited inside, standing by the twin bed that he’d made up with fresh bedding.

Jay gave Kate a small smile. “Hello. I’m Jayvis, but you can call me Jay. I taped padding over the glass before boarding up the windows. No sunlight will get through. The room is completely safe. I also took the liberty of ordering some leggings and shirts from a local store that should fit you, and one of the guys picked them up already. You’ll find them in the top drawer,” he said, nodding at a small dresser. “When you have some free time, let me know. I’ll sit with you and we’ll get on the computer, go shopping for everything else you’ll need, like shoes and undergarments and whatnot. I have

six sisters, so I'm more than aware that what I've ordered so far won't be nearly enough."

Trent silently resented Jay for knowing what Kate would need long-term. As their alpha, he should have thought of that stuff himself, since she was his responsibility. "Thanks, Jay."

"It's what I do. I stick around to make sure everyone is taken care of." He grinned before motioning to the bed. "Sorry for the dark blue bedding, but we'll let you pick something else that's more feminine, if you'd like. It's all we had."

Now Jay was *really* annoying Trent. "Thanks. You can go now." He reached out and gently gripped Kate's arm, moving her deeper inside the room and away from the doorway. Jay took the hint and fled, leaving them alone together.

"We should switch bedrooms."

She peered up at him and shook her head. "You wouldn't fit on that small bed. Besides, I shared a bedroom with both of my sisters. It's nice just to have my own space."

That revelation surprised him. "You still lived at home before you were taken?"

She nodded. "My dad said it was stupid to waste money on rent when we could save up instead to eventually buy our own homes. He and my mom really struggled to afford a house after having their first baby. Kids are so expensive. It's why they ended up with a two-bedroom home. He didn't want us to have to live the way they did, when we eventually had our own families. I'd saved a lot, and was almost ready to start house hunting..." Sadness tinted her eyes. "My family must think I'm dead by now."

Trent didn't blame her for wanting to contact the people she loved. "Give me time to think up something safe for everyone, okay? I'm not saying no forever, but right now, it just can't happen. It would not only put you in danger, but your family as well if you reached out to them."

"I know. I remember what you told me."

"Do you truly understand, though?"

She nodded. "I was paying attention, Trent. The last thing I want is to put my parents and sisters in danger or risk hurting them in any way. I know what it's like when monsters—" Her voice broke. "I don't want Vampires going after them."

"We're on the same page then. Why don't I give you some time alone to settle in? I need to have a meeting with the guys."

"Okay."

"Will you be good on your own for a bit? I'll come back soon to check on you."

"Sure."

"Don't run, Kate. Promise me. I'm trying to keep you alive. Don't do anything stupid. The world may look the same to you, but everything has changed. You have a lot to learn before you venture out there. Toddler, remember? I can only keep you safe if you stay here."

She held his gaze. "I promise I won't leave."

He hoped she meant it. He didn't know her well enough to trust her word, but he wanted to.

He left her room, walked downstairs, and whistled. The guys followed him out the back door, all of them gathering in the yard.

“Cable, you’re on first patrol. You take over for him at three, Reef.”

“For what?” Reef frowned.

“To make sure the Vampire doesn’t try to sneak out,” Klevé answered. “Because she’s a prisoner.”

“Not a prisoner,” Trent corrected. “A reluctant guest.”

Cable snorted. “You gave her a bedroom. By letting her live, you’re signing all of us up to babysit her.”

Jay stepped forward. “I volunteer to keep watch all night. It’s easier for me, since you guys need to work tomorrow.”

Trent studied him.

“I can handle Kate without hurting her if she tries to leave, and it’s not like I’m much good for anything else.”

“I wouldn’t say that.” Reef chuckled. “I love it when you do my laundry.”

“Me too. We appreciate you,” Klevé added. “It’s not your fault that you have to keep a low profile.”

Trent sighed. “Are you sure you’re okay with taking over Kate duty all night?”

Jay nodded. “I’m cool with it. Besides...” He glanced at Reef. “At least I won’t hit on her.”

Reef flipped him the middle finger. “You love pussy as much as I do.”

“True, but she’s under our protection. We need to treat her like family.” Jay glanced at Trent. “Is this meeting over? I think a roof view would be best. I can see all the way around the house from up there. No way will she get out without me spotting her.”

“Yes. Thanks.”

Trent watched as Jay ran at the house and then he leapt. The spry male landed on the porch roof and swiftly began to climb upward, toward the highest peak of the house.

“That shit looks so freaky when he does it,” Reef whispered.

“Jealous much?”

Reef nodded at Kleve. “Yeah. Definitely.”

“Me too. I have shit balance and can’t jump nearly that high.” Kleve stepped closer to Trent and lowered his voice. “What’s next? Are we going to take in a human? Maybe a bear shifter if we can find one?”

Reef grinned. “I bet we could find a bear. I hear they love to live high in the mountains. I wouldn’t even care if it was a shifter or not. It would be amazing to have one around.”

Kleve ignored his brother. “I’m not trying to be a dick. I swear. But we’re spread thin already, Trent.”

“That’s true,” Parker agreed. “I feel bad for Kate, but we’re not exactly prepared to add someone else to our mess.”

“It’s already settled. Kate stays,” Trent ground out. “Just remember where we all come from. Do you want to toss Kate out into the world alone, like we were?” He held Cable’s gaze.

“Not even give her a fucking chance to live?” He looked at Parker next. “Each of us were all given at least that much. Most of our old packs didn’t have the stomachs to outright murder us. They threw us out thinking others would do their dirty work for them. She’s not only got the Vampire thing to deal with, but she’s a woman. An *attractive* one. Has anyone thought about that?”

Cable lowered his chin. “It would be bad.”

“I don’t get it.” Parker said, glancing between Cable and Trent.

Cable answered before Trent needed to. “Kate’s pretty and young. Some nest might force her into prostitution to gain them blood and money from humans. Or make her service the entire nest as a sex slave. As a Vamp, she’s hard to kill, so they could abuse her in every sick, twisted way they could dream up and she’ll eventually heal. Most Vamps don’t value their women the way a pack does. As for Werewolves, they might not kill her. At least at first...”

“Ever see a severely injured or starving female Vampire?” Trent glanced at the others, except for Cable. He already knew the answer. “They’re slightly different from the males, who go stark-raving mad and kill anything that moves. Females become highly aroused. Enough to lure any Were in probably a hundred-mile radius. Cable and I came across that shit once.”

“Four rogues had captured a female Vamp,” Cable took over. “They mutilated her. That shit was so horrible, I *still* have nightmares.” He gave Trent a nod. “You win. Kate stays.”

“How did they mutilate her?”

Trent scowled at Reef.

“Just curious.”

“They cut off her arms to render her defenseless and used pliers to rip out all of her teeth so she’d never be able to feed again,” Cable whispered. “She mouthed ‘thank you’ right before I took her head to give her mercy.” He looked at Trent and abruptly spun away. “I’m going for a run.”

He watched his best friend stalk into the woods and glanced at the rest of his pack that remained. They all looked sickened and horrified by what they’d been told. “That shit will never happen to Kate. We’ll make adding a Vampire to the pack work. Think of her like your sister.”

Kleve jerked his thumb toward the roof. “A sister who might sneak off and rip some human’s throat out so we have to babysit make sure that doesn’t happen.”

Trent sighed. “Kate is scared and has been through a lot. Most of us would run in her shoes. She doesn’t know us yet. It takes time to build trust.”

Chapter Four

It was tempting to try to sneak out of the house to make a run for it. She wanted to see or speak to her family so badly that it made her chest ache. But Kate stayed seated on the bed, staring at the two small boarded-up windows. No chains or locks kept her inside the room. Just the fear of the unknown.

Trent had rescued her. Every word he said kept repeating inside her head. It made sense that telling people Vampires were real would be a death sentence. After all, everyone thought it was all movie and book fiction. Anyone saying otherwise would be pegged as lunatics who ranked right up there with people ranting about alien abductions.

Kate contemplated why the world at large didn't know they were real beings. Vampires had to be responsible for keeping a lid on that truth. It meant they were far-reaching and powerful. It made sense, she supposed. Trent had confirmed Vamps could mess with human minds and make them forget stuff.

And Werewolves existed too. It scared the hell out of her, knowing she was in a house with six of them. Those horror movies she'd seen ran through her mind again, and she wondered how many of the details were bullshit and what came close to the truth. The fictional creatures were brutal and unstable when a full moon came along.

Trent seemed to be in charge. The guys living in the house were all strong, big, and appeared as if they could kick

ass if needed. Even their so-called nerd. Parker was a muscular guy who looked like he could win any fight. She didn't want them hunting her. Trying to escape would accomplish exactly that. Trent had told her as much. A shudder ran down her spine at the thought.

There was no forgetting when Trent had fed her his blood either. Her body had gone horny haywire, and she'd nearly lost her mind. One second, she'd been watching Trent bit himself, kind of appalled, and the next, she'd had warm deliciousness filling her belly. She had no memory of how that even happened.

She *was* dangerous. There was no denying it. Even if she didn't kill someone by accident, she didn't want to end up having sex with a stranger, either.

She wasn't a virgin, but her parents had raised her with a strong sense of hearts and flowers when it came to sex. It shouldn't happen unless love was involved. It was one of the reasons she'd never had a one-night stand. All of her closest friends had, but she'd witnessed the aftermath.

Nope, Kate didn't want to end up becoming as jaded about men as Paula or Melissa. She believed in finding love, marriage, and having kids one day with someone special. Mistakes happened, of course. She had two serious ex-boyfriends in her past. Time had taught her that neither had been right to settle down with.

Tears slipped down her cheeks and she wiped at them, still half expecting to see red every time she cried. Her tears were clear, though, and she felt grateful that no blood leaked from her eyes like the Vamp tears in a few movies she'd seen.

She stood, pacing the small bedroom. It was small, the space maybe eight by ten, but it was private. No one would come in to hurt her like the members of that nest had in their much bigger basement.

Heavy footsteps sounded in the hallway, coming toward her room. Kate spun to face the closed door and held her breath. Someone knocked gently. She pulled in a breath, straightened her shoulders, and went to open it.

Trent stared down at her from his greater height. “How are you doing? I wanted to check on you.”

“I’d like to take a shower.”

“You know where the bathroom is.”

“I didn’t want to leave the room without permission.”

He scowled. “I told you that you’re free to roam the house and the yard. Just don’t go far. Stay very close to the house.”

She nodded.

He studied her face and his gaze softened. “No one here is going to hurt you. I give you my word, Kate. You’re under our protection.”

“I’m really out of my element,” she admitted.

“I realize that.” He paused. “You’ve been crying.”

“Just a little.” There was no use in hiding it since it must be obvious. “I’ve lost everything, and I don’t know what to do.”

“You’ll stay here, where you’re safe. You survive and you listen to me, so I can help you learn what you need to know.”

“What happens to me then?”

“What do you mean?”

“When you kick me out.”

Trent scowled again. “I won’t ever do that.”

That stunned her. “You’d let me stay here indefinitely?”

He nodded. “Yes. It’s not safe for you to be out on your own, Kate. I wasn’t shitting you about that. It would be really bad if Vampires or other Werewolves found you. Deadly.”

It was her turn to study him closely. Sincerity shone in his blue eyes. She believed him. “Thank you.”

Trent nodded. “Take a shower. Tell Jay whatever you need to buy when you see him. He’ll order it for you. The guys have a large movie collection in the living room, but none of us really watch them. You can help yourself. There’re also boxes of books I saw up in the attic from the previous owners, if you like to read. I don’t know what kind they are, but we just left them up there when we bought the place. There’s a ton of shit up there, actually. Nobody wanted to go through it all, and the attic isn’t fit to be turned into bedrooms. The ceiling isn’t high enough to accommodate any of my pack.” He glanced at the top of her head. “Except for maybe you. It’s about six feet from floor to the ceiling. You wouldn’t have to hunch to walk around up there.”

She nodded. “Thanks.”

“I’m going to go eat and do some paperwork. Tomorrow, most of us will be gone until evening, but Jay is always here. He’ll protect you while you’re sleeping.”

That struck a chord of fear in her.

Trent sniffed the air, then cocked his head. “What’s wrong?”

“I’ll be totally out of it. I just thought about that.”

“What’s the problem?”

She felt heat flush her face but she lifted her chin, holding his gaze. “Six men. One unconscious woman. I don’t know any of you. What if someone comes in here to...to touch me or something? I wouldn’t know until I woke up.”

He stepped closer. “First off, I’d personally kill *anyone* in my pack who’d touch a woman without her consent. Not that I’d have to. The others would probably beat me to it. I only accepted men I could trust into this pack. With *my* life, and now with yours. If it makes you feel any better, I’ll install a bolt on the inside of the door.”

She nodded. “I’m sorry. It’s just th—”

He cut her off. “You don’t have to explain.”

“I do. You look insulted. Only Rupert was able to stay awake all day. It was the only time I felt safe. He wouldn’t touch me that way, because he wanted me to be his son’s bride. I knew I was safe from anyone hurting me once the sun came up. All of you can move around during the day.”

His lips pressed into a tight line. “Did any of the nest try to sexually assault you?”

“Some tried to sneak into the basement from time to time, but I raised hell because I was awake and able to scream. It drew attention, and Blah always got to me before I was hurt.

The master had put him in charge of protecting me, and he'd have been severely punished if I were hurt. It's the only reason he stopped the others."

Trent shook his head. "Look, I'll install that dead bolt before you go to sleep. But Jay's trustworthy. He's got a bunch of sisters and was protective as hell over them. He'd never touch you, and he'd kill to make sure no one else does, either."

Kate knew she would have to take his word for it. It wasn't like she had any other choice. "Okay."

"Take your shower, Kate." With a final nod, Trent turned and walked away.

She watched him go until he disappeared down the stairwell, then she made her way to the bathroom. It wasn't big, but she was surprised by how clean it was, considering a bunch of men shared it. She had friends with brothers who complained about them often. There was no lock on the door, which made her nervous, but she felt desperate for a real shower.

Kate reached up, taking her hair down. Rupert and Blah always forced her to tie it into a bun to avoid it becoming matted with blood when she was punished. She suddenly wished for scissors to trim a few inches from the red mass. Vampires could grow hair like anyone else, and hers had become significantly longer while in captivity.

The mirror drew her, and she moved toward it slowly, staring at herself for the first time in almost a year.

She was shocked at the physical changes.

Kate spun away as a sob caught in her throat. She made a silent promise to avoid mirrors from that moment on. She wished the old movies were true, that Vampires didn't have reflections.

A stranger had peered back in those seconds she'd looked into the mirror. That deathly pale, thin creature was *her*. Cheekbones jutting out, hair looking blood red against her Vampire pallor. Even her green eyes were no longer the same. They seemed cold and unfamiliar, like they belonged to someone else.

A stranger had stared back at her from that mirror.

Kate moved on auto pilot, her mind reeling. She turned on the water, letting it become warmer as she stripped out of the shirt. There were a collection of different shampoos and conditioners, all geared toward men, but it didn't matter. Kate hoped no one minded if she used their things.

Sobs wracked her body as she stood beneath the warm water and shampooed her hair. She tried to be as quiet as possible, but it was no use. The startling reflection she'd seen in the mirror kept flashing in her head.

Rupert had destroyed her life, taken away everything she loved, and turned her into a thing right out of a monster movie.

Trent leaned against the wall next to the closed bathroom door and fought his instincts—hard. It took every bit of self-control to remain still.

Reef walked down the hallway toward him. Their gazes met, and his friend's eyes reflected the sadness Trent felt.

“Damn,” Reef whispered. “She’s breaking my heart. That’s fucking gut wrenching. I heard her all the way from downstairs. So can the others. They’re all standing at the base of the stairs, feeling useless. I was the only one brave enough to come up.”

Trent nodded. “I want to go in there and comfort her, but she’ll freak out.”

“Me too. She’s not faking that. I didn’t know why you brought her here at first, but I get it now. She isn’t like any Vamp I’ve ever met. Her pain is ripping me to shreds. She still feels human emotions.”

“They taught Kate nothing, kept her locked in that basement and had her drinking cold blood. In her head, she’s very much still human. I think it’s finally sinking in what’s been done to her, now that she’s no longer stuck in survival mode.”

Reef nodded. “I’ve heard stories of what masters do to newly turned Vamps. Desensitizing them until they’re brutal, unfeeling bastards who view humans only as food. Almost like a game, where there’re rewarded for brutality and punished for showing compassion. I guess they didn’t do that to Kate, if she can still cry.”

Someone else came upstairs, and Trent turned his head, meeting Cable’s gaze. His best friend stopped at his bedroom door and nodded. “I won’t give her any more shit,” he said quietly. “For fuck’s sake, go in there. None of us can stand to hear her sobs anymore. Comfort her, Trent.”

“Kate’s already afraid we want something in exchange for letting her stay,” Trent admitted. “I came up to put a dead

bolt on the inside of her door, to make her feel safe from anyone molesting her while she's helpless during the day."

Cable clenched his jaw. "*Fuck*. I'll take care of that."

Trent tossed him the bag he'd brought upstairs, with the tools and a bolt kit. Cable passed him to enter Kate's bedroom.

Reef sighed. "I won't hit on her again, or even tease that way. No one here would do something that messed up."

"We know that, but she doesn't."

Someone stomped up the stairs, and Trent wasn't surprised when Jay came toward them. He stopped in front of Trent. "I'm going in."

He blocked the door. "No. She's afraid of us."

"I'll pretend I'm gay. It's something I've learned to be good at. Move."

Trent hesitated.

"Jesus, you know all about my past. I kept no secrets from you when we met. Hell, I was so drunk, I even confessed how many times I jack off in an average week. *Someone* needs to comfort her, because her crying is driving us all nuts. We're protectors, Trent."

"You better not touch her in any sexual way," Trent warned. "*Ever*."

Jay held his gaze. "You have feelings for her. We all understand that. I'd never trespass."

"It's not like that."

Jay and Reef both scoffed over Trent's denial. Even Cable grumbled from the bedroom behind him.

Trent stepped aside and Jay entered the bathroom.

"Don't panic," Jay called out quickly, closing the door behind him. "Sweetheart, I like dick, you're safe. Ah, darlin'. I can't stand to see anyone in a ball on the shower floor. You poor thing. Come here, I've got a fluffy towel ready. You're safe with me, sweetie. You've got nothing that interests me but your poor little broken heart."

Trent tensed, waiting to see if Kate would scream or panic over Jay being in the bathroom with her. She didn't make any protests. Her sobs stopped after a few minutes.

"That's it, sweetie," Jay crooned. "We've got to stick together. Here, let's tuck this around you. What's got you so upset? You can tell me."

"I saw the mirror," Kate sniffed.

Trent felt gutted. He hadn't thought of that. There'd been no mirrors in that basement that he'd seen. Reef reached out and gripped his arm, hauling him into the primary bedroom. They'd barely shut the door when the bathroom opened across the hallway.

"You're very pretty, Kate. Just a bit paler than you probably remember." Jay either carried or led her into her bedroom. "Cable, give us some privacy."

"Just finished," Cable rumbled. "You've got a dead bolt now, Kate."

A door closed, and Reef yanked open the primary bedroom door. Cable stood in the hallway, and the three of

them stared at each other. Soft voices came from Kate's room, and then she laughed.

Trent finally relaxed.

Reef shook his head. "How does he pull that shit off?" He kept his voice low. "He can get more pussy than a cat shelter."

"He had to pretend to be gay growing up to avoid having to breed with women," Cable whispered back.

"That doesn't sound so bad." Reef wiggled his eyebrows.

Trent shook his head. "The women weren't willing."

Reef's expression hardened, but he remembered to keep his voice low. "What the *fuck*?"

"Because of all the wars they've fought in, Jay's species is extremely rare," Trent explained. "Mating isn't allowed. All their women are forced to breed with multiple men every time they go into heat, to increase their chances of getting pregnant. Jay avoided being part of that sick shit by pretending to be gay. And all the scars you've seen on him? Those are from trying to protect his sisters and other women from the worst of their abusers. Some of the men got violent if they refused to take their seed."

Rage transformed Reef's features.

Cable sighed. "I need a beer. Come on, Trent. Jay's trustworthy. He won't hit on Kate."

Trent *did* need a drink. "I'm glad we killed all those Vampires in her nest."

"Me too." A glint of fury showed in Cable's eyes.

They walked downstairs to where the other pack members hovered. They all strode into the kitchen together, and Parker passed out the sandwiches he'd made earlier, that he'd stored in the fridge.

"You really need to learn how to cook," Kleve muttered.

Parker flipped him off. "What's stopping *you*? Quit bitching about it or you can take over preparing meals."

"Only if we want food poisoning," Reef muttered.

Kleve flipped him off. "I'm better at cooking than you are. You tried to make a grilled cheese by using a lighter and caught the bread on fire."

"When we were kids," Reef defended. "I was four, for fuck's sake."

Trent chuckled, enjoying watching the pack verbally spar with each other. They'd come a long way since they'd banded together. A year ago, the brothers would have gone to physical blows instead of bantering with words. That was progress.

They stood around the kitchen eating, teasing each other. Parker staring at Trent drew his focus, and he met the male's steady gaze. "What?"

"We have a woman here now. It's probably best if we start using the dining room table for meals."

Reef laughed. "She's a Vampire. They don't eat food, genius. I think you spend way too much time in front of your computers instead of in the real world."

Parker glared at him. "I know that, but what I mean is that it'll make us seem more stable to Kate. That's important.

She's lost everything she knew. I bet her family ate together. It might make her feel more at home to do familiar things."

"I like that idea." Trent nodded.

"What else is going to change?" Cable didn't look happy.

"Who gets to feed her? Are we going to take turns?" Parker lowered his voice. "I'm not sure how I'd react to being bitten. I might lose it."

"She'll feed from me." Trent wasn't willing to risk Parker having an out-of-control shift.

"I'll offer up my wrist," Cable said. "She's new, so she needs to be fed nightly. We can flip nights."

"I'll donate too," Reef offered. "I have no problem with that."

"Count me in," Kleve added. "We have Kate covered."

Trent's muscles tightened, anger flooding him. "I appreciate that, but I'll be the only one feeding her."

Cable finished his second sandwich and took a swig of his beer, shaking his head. "We should share the burden."

"No. Until Kate learns more control, I'll be the only one feeding her—end of discussion." Trent dared his lead enforcer to argue with him by giving him a deadly glare.

Cable rolled his eyes. "Fucking jealousy. Isn't it grand?"

"It's not jealousy," Trent denied. "Kate was embarrassed by how her body reacted earlier. I won't have her feeling uncomfortable with her donors."

“Or you think one of us won’t keep our dick in our pants.”

A snarl tore from Trent as he got in Cable’s space. “That’s not it.”

“Um, guys?”

Trent whipped his head around, staring at Jay. He hadn’t even heard him coming down the stairs.

The male jerked a thumb behind him. “Kate’s about to come downstairs. Could you calm down a bit? I can feel the tension. Talk about this tomorrow while you’re at the office.”

Trent nodded, backing off from Cable. “We’ll finish this in the morning.”

“Yeah, we will,” his best friend said.

Trent heard light footsteps on the stairs, then Kate appeared. He forced a smile, letting go of his anger. Her red hair was wet and much longer than he’d suspected it would be, free from that bun. It fell in loose curls. Regardless of what she thought she saw in that mirror, she was really beautiful.

Kate wore what appeared to be a new oversized plain T-shirt and a pair of black leggings. He figured they must be among the items Jay had ordered, which Reef had picked up in town.

“Feeling better, Kate?” Trent hoped he sounded cheerful. “We just ate, now we’re going to play some pool.”

She nodded. “It was amazing to have a hot shower. I’d almost forgotten what that was like.” She glanced around. “I

hope you don't mind, but I had to use someone's shampoo and conditioner."

"Hopefully mine." Reef stepped forward, grinning.

"Don't," Trent warned, worrying he'd hit on her. Reef flirted with literally all women. It usually amused him, but not when it came to Kate.

"I simply meant because you heathens buy whatever the hell is cheapest." Reef reached up and ran his fingers through his black hair. "Only top-of-the-line products for these silky locks, baby." Reef winked at her. "They'd use dog shampoo on their hair and not give a shit."

Kate laughed, then quickly slapped a hand over her mouth, as if worried she'd offend someone.

"We'll order you what you usually use. Just tell us what it is." Jay stayed close to Kate. "When one of the guys goes to town tomorrow, they can pick up anything you need."

Reef raised his hand. "I'll do it. Just tell me where to go."

Cable snorted. "I'll love to. It won't be anywhere nice."

"Now boys." Jay put his hands on his hips. "Stop it."

Parker choked on his beer, eyes wide. "Why are you acting like that?"

Reef spun, walked over to him, and hit him hard on the back. It nearly knocked Parker off his feet.

"I'm going to kick all of your asses at pool!" Kleve hurried out of the room.

Trent watched them go, hanging back with Jay and Kate, since neither moved. "You two don't plan to play?"

“I thought I’d take Kate to my room for some shopping on my laptop. She needs more than just a couple of baggy shirts and leggings.”

Trent agreed. “Well, you’ve got our business credit card. Don’t max it out.”

Kate looked horrified. “No. That’s not necessary. You’ve done so much for me already.”

Trent wanted to comfort her, but she might mistake any touch for something sexual. Kate wasn’t a Werewolf used to physical comfort. “It was a joke. We’re doing pretty good these days financially. You need clothing and shoes, Kate.”

“Blowing a few hundred bucks isn’t going to break us.” Jay put his arm around her shoulders.

It made Trent hate him a little when Kate didn’t flinch away or make any outward sign that Jay’s touch wasn’t welcome.

“May I ask what kind of business you do?” Kate glanced between them.

Trent answered. “We’re bounty hunters, and we do some investigation work, as well. Our pack bought a small building in town that we use for our office.”

She appeared fascinated.

“We’re stronger and faster than the humans we track, so most of the skips we go after are easy to catch. Sometimes we work for local packs to run down their missing teenagers.”

“Missing teenagers?”

Kate had a soft heart. Trent could see the concern in her eyes and hear it in her voice. He opened his mouth, but Jay cut him off before he could speak.

“It’s not what you think. They aren’t really missing. It’s more like they took off to avoid their chores and have fun. Shifter boys are horny and wild, and they figure out fast that human women are naturally drawn to them. Male Weres put off a scent that screams ‘fuck me’. Women basically flock to them.” Jay winked. “Their families pay our guys to grab them and bring them back home before their alphas get pissed enough to punish them.”

Kate nodded. “How are they punished?”

Trent shrugged. “It depends on how many times they’ve blown off their duties, and what kind of trouble they get into with a human. It could be anything as simple as getting yelled at in public, which is humiliating, to being locked up for a few days in a holding cell. Werewolves hate being contained inside any small space. Pups aren’t physically abused.”

“Most of the time,” Jay muttered. “The packs near us are good ones, though. Their alphas aren’t dicks. Our pack wouldn’t track down youths if we thought they’d be harmed in any way.”

“Damn straight.” Trent forced a smile at Kate. “Go shopping and let Jay buy you whatever you need. Our company has done great this year. We can afford it.”

Jay tightened his hold on her. “You heard him. Shopping! We’ll have a blast.”

Trent watched them go up the stairs. A part of him wanted to trail behind, to keep an eye on Kate, but he trusted the shifter. Jay had taken the Vampire under his wing and would treat her like a sister.

Trent wished *he* could see her that way. But he didn't. He could deny it to his pack all day long...but he was attracted to Kate Murphy.

Chapter Five

Trent drove faster, ignoring the posted speed limit. He'd meant to leave the office early enough to return to the pack house before the sun went down, to be there when Kate woke. He'd been held up by a human client.

Cable grumbled from the passenger seat. "Like we need to get pulled over and ticketed. Not."

Kleve had the nerve to laugh from the backseat. "Worried about our Kate?"

"Fuck you." Trent reached the pack house five minutes later and parked, jumping out. He ran inside and up the stairs. Kate's bedroom door stood open, and he froze outside it, sniffing. Her scent was there, but it was faint.

Reef came out of his bedroom and arched an eyebrow. Then he jerked his thumb toward Jay's room. Trent gave him a thankful nod and strode down the hall. He had to stop himself from breaking down the door and knocked instead.

Jay opened it right away. "Hey, glorious alpha. You're home unusually early."

Trent put his hand on Jay's chest and gave him a gentle push, entering his bedroom, and spotted Kate sitting at the desk with the laptop open in front of her. She turned her head, smiling. It felt like she'd sucker punched him in the gut when he took in the sight of her.

Kate wore her hair down again today, and soft waves flowed down her back almost to her waist, her pale skin amplifying the red color. Her big green eyes sparkled...but it was that smile that just about leveled him. She took his breath away with her fragile, haunting beauty.

She no longer wore one of his shirts, or the oversized tee that billowed around her frame. Gray leggings hugged her slim, shapely hips and a form-fitting matching shirt stopped at her lower belly. A hint of cleavage beckoned from the Vee of the neckline, exposing the creamy, tempting mounds of her breasts.

Jay reached out to give Trent's arm a squeeze, pulling his laser focus off Kate. "Our girl cleans up nice, doesn't she? I had Reef pick up a few things that I was able to order, now that I know Kate's sizes."

Trent wanted to punch Jay. *Our girl?* He almost choked on a snarl. Kate belonged to *him*.

It took him a second to realize how strongly possessive he felt about her. It was so out of character. He didn't even know her that well, and worse, she was under his protection. He had no right to feel such jealousy toward Jay.

He cleared his throat. "I wanted to check on you. How was your day sleep, Kate?"

"It was great. Thank you for the lock inside the door." A hint of pink tinged her cheeks. "Jay said I'm completely safe here, but I just don't know any of you all that well yet. He also said no one took offense, and it's natural that I'd be worried since I'm the only woman living in the house."

“It’s perfectly understandable.” Trent wanted to wring Jay’s neck. Kate recited his words as if she trusted the other shifter over him. “Did Reef remember to get the other things you wanted?” He knew the answer already, having called his pack member earlier that day to make sure he didn’t forget anything while he’d been running errands. Trent might have also made a few threats to kick the living shit out of Reef if he flirted with Kate when he delivered everything.

Her smile widened. “He did. I am now the proud owner of my own shampoo, conditioner, body wash that doesn’t smell manly, and um...well. Not important.” Her smile fell. “Some private stuff.”

Kate looked away, and it put Trent on alert. “What private stuff?”

She blushed again. “You know. Woman stuff.”

He looked at Jay for a hint. The shifter avoided his gaze. He didn’t know what the hell was going on, but he needed to find out. Something was off. Trent withdrew his cell phone. “That’s great. Have you done any more shopping online, for clothes and things?”

He texted Reef. **Send me the exact list of shit you bought for Kate at the store, right now.**

Kate nodded. “Thank you. I picked out a few dresses, a pair of shoes, and some underthings. I was careful of the prices.”

“That doesn’t matter. I told you to not worry about it.”

“See?” Jay inched away from him. “We totally need to buy you a bigger wardrobe, sweetie.”

Trent's cell vibrated from an incoming text, and he glanced down, tapping it open and reading down the shopping list on the screen. It wasn't a long one. He inwardly flinched as one item stood out, before shooting a glare at Jay. "Out. Kate and I need a moment."

Jay walked past him. "You know this is my bedroom, right?"

Trent ignored him and closed the door once they were alone.

Kate turned in the seat to face him, looking nervous. "Is something wrong?"

He approached her, shoving his phone back into his pocket and crouching to be closer to her eye level. "There are a few things we need to discuss." He lowered his voice. "I asked Reef to send me the list of what you wanted from the store."

She blushed more. It was damn cute, and he felt like a bastard for invading Kate's privacy, but she was *his*. At least to protect. Part of that job was teaching her about what she'd become, since the nest clearly hadn't.

"Hey, there's no need for that." Trent reached out and gently gave her knee a squeeze. It wasn't sexual, but he wanted to comfort her. The leggings were soft against his fingertips. He removed his hand. "You asked Reef to pick up pads. Why?"

She avoided his gaze and her cheeks turned pinker. "Um...because I might need them."

He was confused. "Again, why?"

Kate bit her lip, looking highly embarrassed. But after a few seconds, she lifted her chin and straightened her shoulders. He was a bastard for noticing how the posture showcased her breasts in that shirt. He avoided glancing at them.

“Extreme stress can make women miss their periods. I thought, now that I’m not locked up in the basement and being whipped every night, mine might come back. Those bastards put me through hell, Trent. Starved me. Hurt me. But now I’m not dealing with any of that.”

“Shit.” Trent wished his pack could slaughter those fucking assholes who’d stolen Kate all over again. They’d do it slower and cause a lot more pain. He dropped to his knees from the crouch and put one hand on the desk, the other on the back of her chair, effectively pinning her in place without touching her. Then he said gently, “Vampires don’t have periods, Kate.”

She blinked a few times. “Oh.”

“Jay should have told you that when you made your list. Though, it’s possible that he didn’t know.” That was doubtful, but Trent didn’t want to accuse Jay of being too cowardly to break the news. Hell, he was having a difficult time trying to spit out the words, too.

“Do Werewolf women have periods?”

He shook his head. “No. Our women only ovulate when they want to get pregnant. They’re usually successful. If not, they might bleed for a few hours to, um...clean out their system.” He felt out of his depth with this talk. It was a

conversation mothers usually gave to their daughters, or in Kate's case, Vampire to Vampire.

“How do we *decide* to ovulate? I mean, do we just think we want to get pregnant when we're ready to have a baby, and then have sex? Then boom! It's a done deal?”

Fuck! Trent grit his teeth and took a deep breath, blowing it out. “Kate, I'm not sure how to tell you this, so I'm just going to say it. It won't be easy to hear, but you need to know.”

Her body tensed, and she locked gazes with him. “Okay.”

“Vampires can't have children. They took that option away from you when you were turned. You won't be having periods, or babies. You're also immune to STDs. All diseases, actually. At least that's a good thing, right?”

She looked as if he'd physically slapped her, literally jerking in her seat. He lunged forward and gently cupped her face, making her look at him. The tears he saw in her eyes tore him up inside. Kate must have wanted to have babies one day, and he'd just blown her dreams to hell.

“I'm so damn sorry, sweetheart. Listen to me, though. Did you hear what I said about being immune to diseases? Illnesses too. There are plus sides to being a Vampire. You'll remain just as you are. Vampires don't age in looks. You'll always be beautiful. I've heard of some masters who are thousands of years old, and they supposedly still look the same age as they did when they were turned.”

She tried to nod, but tears slid down her cheeks, and he couldn't take it anymore. Trent released her face and scooped

her out of the chair, sitting on the floor, and putting her on his lap. He wrapped his arms around her and drew her against his chest, tucking her in close. Then he started to rock.

“It’s okay. Or it *will* be. I’m so sorry to be the one to break it to you.” *Fucking Jay didn’t have the balls to do it.* Part of Trent was glad, though. He wanted to be the one to comfort and soothe Kate.

She turned into him, burying her face against his chest and clutching his shirt. “Why didn’t they just kill me?”

The pain in her whispered question hurt him, along with her words. “Never say that, Kate. Ever. You’re alive and safe with us. If having a kid means so much to you, then...I’ll get you one.”

She became still in his arms, then slowly lifted her head. “*What?*”

He could peer into her lovely green eyes all night, even when she was looking at him as if he’d just said something ludicrous. “I’m not going to kidnap a child or anything. Sometimes we come across orphaned pups and half-breeds from dead rogues. We try to find a relative to raise them. It’s been a huge pain in the ass, because even if a relative is willing to take on that responsibility, they must gain permission from their alpha to accept a half-human child into their pack. We haven’t met any bastards who would refuse, but it’s just a matter of time. We’ve certainly heard of it happening. I’m just saying that, in time, if you’re determined to be a mother, it could still happen. It just won’t be in the old-fashioned way.”

She tucked her head again but was no longer crying.

Trent stroked her back, rocking her again. “It’s going to be fine, Kate. Let’s focus on getting you adjusted to your new body and everything else. Then we’ll deal with the other things. I’m going to make sure you’re happy. Just have some faith that things will work out. Okay?”

She looked at him again, studying his eyes. “Why are you being so nice to me? Why would you care about me, or whether I’m happy or not?”

He could understand Kate’s wariness. In his experience, most people couldn’t be trusted and they didn’t give a shit about others. Maybe sharing part of his past would help her understand him...build some trust. He cleared his throat, continuing to stroke her back.

“The alpha of the pack I was born into lost his parents when he was a teenager. His mother died giving birth to one of his siblings. It’s extremely rare for shifters to die in childbirth, but it can happen. With mates, if their bond is strong, the loss of one means the other doesn’t survive. The remaining one just...gives up on life. That happened to his parents. Cruz was sixteen at the time, and the pack was nearly torn apart from infighting.”

“Infighting?”

“When an alpha dies, challenges can and usually are made by the strongest males in the pack, if they doubt the ability of the newly appointed alpha. That’s usually the oldest son of the *previous* alpha. Taking orders from a teenager isn’t ideal for any male, and some of the pack members challenged Cruz. The same thing can also happen if an alpha gets really old and doesn’t have a son that he’s already named as his

successor. Members might think they can take him down and lead the pack instead.

“Cruz had to face nine challengers from his own pack within days of losing his parents. Normally I’d feel sorry for him...but it made him cold inside, and screwed up his head pretty good.”

Trent cleared his throat. “After the loss of his parents, Cruz saw mating as an unforgivable weakness. He was also pissed that he lost so many of his father’s enforcers, since he’d had to kill them to keep his alpha status. Most of *their* mates died shortly afterward, too, of course, because of their close bonds. Some of them were important females in the pack, including the pack healer. It crippled the pack to lose so many members in such a short time and made it a target for territory wars from other alphas. Cruz battled for four years straight before the pack stabilized and outsiders stopped fucking with him.”

“That’s sad.”

He nodded, his fingers absently playing in Kate’s long hair. It was so soft, and he loved the color. “Long story short, Cruz had a low opinion of mating. I can understand why, but it’s against our nature *not* to mate.”

She frowned.

“To find a mate is important to us. We’re possessive. Protective. Anyway, the point is that Cruz didn’t flat-out ban mating, but if you wanted a high-ranking position in his pack, you avoided taking a mate, otherwise he’d replace you. They’d lost a lot of numbers during those battle years, the pack had become small, and Cruz decided to ask females to breed as

many pups as possible with the remaining males. Werewolves normally only have children once they're mated. Humans can't control their ovaries, but Were women can. That's how most half-breeds happen. Um..."

He cleared his throat. "Condoms aren't a thing in packs, since accidental pregnancies don't happen during casual sex. So pack males don't often think to use them with humans, resulting in accidental pregnancies. Cruz *did* ban his men from fucking humans for that very reason. He refused to make the pack weaker by infusing half-breeds into their ranks."

"Can half-breeds shift?"

"Some. It's never a certainty. It's on a child-by-child basis."

Kate nodded. "I get that. My dad has blue eyes. I got my mom's green ones. Both my sisters have blue, like dad. Me and my sisters all got our red hair from our mother, but in different shades. Dad has really light blond hair, but Mom's is dark red. You can never tell what traits you'll inherit from a parent until you're born."

"Exactly. Cruz is an alpha. It's the most powerful position you can hold in a pack. Three women were more than happy to offer to breed his pups, hoping they could entice him into mating one of them down the road. There's no higher status a female can achieve inside a pack than becoming an alpha bitch. Some would do anything to become one. It basically turned into a screwed-up competition for those women, to see who could get pregnant first, and from what I was told, Cruz had to forbid them from killing each other when they literally fought to get his attention."

“Wow. Like the shifter version of one of those reality shows about dating a rich bachelor. Only with babies and gaining power as the objective, instead of money.”

He chuckled, amused by Kate’s insight. “Yes.”

“Got it. So what happened?”

“Cruz had no intention of changing his mind about taking a mate. After each of the women had birthed him a pup, they finally figured that out. Rumor was that it turned even *uglier* between them. If he wouldn’t mate one of them, then I guess each wanted to kill the others to be the only female with access to his bed. Sharing him was no longer working for them. As I said, we’re possessive by nature.”

“Common jealousy.”

He nodded. “Cruz got fed up dealing with what he called their ‘petty bullshit’ and turned his attention to a submissive female. She was young, in training to become a pack healer. Whispered spread that she might have been his true mate, but that wasn’t the case. The bastard just wanted her.”

“Submissive? Like in the books?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t read what humans write about us. Submissives aren’t aggressive and will cower instead of fighting, unless they’re desperate to protect a cub or mate. Most of them perform humble tasks in packs, like childcare or cooking. Stuff like that. Her name was Tressa. She was my mother.”

Kate sucked in a sharp breath, staring at him with wide eyes.

Trent nodded and fought back his anger. “Cruz took what he wanted. No one dared to tell him no. My mom didn’t stand a chance of fighting him off. He used his position to force her into his bed. He overpowered her mind and body. Alpha vibes are a real thing. He demanded her submission in all ways, including breeding for him. As in forcing her to ovulate, and I’m the result.”

“I’m so sorry.” Kate rubbed his chest, over his shirt.

He appreciated her trying to comfort him. “It pissed off his other breeders when my mother became pregnant. They had zero compassion, despite the fact that it wasn’t something my mother wanted. Those bitches were just pissed that he’d bred yet another female. Cruz knew they’d kill her. Non-aggressive females just aren’t good in a fight. They don’t have that inner rage to draw from. Cruz moved my mother into his home during the pregnancy to keep her safe, which only made the situation worse.”

“He sounds like a total asshole.”

Trent nodded. “He is. It was bad enough for her, having to live with him, but the other breeders were outraged. Two years after I was born, Cruz grew bored of sharing his home with us. He put us in a cabin of our own, like his other breeders. Mom kept us both locked inside most of the time, unless Cruz ordered the enforcers to pick me up for a few hours of training. When I was five, I returned to find the door kicked in.” Grief restricted his ability to breathe easily for a long moment. “Those bitches had broken in and murdered her.”

“Oh God, Trent! I’m so sorry.”

“Me too. Cruz moved me back into his home and gave orders that no one was allowed to kill me. That pissed off the breeders, too. Showing more interest in *me* than in their pups. It was technically an advantage, assuming one of his offspring would become his successor in the future. Let’s just say my childhood wasn’t the greatest. Cruz’s breeders encouraged their sons to make me a target. None of them could kill me, but messing me up pretty good was acceptable. Cruz didn’t care. He said the beatings would only make me stronger.”

“What a dick!”

Trent almost smiled at Kate’s outrage and the anger he saw in her eyes. “Most of his other sons were born a few years before me. Their attacks never stopped, and they became more brutal as we grew older. Hormonal teenagers aren’t the best at self-control. I had a little, but Flick had none. He was Cruz’s firstborn son, and therefore he hated me the most. He lost his temper and took it too far one day. It became a life-or-death fight. Flick was nineteen. I was fourteen. I pinned him, but he wouldn’t stop trying to tear out my throat. I had lost a lot of blood already, and I knew if I passed out, I’d never wake up. It was kill or be killed...I had to do it.”

Kate slid her hands up his chest to cup his face. She inched closer and held his gaze. “I’m so sorry that you were put in that position.”

He felt relieved that she didn’t seem horrified by his admission.

“The breeding bitches, as I called them, wanted me executed for the death of Flick. Cruz denied their request, but they wouldn’t let it go. He eventually got sick of their bullshit

—his words—and changed his mind. I guess one less son didn't matter when he could always breed another.”

“*What?*” Kate shifted her ass on his lap and clutched his face tighter.

Trent gave a single nod. “I fled to avoid being put to death. Cruz never sent trackers after me or put a bounty on my head. I would've easily been caught and returned if he had. I was only fourteen and couldn't exactly blend in well with humans. I didn't even travel all that far, since I didn't know where to go. Other alphas would have had me hunted as a rogue and killed. Cruz was a shit father, never allowed any of his bastards to use that title with him, but he *did* allow me to escape.”

“Allowed?” She didn't look convinced.

“Most in my position would have been bound and locked up, with guards standing by to make sure they didn't escape before a public execution could be performed. Cruz just told me he was sick of their bullshit, he'd kill me in the morning when everyone was present to witness my death...then he left our cabin to go fuck one of his bitches. Looking back, it's clear he was giving me a chance to flee. So, at least there was that.”

“I don't know what to say.” She lowered her hands back to his chest.

“You don't have to say anything. Life was rough for me. I lived like a homeless human on the streets, sleeping in alleys. I hunted in my animal form in the nearby woods to keep from starving. Sometimes Werewolves would pick up my scent and come after me. I barely escaped being killed more times than I

can remember. I had no one to trust or to turn to. Then a few years later, I ran into Cable. He was like me. Different backstory but just as alone. His pack screwed him over unfairly too, and he was also left trying to survive on his own.”

“That’s terrible.” Sadness and sorrow flashed across Kate’s beautiful features.

“We stuck together because both of us were good fighters and had alpha blood. That means we’re stronger than regular Werewolves. It was the first time we felt hope that we might survive and possibly have a future. Instead of running from the occasional Werewolf or Vamp who came after us, we held our ground to fight them off together. Pretty soon, they learned not to mess with us.”

“I’m glad you found each other, Trent.”

“Me too. A few years after that, we came across the brothers. Then we found Parker. He’d been living in his wolf form for over a year. It was hell to contain him, earn his trust enough to get him to shift back to skin, and talk him into staying with us. He deserved a chance at a future too. *All* of us do.”

Trent paused, taking a few deep breaths. “We all have shitty backstories of packs that tossed us out for fucked-up reasons. After Parker joined us, we began to save every dime we earned to buy this house and land. The location’s far enough away from all of our birth packs to feel secure our pasts won’t become an issue. The land is vast enough to give us a small territory of our own, and the ability to form a pack. We stopped working for others and opened our own business.

One of our first jobs was to track down a problem rogue and kill it.” He played with her hair again. “That’s how Jay came into our lives.”

“You saved him, too?”

“Jay’s a cougar shifter, if he didn’t tell you. It’s no secret in our pack. We can smell it, but I’m guessing you haven’t learned to differentiate between breeds. All cat shifters were believed to be extinct in the States. Packs killed them on sight until supposedly there were none left living in America. Jay came as a huge surprise when we realized what we’d hired to find. I had to respect the hell out of the guy for surviving as long as he did on his own.

“His story is his choice to share with you or not...but we offered him a home and to be a member of our pack. He can’t leave our territory because of what he is. It’s too dangerous. Most packs would be riled up enough to declare war on us if they knew we were harboring a cougar. It’s a long-standing kind of instant-hate thing. As former rogues, we’ve all suffered our fair share of prejudice. It took Jay some time to believe we weren’t playing some sick game with him.”

“He was worried that you’d hurt him when he let his defenses down,” Kate seemed to guess. She tucked her head against his chest again and relaxed in his arms. “He told me that he trusts all of you completely, and that I should too.” She sighed. “And now you’ve rescued a Vampire. I guess I understand why. Thank you, Trent.”

“You’re welcome. And it’s not just about surviving anymore. We want to be happy. All of us deserve that. To have a semblance of the futures we once only dreamed about. A

home with people we can trust. You want to be a mom? It's not completely off the table, Kate. It's just something to work harder toward having one day. There are always kids in need of parents." He nuzzled her head with his cheek. "Are you okay now?"

"Yes. Thank you." She paused. "I'm hungry."

"Me too. Can you wait until I've eaten dinner or do you need to be fed now?"

"I can wait. The hunger isn't painful yet."

Trent wished he could continue to hold Kate, but he knew some of the guys were lingering in the hallway, listening. It should have pissed him off, but they were showing concern for their newest pack member. That was a good thing. It meant they cared enough to want to protect her. Even from him.

He lifted her off his lap, helping her get to her feet, then stood. "How are you feeling now?"

She smiled at him. "Much better."

"Come on."

He jerked open the door, not surprised at all to see Cable, Jay, and Kleve.

Chapter Six

Kate waited in her bedroom for Trent while he ate his dinner. It gave her time to think about everything she'd learned. For the first time since waking in their basement, she felt comfortable around the men she now lived with. They had all suffered unfairness in their lives and had come together for safety. Now they were offering her a piece of that. It might not have been the kind of life she'd ever imagined, but it beat death.

It still hurt to know she'd never get pregnant. She reached down to place a hand over her stomach. Her and her sisters had always dreamed about getting married, having kids, and even buying homes in the same neighborhood as their parents, to keep their families close. That was important to all of them. Now her family would likely keep those plans, but she wouldn't be a part of that future.

She *hated* Rupert and the nest for taking everything away from her. She was glad they were dead.

A light tapping sounded on the door, and it opened before she could stand from where she sat on the bed. Jay peeked in and smiled, opening the door wide. "The guys are still eating dinner. I wanted to check on you." He came in and took a seat on the floor beside the bed.

Kate smiled. Jay was already becoming a good friend, and she liked him a lot. He was also a pleasure to look at, but not in a rugged way like Trent. He had beautiful, lively green

eyes with long black eyelashes, and a thick head of shiny black hair. Some man was going to fall madly in love with him someday. “I’m doing much better.”

“I’m sorry that I didn’t tell you about the pads you asked for. I just couldn’t break that kind of news to you. I didn’t have the heart.”

“May I ask you something?”

He nodded. “Sure.”

“You’re really a cougar shifter?”

“I am. Do you want to see me in my other form sometime?”

“I would love to!”

He glanced around. “Just not in here. There’s not enough room. My cat’s bigger than a normal one.”

“Really?”

“Most shifters are larger in size than the animals you’re familiar with. I overheard what Trent was saying to you.” He reached up and tapped his ear. “We have great hearing. Night vision.” He paused. “Sense of smell. Speed. Strength. I’m glad I’m not a human. I remind myself of that anytime I experience a little cabin fever being stuck here. I remember how I lived when I was alone, and I never want to go back to always being afraid of attacks.”

Kate had questions but she didn’t want to pry.

Jay grinned. “I can see the curiosity in your eyes, sweetie. What do you want to know?”

“Is it weird to live with Werewolves?”

“I’m grateful to them every day for taking me in. It is pure *hell* being all alone.” He shrugged. “I’ve kind of become the resident housewife.”

“Are you dating one of them?”

He threw back his head and laughed before grinning at her. “No. I just do their laundry, try to keep the common sections of the house clean, and generally pick up after them.” He lowered his voice. “Reef is a total slob. I feel sorry for the woman if he ever finds a mate.” He winked and started to speak at a normal volume. “I’m also good at fixing shit, which makes me the resident handyman. It’s the least I can do, since I’m unable to work with them or leave our territory. I tried to take over cooking but that didn’t turn out too well. I almost started a kitchen fire. It’s not as easy as those cooking shows make it look.”

“I can cook really well. How ironic is that? I don’t think Vampires eat food. Just thinking about it kind of makes me queasy.”

He put his finger to his lips, then whispered, “Don’t say that too loudly, or they’ll beg you to make dinner every night after they get home.”

Kate didn’t think it was a bad idea. “I should pull my weight somehow. I wouldn’t mind. Actually, it’s something I’d *want* to do.”

“Then I’m sure they’d appreciate it.”

She nodded. “I’ll offer. I could teach you if you want. My mom’s an amazing cook.”

“Tell me about your family.”

She smiled sadly. “We’re super tight. Most kids grow up wanting to move out the second they turn eighteen, but not my sisters and me. Dad talked us all into saving our money to buy homes. He’s the type to lay out all the facts in a way that always makes perfect sense. Mom, of course, just wanted us close. We could always talk about anything with each other, and we had a lot of fun.”

Jay reached up and rubbed her knee. “You miss them.”

“I do. It’s got to be tearing them up not knowing what happened to me. My family must think I’m dead. They know I’d never just walk away from them unless someone made sure I couldn’t come back.”

Jay turned his head, cocking an ear toward the door. “Trent and Cable are coming to feed you.” He stood. “Do you want me to stay to make you feel safer?”

“This room is kind of small.” She held his gaze. “I trust them.”

“Good. You can. Every other Werewolf would want me dead, but not these guys. They have huge hearts, Kate.” He walked out, leaving the door open.

Trent paused just outside. “Ready?”

She stood. “Yes. The hunger’s starting to hurt.”

He stepped inside, with Cable right behind him. Trent motioned for Kate to come closer. “Cable wants to hold your arms, if that’s okay.”

She felt embarrassed, remembering the evening before. “I understand.” She gave Cable a nod. “Thank you.”

“You’ll get better at learning control.”

She felt grateful that he wasn’t glaring at her this time, and his tone was pleasant. The words were even encouraging. She took a deep breath and faced Trent. “I’m ready when you are.”

Trent rolled up the sleeve of his shirt and bent his arm. “Try to bring down your fangs.”

She reached out and gently wrapped her hands around his arm, leaving space between them, where she’d bitten him before. There were no marks or bruises on his skin. He healed fast.

She waited a beat...and nothing happened.

“Close your eyes and try to think about blood. Maybe that will help,” Trent suggested.

She did as he said, visualizing how his blood had tasted. Her gums throbbed, and suddenly she felt her fangs touch her bottom lip. She opened her eyes and grinned, running her tongue over the sharp tips. “I did it!”

Trent chuckled. “Good. Now lean in, close your eyes, and inhale, see if you feel any urges. Go with them. Don’t fight it if you want to bite.”

“Lick his skin first. Your saliva not only heals, but it’s got a numbing agent,” Cable informed her.

She closed her eyes, putting her face close to Trent’s arm. She inhaled through her nose. He smelled really good. It didn’t even gross her out knowing that she needed to lick his skin. Her stomach rumbled and hunger hit. Suddenly, she really *wanted* to lick him, and so she did, a long swipe back and forth

over his inner wrist. Trent tasted warm and a bit salty. It was pleasant.

She inhaled again and moved closer, opening her mouth wide. Her fangs brushed against his skin, and she adjusted a little more—then bit.

Blood filled her mouth as she sealed her lips to his flesh. It was warm, and *so* good. A moan broke from her throat and she clutched Trent's arm tighter.

Cable gripped her upper arms and moved his body closer to her own, pressing his front to her back. "Easy," he ordered. "Your fingernails are growing and you're digging them into Trent."

She heard the words but she couldn't really understand what they meant. Her nipples beaded, her clit throbbed, and she tried to jerk away from Cable to get closer to Trent. She needed him! Cable's hands on her arms irritated her. She frantically twisted her upper body to break free.

It didn't work. He just tightened his hold until it hurt.

Blind rage filled her and she suddenly released Trent. A loud hissing sounded, and she turned, swiping out, trying to slap Cable. She didn't want him touching her!

He jumped back, hit the wall—and that's when she saw her hands. Her fingernails were longer and something red stained the tips of several. She stared, confused.

"Kate." Trent approached from behind and wrapped his arms around her, gently taking hold of her wrists, his firm body almost curled around hers.

She froze. The hissing had come from *her*. She let that sink in and she stared at Trent's arm...the one she'd been feeding from. He not only had two puncture wounds, but there were bloody scratches from her nails. The sight horrified her.

She wanted to apologize—but then she inhaled, scenting Trent again. She couldn't resist the need to lick the remaining blood. He tasted so damn good! Unlike Cable, she didn't mind Trent pressed up against her back. She liked it. He made her feel safe. Horny.

She clutched at his arm, more carefully this time, and cradled it against her mouth as she licked at the bites and scratches. He allowed it.

Trent held Kate in his arms as they stood in her room. She didn't bite him again, but her little tongue slid over his skin where she'd scratched him, soft moans escaping from her throat as she cleaned the blood from his wounds. He felt like a bastard when his dick hardened. Her ass rubbed against his jeans, not helping matters. The scent of her arousal filled the room.

Cable scowled at him.

He glared back.

Cable glanced down at Kate. "She tried to attack me."

He didn't like the way his friend was watching Kate, as if something was wrong with her. "She didn't mean to. It's not like a swipe of her tiny little claws were going to do much damage. You avoided them. No harm, no foul."

Cable held his gaze. "Not the point."

“What is?” He ignored the way Kate kept licking him, wiggling her body against his.

“I’m curious. Get ready to release her.”

Trent didn’t like the sound of that, but before he could ask what Cable had in mind, his best friend let his claws grow from his fingers and swiped one of them along his arm. Blood welled instantly.

Kate stopped licking Trent, sniffed, and jerked her head up, staring at Cable’s bleeding arm that he held out to her.

“Let her go,” Cable said.

“I told you that I’m the only one feeding her. Not you.”

“I don’t think she will. Let her go, Trent. This is important. Trust me.”

Trent hesitated, but finally he released Kate. She didn’t lunge toward Cable. She just stared at his bleeding arm...

Then she spun around, burying her face against Trent’s chest and clutching at his shirt with her tiny Vampire claws. They didn’t tear into him, but Trent felt the sharp tips through the thin material. Kate trembled against him. He put his arms around her to rub her back. It seemed to soothe her, and she stopped shaking.

“Fuck,” Cable snarled. He dropped his arm to his side, smearing blood on his clothes.

“What?”

Cable walked around him and stomped out of the bedroom. “We’ll discuss it later.”

Trent turned, making Kate move with him since she didn't seem to want to let him go. "She didn't try to bite you. That's a good thing."

"No," Cable called out, continuing down the hallway. "It's not."

Trent gave all his attention to Kate. She rubbed her body against him again, and he bit back a groan. His dick had grown rock hard. He gently pulled her away from him and stared into her beautiful green eyes. "Take deep breaths."

She kept her gaze locked with his but did as requested, sucking in air and blowing it out. Her dilated pupils retracted a little, taking on a more normal size. She broke eye contact and stared at her hands clutching him, before snatching them away. "Shit."

"It's okay. Perfectly normal."

She lifted her hands, staring at the sharp tips. "*This* is normal? My fingernails are all pointy and longer than they should be."

"Yes. Keep breathing and rationalize whatever made you angry. Vampires can grow claws when they're feeling threatened or enraged. What set you off about Cable, specifically?"

She bit her lip and lowered her head, staring at his chest. "I didn't want him touching me."

"Because he was holding you back from me?"

She remained silent.

“This is important, Kate. We need to figure out exactly what triggers certain instincts in you and find ways to work around them. You tried to attack Cable. Was it because he was keeping you from getting closer to me while you fed?”

She closed her eyes and sighed before meeting his gaze. “I just...didn’t want him touching me. Have you ever gone on a date with someone you felt no attraction toward, but they kept pawing at you? Then it becomes uncomfortable and unpleasant? It felt like that. It made me want to pull away from him. To make him stop touching me.”

Trent nodded. “Okay. I mean, it’s a little surprising. Females are naturally drawn to us because we put off pheromones. I’ve had plenty of human women just walk up and start touching me as if they have the right. It’s highly annoying.”

She ran her gaze over his body and sighed, hugging her waist. “I bet they do.”

“What does that mean?”

She arched her eyebrows and shook her head. “Seriously? You’re like a mountain of beef cake, Trent. Six-foot-forever, big blue eyes, and muscles that make a human overdosing on steroids look like he hasn’t taken enough. Only I bet your nuts aren’t shrunken, since you don’t need to take drugs. You *know* you’re hot.”

He grinned, amused. Kate had surprised him. She’d been pretty shy since entering the house, but now the things she blurted out...she was showing signs of a mouthy female. And he liked it. “My nuts are large, and I appreciate the compliment.”

A blush rose to her cheeks, and she darted her gaze away, then looked at him again. “I didn’t mean to attack Cable. I should apologize to him.”

Trent blocked the door. “Cable is fine. So you found it irritating that he was touching you? That’s fine. But Cable wasn’t hitting on you. He was trying to keep you from getting too close to me. Vampires have instincts, just like Werewolves do. When it comes to feeding, you need to learn to control them. It’s going to take time, but you *will* get a handle on them.”

“Do you think Cable will want me gone again after what happened?”

“No. I’m going to go talk to him. Just relax. You’re not going anywhere. I promise, Kate.”

Trent left her bedroom and closed the door. He went downstairs and sniffed, following Cable scent into the basement. They had a few punching bags hung from the rafters down there, and his friend was heavily abusing one of them with his fists.

“You’re going to break the bag.”

Cable lowered his fists and faced him. “You need to stop feeding her, Trent. There’s no more discussion about it. Done deal.”

“No. Not until she stops getting turned on by each feeding.”

Cable came closer and stopped before him. “She’s already fixated on you, damn it!”

“You annoyed Kate by touching her. That’s all it was.”

Cable shook his head. “I dated a Vamp, remember? Vivian loved to talk my ear off after we went a few rounds of sex, and I was too weak to get up from the blood loss. You could say I was a captive audience. Did I ever tell you why she fled her nest?”

“She hated them?” Trent shrugged. “They were assholes, like the ones we just rescued Kate from?”

“No. She was actually her master’s favorite for years. He spoiled her, made her think he was in love with her, and she was certain they’d be a couple forever. He even said so. Turns out he lied. Once he grew bored with Vivian, he picked up another young Vamp to fawn over. Only this one was super timid and refused to drink from humans.”

“What’s the point of telling me this?” Trent had a bad feeling in his gut.

“The master spoiled his new lover by allowing her to only drink his blood. Vivian was jealous as hell, since she doesn’t take kindly to losing him.” He jabbed his thumb at his chest. “She tried to kill *me* after I left her. When it comes to possessive types, she makes Weres look like amateurs.”

“So what, Vivian killed them both?” he guessed.

“She tried, but failed. Her master was pissed. He locked her up as punishment and flaunt his new relationship in front of her. He eventually grew bored of that woman, too, and found someone else. The discarded female was forced to try to drink blood from humans. She couldn’t. It was like she was addicted to the master’s blood, since it was all she’d fed on from the moment she was turned. She was starving, and Vivian said the girl would attack their master. Not to kill him,

but to get his blood. That's how Vivian eventually escaped. She promised the girl she'd help distract their master, help her get his blood, but of course, she fled the moment the girl released her from her cell."

"That's bullshit if you think Kate is getting addicted to my blood. She drank plenty of blood before I came into her life."

"Cold, random, unknown blood from a cup, Trent. Not fresh from the vein. Kate should have come for my blood the moment I cut myself, but she didn't. She's still young for a Vamp. I'm afraid if you keep feeding her, your blood will be all she ever craves."

"I'm not a Vamp master, and I think that story's bullshit."

"What if it isn't? What if you keep feeding her, and Kate becomes addicted to your blood? It's not a risk you can take."

He refused to listen to reason, even if a small part of his brain was recalling how Kate turned away from Cable's blood, clinging to Trent instead. "I can feed her. It's no big deal."

Cable snorted and shook his head, glaring at him. "Really? What about down the road when you find your mate? Do you think she'll feel understanding that you're letting a Vampire feed from your wrist? Take your blood? That your mate won't feel like ripping Kate's head off for you allowing another woman to touch you in an intimate way? *Come on*, Trent. You're not a moron. And what about Kate? One day, she might want to have a relationship. How is the guy going to feel about you feeding her, if the worst comes to pass and it turns out she can't feed from anyone else?"

“Fuck.” He knew that would be bad.

Then again, the idea of another man touching Kate made him feel enraged.

“From now on, we take turns offering blood to Kate. You’re done being the only one. She’s new to this way of feeding, so we need to vary who donates to her.”

“We’re not even sure that addiction nonsense is something that can happen.”

Cable stared at him like he was an idiot.

Trent threw his hands up. “Fine! Okay. You’re right. We can’t risk it if there *is* such a thing as blood addiction.”

“Damn straight. Now you’re thinking with this.” Cable tapped his temple. “Instead of your dick. I know you’re attracted to her, but she’s a Vamp, Trent. You’re our alpha. When you take a mate, it needs to be one you can breed with. That won’t ever be Kate.”

It twisted him up inside. “Don’t *ever* bring this topic up in front of her. She wanted to have babies. It tore her up when I had to be the one to tell her the truth. And you already know that.”

“I do.” Cable backed up and sighed. “For the next few nights, you should make yourself scarce. I’ll feed her next time. Then we’ll try Jay. We have an opportunity to see if Vampires can tolerate feline blood.”

“Kate’s not someone to fucking experiment on.”

“We need to know because we’re her only food supply until who knows when, since you’ve made her a part of our

pack.”

Trent nodded, conceding. “You’re right again. Sorry. And...I’ll do as you suggest. I’ll stay away tomorrow.”

“Thank you. I’m glad you’re listening to me.” He gave him a sympathetic look. “I’m your lead enforcer, Trent. It’s my job to look out for you.”

Chapter Seven

Kate wasn't sure what was going on, but she followed Jay downstairs the next evening. He'd said she was going to eat in the kitchen tonight, instead of in her bedroom. It made her feel nervous. "Am I like show and tell this evening for the pack? Oh look, Vampire fangs."

Jay chuckled. "No. We just felt you'd be more comfortable feeding in a common area of the house instead of your room."

She didn't agree with that, but she refused to complain. They had set her free from that hellish existence with the nest.

Cable and Reef were in the kitchen. There was no sign of Trent. She stopped, suddenly nervous.

Jay turned, holding her gaze. "What's wrong?"

She looked away from him to stare at Cable. "Are you going to make me leave?"

He scowled. "No. Trent says you can stay. You're staying."

"Where is he then?"

"Working late." Reef gave her a smile. "Don't look scared, Kate. We aren't going to hurt you. If you want to be fed in your bedroom, that's cool. We just thought you'd freak out if the two of us were in your private space. None of us are going to touch you in any way we shouldn't, you know? You're off limits. Like a sister."

Jay came closer. “You trust me, right? It’s fine. Trent will be home later. He knows Cable is going to feed you. Reef and I are here just to make sure you feel comfortable with it.” He paused. “I know what happens when you feed. I’ll make sure you stay in control.”

She felt terribly embarrassed. “I’d rather wait for Trent.”

Cable sighed and pushed off from where he leaned against the counter. “Kate?”

She glanced at him nervously.

“I’m just going to tell you this straight, okay? There might be this thing called blood addiction. How you reacted last night, by not wanting my blood and trying to attack me? That could be the first sign. We can’t allow you to get addicted to Trent’s blood, and the only way to avoid that is by making sure you can drink from others. If you don’t want to take my blood, Reef is here to offer. The bottom line, you’ll feed from one of us tonight.”

“Blood addiction?” She was alarmed by even the possibility.

“Trent’s the only person you’ve fed directly from, right? You drank all your blood in cups after it was cold, before we brought you here.”

She nodded. “Yes. I don’t know who it came from, but I was only fed cold blood.”

“I don’t know a whole hell of a lot about Vampire feeding habits, but I was told a story that implied Vamps could become addicted if they only drink one person over and over. That can’t happen with you and Trent.”

She was confused. “But it was only twice.”

“New Vamps go for a blood source when they’re hungry. *Any* blood source,” Reef explained in a soft voice. “That’s why Cable bled for you last night, to see if you’d feed. You didn’t go for his arm though. That wasn’t normal, Kate. We can’t take chances. Trent is our alpha.”

Kate thought everything they’d told her. “He needs to be strong in case anyone challenges your pack. Feeding me every time could make him vulnerable from blood loss.”

“Right,” Jay quickly answered. “That’s it exactly. Nailed it.”

“We can’t have our alpha feeling off his game,” Reef added. “So do you want my arm or Cable’s? I think my blood would taste better.” He shot Cable a grin when the Were growled. “Hey, you are what you eat. You like spicy shit. I should be much sweeter, since I love baked goods.”

Cable rolled his eyes, before he looked at Kate. “Just pick one of us.”

“I’m right here,” Jay reminded her. “I have your back, and I’ll keep hold of you. Is that okay?”

She wanted to flee to her room but hunger had already taken hold of her body, making her stomach hurt. “Thank you. Um, it doesn’t matter.”

Reef stepped forward and lifted his arm. “I’m way sweeter, Kate. Any woman would want a piece of me.” He chuckled as he let his fangs elongate and used the tip of one to scratch his arm.

Kate smelled the blood but she didn't lunge at him. The scent taunted her, teased her, but her fangs didn't drop.

"Fuck," Cable growled. "Feed, Kate. Do it for Trent. Just imagine it's him if it makes you feel better."

"Hey," Reef protested. "No one could mistake me for our alpha. I'm way hotter."

"Shut up," Jay hissed. He moved behind Kate and gently wrapped his arms around her waist. "Feed, sweetie. You need to. Just close your eyes, breath in that delicious blood scent, and go for it. Reef, put your arm right in front of her mouth."

She closed her eyes and let instinct take over. As soon as she scented the blood nearer to her lips, her gums throbbed and her fangs descended. Reef didn't smell as good as Trent, but hunger rose so strongly that Kate couldn't deny it any longer. She bit, and warmth spread up her fangs.

She was doing it. She was feeding from someone else. She didn't feel lost to the hunger, but that just helped her remain aware of her surroundings as she fed. Jay kept her almost cocooned against his large body, his arms wrapped around her middle. She didn't get turned on. She didn't struggle to get closer to Reef. There was no urge to move at all, actually. Just to drink and feed.

Her fangs slid up once she felt full, and she licked the puncture wounds to help Reef heal. She opened her eyes as she lifted her head. Reef pulled his arm back and smiled. It didn't quite reach his eyes.

"What's wrong?" Then Kate remembered. "I'm so sorry! I forgot to lick your skin first. Did I hurt you?"

“Sadly, no.” He pushed out his lower lip into a pout. “I was warned that you might try to attack me, but you didn’t.”

Cable growled low. “Behave.”

She glanced at him.

“You did good, Kate.” His tone was encouraging but the look in his eyes said the opposite.

“Did I do something upsetting?”

“No.”

She frowned. “Don’t lie to me. Please, Cable. I can see that something has you upset or angry.”

“You didn’t get confused with Reef.” Cable paused. “Which is a good thing.”

She still wasn’t convinced. “Confused?”

“Your hunger. Most newbies confuse blood hunger with sexual need.”

“I didn’t turn you on.” Reef drew her attention by grabbing his heart. “I’m devastated. I’m so going to have to visit a bar soon and allow human women to crawl all over me to fix my wounded pride.” He winked at her as he dropped his hands. “I’ll live.”

Jay released her. “Our Kate is just special. She’s a fast learner. Not to mention, she’s not really a newbie. Just with feeding from the vein. It’s all good.” He took her hand. “Let’s go watch a movie.” He tugged her toward the living room.

Kate allowed him to pull her away, but Cable’s continued frown bothered her. Jay indicated she should sit on the couch, and he browsed the movie collection, grabbed a DVD case

from the shelf, and showed it to her. “Girl movie. I love this one. It’s funny as shit.”

She faked a smile. “Looks great.”

He put it on and finally sat on the couch a few feet from her. “Why are you still upset?”

She turned her head and saw him watching her. “There’s something’s wrong with me, isn’t there? Did those Vampires mess me up when they made me somehow? Am I the equivalent of a flawed or damaged Vamp?”

Jay glanced over the back of the couch before scooting closer. He lowered his voice to a whisper. “No. I don’t think that’s it.”

“Cable—”

“Cable hated me when I first got here. He said I’d get them all killed when other packs attacked to tear my ass apart. *No* pack would normally harbor a cat shifter. It didn’t happen, of course. He just loves Trent like a brother and he worries about everything way too much. It’s his job, as lead enforcer.”

Jay reached out and took her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. “The truth is, you weren’t treated as if you were a part of that Vampire nest. It makes you unique, but not flawed, Kate. I think it’s normal that you get aroused by Trent and only want to drink his blood. You’re attracted to him.”

She felt her cheeks warm but she didn’t look away from her friend.

“Cable’s concerns about making sure you can feed from all of us are relevant, but I think he’s forgetting that you’re our special Vampire.” Jay leaned in and kissed her forehead. He

released her hand and scooted back. “That damn nest didn’t strip you of your humanity. You might have a Vamp bod, but your feelings and heart are still yours. Cable’s not taking that into account. I am. You’re perfect just as you are.”

She relaxed and began to watch the movie. It was a romantic comedy...and she even managed some laughs.

* * * * *

Trent couldn’t take it anymore. He called Cable. “Well?”

“She fed from Reef.”

Jealousy hit hard over hearing that news and pure rage boiled his insides. He fought it back and tried to find calm. “Is she alright?”

“She’s fine.”

Something in Cable’s cool tone set off his anger again. “And? What aren’t you telling me?”

“She drank from him...”

“But? Did he hit on her when she lost it? Was she upset? Fucking tell me, damn it!”

“She didn’t get turned on. She just drank from Reef and that was it. No frenzy, no sexual excitement. Right now, her and Jay are in the living room watching some chick flick and laughing.”

The news soothed Trent. “Good.”

“You might want to hit the bar before you leave town to check on Reef, though. He took off to have some drinks afterward.” Cable snorted.

“Why?”

“His ego is shot to shit. I repeatedly warned him about how Kate reacted to you, just in case. Threatened to beat the shit out of him if he didn’t keep control of his dick while she fed, because I assumed he’d be the one holding her while she took from *my* arm. The fact that his blood did nothing for Kate was a blow for him. You know how much all women love him. Just ask him. He’ll tell you.” Cable chuckled. “You should have seen the look on his face. It blew his huge ego out of the water. Just stop by the bar when you leave the office to check on him. He actually seemed depressed.”

Trent hesitated. “I’m not in town. I’m at the barn.”

Cable snarled, and Trent heard the back door to the house open seconds later. His best friend stormed outside, disconnecting the call.

Trent shoved his cell into his pocket and waited, leaning against the building.

Cable stopped in front of him, glaring. “You promised to stay away from Kate while she fed.”

“I’m away from her.”

“Damn it, Trent!”

“I wanted to be close in case she couldn’t take blood from one of you, or if she flipped out.”

Cable moved over and leaned against the wall next to him. “What are you *doing*, man? You know Kate is off limits. This can’t happen. Talk it out with me.”

“What do you want me to say?” Trent said quietly, staring at the house.

“You want her.”

“I do,” he finally admitted aloud.

“It can’t work out.”

Trent inched closer until their shoulders touched. “Why not?”

“Damn it, Trent. You’re our alpha. One day, everyone is going to expect you to take a mate, have kids to lead the pack in the future, and that can’t happen with her.”

“I never asked for this.”

“But you *did*. When you talked me into saving each of their asses and bringing them home with us. It was your bright idea to form a pack. We bought this farm to create a territory.”

Trent knew he was right. “We’re not a normal pack.”

Cable snorted and turned, staring at him. “Ain’t that the fucking truth.”

“I would encourage *you* if you wanted a woman, no matter what she was. Don’t we deserve love?”

Cable’s eyes widened. “Love?”

“Maybe?” Trent wouldn’t lie to his best friend. They were much more than that, actually. Like brothers. They’d been through a lot together. It had closely bonded them. “I want Kate more than I’ve ever wanted anything or anyone. She’s been in my thoughts from the second I found her in that basement. The moment I saw her, I just wanted to keep her safe. My gut instincts were to protect her. To hold her. It was

so damn strong and it's not easing off. Hell, it's only grown worse."

Cable grimly stared at him. "Okay. Let's play this out in our heads. Say you stop fighting it and take her to bed. What happens if it's just an itch that fades? You made her part of our pack. It's not like some hook-up from a bar. She'll still live in the house, sleeping right next door to you.

"And we both know you also won't let anyone else feed her if you're fucking her. Blood addiction is still a real possibility. What if Kate *does* get addicted, and this attraction fades? Go there in your head and imagine finding another woman, someone you want to bond with. No mate will share your body with your ex-lover, even if it's just blood. I know damn well you wouldn't expect a mate to share you, either, not after your childhood. You never want to be anything like Cruz, intentional or not."

"Fuck." Trent didn't even want to imagine it. Just the idea of pitting two women against each other made him sick at heart. "I can't see wanting anyone more than I want Kate."

"Look...I'm just saying, take this shit slow. You rush into anything with Kate and it could end in disaster."

"I'm out here, aren't I? I didn't feed her tonight."

Cable gave him a sad smile. "Are you fighting the urge to beat the shit out of Reef?"

"A little."

"I'm glad I didn't feed her, then." He sighed. "So... where's your head at on going into town to join him at the bar, maybe picking up a woman to fuck? It might cut the edge off

your lust somewhat. I know it's been at least a few months since you got laid."

Trent shook his head. "No. It wouldn't help. I'm fixated on Kate." He glared at him and scowled. "How do you know when I last fucked someone?"

"It's my job to keep tabs on everyone. We need to take a trip for Jay soon. It's been over *four* months for him. I'm worried he'll grow touch-starved."

Trent appreciated the distraction. "What about Parker?"

Cable chuckled. "No worries there."

"What are you talking about? He never leaves the house, and when he does, it's only to go to the office."

"You know that widow neighbor of ours? The one who calls the house phone when she needs help at her place? He does more than move her furniture or fix leaky pipes."

"I didn't realize."

"He's sly about it, but he didn't use her shower before he came home a few times. Parker is getting laid plenty. So are the brothers."

"I never worry about the brothers. They get more action than all of us combined. What about you?"

"Same ol'."

"I don't know how you can stand those condescending pack bitches."

"Bedding Werewolves is better than finding human lovers. I don't care who else they fuck and they make no demands of me. They aren't interested in a mate, only getting

off on being with someone considered almost rogue. I don't give a shit what they think of my status or lack thereof. I'm just there to get laid. They're more than happy to hook up at a motel between territories when I call. No feelings involved. It's perfect."

Trent wasn't so sure about that, but none of the alphas of those women had called him to complain about Cable hooking up with their pack females. "At least you don't have to use condoms."

Cable nodded. "Unlike the brothers. They buy them in bulk. *Every* woman they screw is human. I'm always worried that a condom will break. Talk about a disaster. They don't exactly pick women who would fit into our pack dynamic. Both tend to go for wild types that are unlikely to settle down."

"We all need female contact. Them more so than us. Even their mother basically shunned them after their births."

"That's true." Cable sighed. "Are you okay enough to see Kate without growling at her for taking Reef's blood? Your instincts might see that as a betrayal, even if you know it's bullshit. It wasn't her choice to feed from him."

He wasn't sure, but he'd hide his feelings. "I need to be okay with it. So I will be."

"Take it slow."

"I heard you."

"You still look tense. Maybe I should run interference, and you can just go up to your bedroom to avoid her tonight."

Trent wanted to see Kate, talk to her, and make certain that she was okay. But he couldn't deny that he *did* feel jealousy. It would be bad if he snapped at Kate over something that wasn't her fault. Mistreating her in any way didn't sit well with him. "That's probably the smart thing to do."

"Yeah. Follow me. I'll make sure she's on the couch, and you can sneak up the stairs."

"Just...watch out for her for me."

"I will."

Chapter Eight

Trent seemed to be avoiding Kate. It made her unhappy and nervous. Had he changed his mind about letting her stay with his pack? She hadn't seen him after feeding from Reef. She'd heard a noise in his bedroom before dawn broke that night. When she'd woken after her day sleep, Jay told her Trent was working late again. That night, she'd fed from Cable.

The good news was that Trent seemed to be the only one she became aroused by while feeding. It was just blood from Reef and Cable. It satisfied her hunger pains and tasted way better than drinking it cold.

Now it was the third night she'd been told Trent would be working late.

After showering and dressing for the evening, she walked into the kitchen and opened the fridge. The ingredients she'd asked Reef to buy were waiting. She pulled out twelve pounds of chicken breasts, then checked the cupboard and found the other things she'd requested. She preheated the oven before getting to work.

Parker came in through the back door and paused, frowning. "What are you doing?"

"Cooking."

He kept a good six feet away. She'd noticed he seemed leery of her every time they were in a room together. "Are you not comfortable with women, or is it because I'm a Vampire?"

She didn't like feeling tension between her and the others. It was best to just drag out the elephant in the room and discuss the problem.

He hesitated. "I'm not stable enough to trust myself around strangers."

She located a knife and began slicing the cleaned chicken breasts on the big cutting board. The block of wood looked old, probably a leftover from the original homeowners. Jay had told her they'd been an elderly couple who'd just taken what they wanted when they downsized to move to Florida, leaving a ton of stuff behind. That included furniture, dishes, equipment in the sheds and barn, and even some cold-weather clothing in the closets that the pack actually used.

She gave Parker a smile, hoping he'd say more.

"I was bullied." He cleared his throat.

Sympathy welled inside her. "I'm so sorry." It also surprised her. "May I ask about what? I mean, you're a very good-looking man. You're also pretty big. You look like you can defend yourself. The kids I knew growing up who had to deal with that bullshit...well, looks and weakness were the two main factors. Did you have horrible acne or something? Not that you have to tell me. You don't. I'm just curious."

"I was...different." He moved over and leaned against the wall, still remaining as far from her as possible. "I always loved computers. The other pups wanted to roam outside and hunt and interact with each other. Meanwhile, I was playing video games. Werewolf pups tend to be very physical. I just wasn't."

She put the chicken in a waiting mixing bowl and seasoned it. “They gave you a hard time about that,” she guessed.

“You have no idea. My father was the lead enforcer of our pack. I was a huge embarrassment to him. My mother too. Even my siblings. Dad tried to toughen me up. It was brutal.”

She paused, hoping that wasn’t as bad as it sounded.

“He’d beat the hell out of me, and he even asked the other pups to attack me as a way to sharpen my senses and fighting instincts.” Parker reached down, tugged his shirt free where it was tucked into his jeans, then twisted his body. He flashed his bare back, where Kate saw faint scars up and down his back. They looked like claw marks. He dropped his shirt and leaned against the wall again.

“That’s horrible, Parker.”

“It was. It got to the point that I felt like most of the pack had declared open season on me every time I left my house. I tried to avoid that at all costs, and my father would just throw me outside. He’d refuse to let me back in until he was certain I’d done some ‘training’.”

Kate wanted to hug Parker, but she stayed where she was. “I’m so sorry.”

He shrugged. “It is what it is. I have a problem with my shifting because of it.”

“You can’t shift? Is it because of the scars? Does it hurt or something?”

“The opposite. I shift without meaning to. It’s from years of being attacked without warning. It became second nature to

just shift at any sound that startled me. Eventually, it got so bad that I just stayed in my other form at all times, and shortly after that, I ran away from my pack. Cable and Trent found me in my four-legged form. I'd been living that way for at least a year. I eventually realized that they weren't going to attack me. They had to coax me into returning to skin. It took weeks."

She blinked back tears. "That's terrible."

Parker shrugged, acting like it was no big deal.

She disagreed. His pack should be shot for what they'd done to him. "How old were you when that started?"

"About eight."

Tears filled her eyes.

"Don't," he grunted. "Please. I didn't tell you so you'd pity me. I just didn't want you thinking that I hate you. I don't. I just haven't learned to trust you yet. Not that you're much of a threat to me, but I'm a big threat to you."

That made her feel a little fearful.

Parker seemed to sense it. Maybe he could smell it. "When I shift, I tend to automatically attack if I feel threatened at the time. I can pull it back quickly now, but it's still a problem for a few seconds, until my brain can override my instincts to fight. It doesn't sound like a long time but that's enough for me to lunge and bite into someone. That's why I try to avoid you and keep my distance. I'm afraid that you'll startle me, and I'll shift and attack before I realize that you didn't mean me any harm. Give me a few weeks and I'll be fine around you."

“I understand. And I didn’t tear up out of pity. I did so because no child, of any species, should ever have to endure what you did. I’m sorry for what your family put you through.”

He stared at her for a long moment. “I’m sorry some crazy Vampires kidnapped you and changed you into one of them.”

She smiled through her sadness. “Me too.”

“You were lucky though.”

“Lucky?” She wasn’t ready to believe that.

“Most Vampires grab pretty women to become fuck-and-sucks. Which is just like it sounds. The nest didn’t rape you, since they were saving you for someone. You *were* lucky. It might not feel that way, but that nest that made you? It was a really bad one. They killed a lot of humans. And they let other victims wake up, knowing they’d been sexually assaulted, but their minds were wiped of who’d done it. They just remembered the hurt and the pain. That’s some sick shit right there.

“The cops were beginning to think they had a serial rapist on their hands. Someone who drugged their victims and forced them to meticulously clean their bodies afterward. No DNA was ever found in the victims’ rape kits. The fuckers cut the women with knives to account for the blood loss. That’s when we were alerted and started to hunt them down.”

She shuddered. “I’m glad you found them. And me.”

“I’ve been trying to find any traces of Remi, the son you told Trent about, but have come up with nothing so far.

Vampires are difficult to track online. Especially without an image to go by. The older ones rarely have cell phones or computers. They tend to use humans to buy them things, or they steal from them. It's easy for them to get what they want with their mind control abilities."

"How did you find the nest?"

"We searched every industrial building just outside of town that wasn't being used. I'm good at hacking into records departments for just about any city, real estate sites, that sort of thing. You were in a warehouse with only two other businesses nearby. Both were open during the day, but closed well before the sun went down. It was our sixth location check. Remote houses were going to be next. Not that many Vamps like human dwellings. Houses tend to have at least one window in almost every room. It's too much of a bother to cover them all. Hence their preference for any warehouses with limited windows."

Jay came pounding down the stairs and he rushed into the kitchen. "I came to help!" He grinned. "I'm throwing myself at your mercy. Teach me how to cook, oh goddess."

Kate laughed at his dramatics. "Okay."

"Are you a good cook?"

She beamed at Parker. "I am. Not to brag, but my grandparents were both professional chefs. They taught my mom everything she knows in the kitchen, and she passed that down to all three of her daughters."

"Let us begin," Jay declared, rushing to the sink to wash his hands.

Parker shook his head, scowling at Jay.

She met his gaze when he looked her way. “What?”

He shot a glare at Jay. “You should tell her the truth. We’re pack. Lies between us are bad.” Without another word, Parker fled the kitchen.

She turned, peering up at her new friend. “What is he talking about?”

Jay bit his lip, wiping his hands on a dishtowel. “Um...” He sighed. “*Fine*. He’s right. Okay.” He sucked in a deep breath and blew it out. “I was raised in a really horrific pride. Cougar shifters are basically slaughtered by Werewolves in the States. It’s always been that way, until very few of us remained alive. Most prides fled here originally because they were dealing with overpopulation in other countries.” He snorted. “So ironic. They were being culled by their own prides, so leaving the States wasn’t an option. We lived in secluded areas, kept to ourselves, and basically hid, since there are hundreds of packs throughout the United States.”

Kate filed that information away.

“The packs were killing off cougar shifters so fast, the main goal of my pride was to force our women to birth as many cubs as possible, to ensure we didn’t go extinct completely. It’s just super fucked-up that they’d even do that. I have six older sisters. When one of them would go into heat, men would—” His voice broke.

Kate walked over to him. “You don’t have to tell me this.”

“I do. It’ll help you understand why I lied to you. Or really, why I was *able* to lie to you...

“When they’re in heat, women in my pride aren’t allowed to say no to men. Having a cub is deemed more important. The more men who fuck them, the higher the chance of the women getting pregnant. Our pride leader would make lists of anywhere from five to seven men to breed with each woman during her heat.”

Kate gasped, horrified.

Jay lowered his voice and stared at the floor. “It didn’t seem to bother the men in my pride how they got those cubs, as long as our numbers rose.” He met Kate’s gaze and anger flashed. “I watched my six sisters get brutalized over and over by my own pride, forced to birth their cubs. I was much younger, and unable to do anything about that horror show.”

“Jesus. I’m so sorry, Jay.” Trent had told her that all their pack members had tragic pasts. He’d been right.

“I realized at a young age that when I hit maturity, my pride would expect me to breed cubs too. I never wanted to hurt women or force someone to birth my cubs. The very thought sickened me. Being gay helped me avoid that. First, I wouldn’t have been able to get it up for a woman.” He motioned to the front of his jeans. “Second, those idiots actually thought I’d make gay babies. They weren’t about to risk that. I got my fair share of beatings for trying to defend my sisters, and even more for being useless as a male to my pride.”

“They beat you?”

“Oh yeah. I was deeply hated. It didn’t keep some of those assholes from asking me to blow them,” he sneered. “That was a big hell no. I hated every male in my pride. Not a single one of them was decent. Not even my own father. Anyway, they eventually booted me out. And I mean they literally put me in a small plane—I got a parachute, at least—and they shoved me out once I was far enough away from the pride that they felt I had zero chance of making it back to them alive. I would have had to traverse countless pack territories to do so.”

She walked up to him and gave him a tight hug. “You poor thing! I’m glad they didn’t flat-out murder you. I was forced to watch Rupert murder one of his Vampires.”

“They would have, except my sisters, who loved me dearly, would have lost their shit if our pride leader had executed me. That was his compromise. They banished me in a way that assured I could never return. One of the pricks who pushed me out of the plane was filming to prove I was still alive at the time.”

“I can’t believe that happened to you.”

He gave her one last squeeze, then released her, taking a step away. “The guys found me and brought me here. Sanctuary for one lucky cat shifter.” A tender smile curved his lips. “Then one night, Trent brought home this terrified Vampire, and she saw herself in a mirror for the first time since her turning. Total gut-wrenching breakdown in the shower. All the guys could hear her sobs, and it wrecked us. Tore our heart out, hearing her cries. Our shifter instincts were screaming that *someone* needed to go in there to comfort her,

but we all have big, scary dicks. She'd have probably thought we were barging in to rape her or something... Am I right?"

He was talking about her, obviously. Kate nodded. "I did think it was a possibility that a single woman living with six men spelled trouble for me."

"Right. But you were wrong, because none of us would ever hurt you. Do you believe that now?"

"I do." She didn't have to think about it.

"Good. Anyway, we figured only a gay guy could march into that bathroom and pick your broken heart up off the shower floor and soothe your fears." He pointed a thumb at his chest.

"I still don't understand what that has to do with a lie?"

"I spent my entire life, since I was a tween, convincing everyone in my pride that I'm gay...but the truth is, I'm not. It was a ruse to make certain no woman was forced to birth my cubs."

Kate gasped. She felt sucker-punched.

Jay took another step back, to put a little more space between them. "Lifetime of acting, darling." He dramatically cocked one hip and put his hands on them, batting his eyes at her. Then he turned serious, straightened to his full height, and let his hands drop to his sides. "In truth, I'm only attracted to women, and always have been. I hope you can forgive me for deceiving you, Kate. I planned to tell you eventually, but Parker is right. Someone is going to mess up at some point. The guys love to tease me about being a pussy magnet because, you know... I'm a cat."

She just stared at him, still processing.

“Are you upset?”

She finally shook her head. “I understand why you did it in the past, and even more recently with me.” Kate surprised herself by laughing. “You’re a really good actor. I was completely fooled.”

He approached her, pulling her into a hug. She wrapped her arms around his waist and squeezed back.

Jay kissed the top of her head. “I *do* want to be your very platonic best friend still. We’re both housebound, since it’s too dangerous for us to leave this territory. And I still want you to teach me how to cook. Are we good?”

“We’re great.” She laughed again. “You really should be an actor.”

He chuckled. “I should let you go now. You’re a beautiful woman, and it’s been a long time since I’ve had someone so hot standing this close to me. I don’t want to scare you if I pop a boner. You’re totally my type.”

She laughed again, knowing he was teasing.

A loud snarl startled Kate—then she was suddenly ripped out of Jay’s arms.

Trent was furious. He’d walked in to find Jay holding Kate closely, and he’d caught his last words.

Jay jumped back, both of his hands coming up, showing his palms. “Easy, man! I wasn’t making a pass at her.”

Kate pressed against Trent, putting herself between him and Jay. “He wasn’t hitting on me!”

Trent glanced down at her. Kate was as beautiful as ever. Her hair was pulled away from her face tonight, held back in a ponytail. Her big green eyes were wide as she peered up at him. He took a calming breath and softened his hold.

“He just told me the truth. The not-being-gay part, and we’re just friends. He was joking with me. It wasn’t anything more than that.”

Trent relaxed further. “Sorry.” He tore his gaze off Kate to stare at Jay. “Rules are there for a reason.”

“Totally innocent, man. Swear. I had just come clean with her about why I’d lied. We made up. Not making out.”

“Got it.” Trent released Kate and peered around the kitchen. “You’re cooking?”

“She’s going to teach me,” Jay admitted. “It seems Kate here knows what she’s doing with pots and pans. No sandwiches or reheated frozen pizzas tonight.”

Trent nodded. “Okay. I’m going to go take a shower.”

He strode away, taking the stairs fast. Trent felt like a fool. He’d just walked into the kitchen, seen Kate in Jay’s arms, heard the word “boner”, and that set him off. Jealousy was a bitch, and it had taken hold of him hard.

He entered his bedroom and closed the door, snarling under his breath.

He stripped as he entered his bathroom and turned on the water. The house was old and it sometimes took a few minutes

for the hot water to reach upstairs. He stepped in and closed his eyes, allowing the still warming water to soak his skin. He leaned his head into the spray, letting it wash over his face.

He wanted Kate. His dick hardened just thinking about her. It happened all the time now. Cable had a point. It would probably help if he got laid but the idea of picking up some woman in the bar held zero appeal. They weren't who he wanted. Just Kate.

It shouldn't happen. Cable had made valid points. A lot of them. His pack depended on him now. He'd made promises to them. Their very lives were in his hands. He was the glue keeping them together and the connections he'd made kept the other packs from seeing them as a threat. One day he was expected to have sons, at least one, to take over.

It wouldn't have to be for a long time though. Their pack wasn't ready for cubs, and he'd met alphas who were hundreds of years old. They would hopefully expand their pack in the coming years, bringing in more men like them. Outcasts from shit packs who wanted better lives and would fit right in. Possibly some with alpha blood.

Cable had strong alpha blood too. His best friend could take over easily, but the others would balk at following him. He was too gruff and rough around the edges. That was the bad thing about being the reasonable one. It left Trent in charge, and he didn't foresee that changing anytime soon.

He might not like it but the pack needed him. And he needed them right back. His pack gave him hope for the future.

He ended his shower, ignoring his stiff dick, and got dressed. The idea of facing Kate kept him inside his room. He checked his cell phone before turning on his computer at the desk in the corner. No messages waited for him in the company email account.

A new job would at least keep him busy. They'd just wrapped up their most recent case today. Just thinking about it made him snort. He'd never seen himself becoming a bounty hunter for humans, or a private investigator. Before leaving the office, he'd handed over photos that Kleve had taken for a human male who'd paid to have his wife followed. She was having an affair. Kleve had climbed a tree and gotten photos of the wife going at it with another guy.

Humans had screwed-up lives. Mated Werewolf couples couldn't get away with cheating, but humans males couldn't smell other men on their women. They often had to pay someone like Trent and his pack to learn the truth. Today, the husband had shed tears in Trent's office. The poor bastard loved his wife, and the news devastated him. The client had been hopeful that she really *did* belong to some wine club with a bunch of other housewives—the story she gave him for her weekly absences—instead of spending time banging someone else. Now he had photographic evidence of her betrayal.

Trent got up to pace. The smell of something delicious teased his nose. Whatever Kate was cooking made his stomach rumble with hunger. He cursed and stalked to his door, going back downstairs. Hiding from her wasn't an option. He wasn't a coward.

Kate stood at the stovetop tending to three large pots. Jay hovered at her side, watching her every move. Trent ground his teeth together, not liking the cougar that close to her.

“That looks easy enough,” Jay murmured.

“I had Reef buy boxed stuffing and packaged mashed potatoes, since you said you wanted to learn. I thought we’d start the easier way,” Kate chuckled. “I didn’t want to scare you off.”

Jay laughed. “Thanks for that.”

“What’s for dinner?” Trent cleared his throat. “It smells really good.”

Kate turned, a smile on her lips, and her big green eyes locked onto him. “Something simple. I’m baking mushroom gravy chicken strips, and we’re having mashed potatoes, stuffing, and green beans with it. I didn’t know if you guys liked potatoes or stuffing more, so I decided to serve both.”

“That sounds wonderful.” Trent’s stomach growled in anticipation.

Kate beamed. “Good. I just hope I made enough. I have two baking dishes in the oven. One usually feeds six to eight people, so I doubled up. I figured two pounds of meat per person.”

“I told her we tend to eat a lot.” Jay winked at him.

“Yes, we do,” Trent agreed. “I think that’s the first time the oven has been used since we bought the place.”

“Not so.” Parker entered the kitchen. “I’ve warmed plenty of frozen pizzas in that oven. What do you think I do?”

Micro them all?”

“I didn’t think about it,” Trent confessed. “I was just grateful when you yelled for us to come eat and food waited on the counter to dig into.”

Parker chuckled. “Jay warned her that if she’s any good at this, we’re all going to beg her to cook for us every night.”

“I can do that,” Kate quickly offered. “I like earning my keep in some way.”

Her words had Trent frowning. “You don’t owe us, Kate.”

She went back to stirring stuff on the stove inside the pots. “Maybe not, but I want to pitch in. And it gives me something to do. I love to cook. The women in my family take turns during the week preparing dinner. It makes me feel... normal.”

Trent inwardly winced but kept his tone light when he spoke. “Then by all means, have at it. We deeply appreciate food. If it tastes half as good as it smells, we’re going to love it.”

“Oh my God.” Reef rushed into the kitchen from the back door. “Is that...” He inhaled deeply. “Kate, I think I love you.”

Trent shot him a dirty look.

“What?” Reef met his gaze. “I know damn well no one else cooks in this house so it has to be her.” He sniffed again. “Whatever it is, I can’t wait to eat. How much longer?”

“Look at the oven timer, dumbass.” Kleve had followed him in. “Five minutes.”

“Someone should set the table,” Parker reminded them.
“In the dining room.”

Trent had to step out of the way as Kleve and Reef rushed to open cabinets to grab plates. Parker went for silverware. Even Jay got into it by yanking open the fridge to grab beers, carrying them into the next room.

It left him alone with Kate. “Thank you for doing this.”

“It really is my pleasure.” She turned off the flames under the pots, putting lids on them to keep the food warm. Then she turned to him. “How have you been?”

He stared deeply into her eyes, and the urge to get closer had him locking his body in place. He wanted to touch her so badly. “Good. Just finished our last open case before I left the office.”

“Criminal caught or were you being a detective?”

“Detective. Cheating spouse.”

Her eyebrows shot up. “I take it that his wife is going to take him to the cleaners? You know, screw him in the divorce by taking a big chunk of his money for touching another woman?”

“The offender *was* the wife. The husband hired us.”

“Oh.”

“He cried.”

Her features softened. “That’s so sad.”

“Yeah. Older guy with a younger wife. He seemed to really love her. She, on the other hand, seems to care more about her lover. He lives in the guesthouse of one of their

neighbors. Paid helper. Kind of a groundskeeper and driver. Thankfully, the husband had her sign a prenup. The pictures I handed him will probably star in their divorce proceedings to make sure it sticks. She won't get to screw him twice by taking his house or money so her and her lover can upgrade from that tiny place where they were meeting."

"Damn. Well, that's good for the husband at least."

"He was hoping to be wrong." Trent shrugged.

"Do you work for a lot of humans?"

"Yeah. Those jobs tend to be easy. I had Reef bump into the wife after she returned from a night out, and he smelled sex and another male on her. So we knew she was cheating. It was just a matter of following her, getting the proof, and handing it over to the husband. It saves time if we can figure out right away if the party is guilty or innocent. We'd have told him he was wrong immediately if she'd smelled like wine and other women." At Kate's confused frown, he explained, "That's who she was supposed to be spending the evening with. Wine club turned out to be code words for screwing around on her husband."

"Poor guy."

The oven timer dinged. Trent grabbed the mitts on the island before she could. "I've got it." He opened the oven, seeing two big glass dishes with foil wrapped over them. He took one out and paused, looking around.

"Cutting boards. Just put them down on those. I didn't want to damage the old counters in here. I'm not sure what

they're made of but I suspect some kind of plastic coating over plywood."

He carried the first one to the thick wooden cutting board Kate had placed on the mobile island, before setting the second one on another board. She closed the oven and turned it off.

"Sorry. We changed out a few of the older appliances in here but we left the rest of the kitchen alone."

She glanced around. "I figured. It screams nineteen-seventies but I noticed the oven and fridge are new."

"The microwave too. There wasn't one originally, or maybe they took it with them. There was no cutout in the cabinets for one."

"It's a big house."

"That's why we bought it. It might be a little outdated but it came with enough room for all of us and lots of land."

She met his gaze. "What's considered 'lots'?"

"Close to four hundred acres. We bought up another hundred and ten a few months ago, when one of our neighbors needed some fast money. She sold off a section of her land that butts up to ours. We're hoping she sells us more. She's got close to three hundred that she doesn't use for anything."

"Does she know what you are?"

"No. She's human. No other packs are within miles of us or the town. That's why we settled here. The nearest pack is about a forty-minute drive."

"Do they ever bother you?"

He shook his head. “No. Arlis is a good alpha. Nothing like my father. His pack members are solid, decent Weres. They’re the closest pack to us and they leave us alone. Graves sends us work from their pack sometimes, actually.”

“Graves?”

“He’s a judge. It’s kind of complicated, but he lives with that pack. He was born there and his family are still members.”

“A judge? Like a human one? He holds court and stuff?”

“It’s complicated, like I said. Sometimes things happen in packs that an alpha doesn’t want to handle. Especially if it involves a close friend or family member. They hire Graves to come in to sort it out. He doles out the punishment if he finds them guilty of a crime.”

She scrunched up her nose. “That doesn’t sound like a good job. What kind of punishment?”

“It can be anything from a beating to death. It depends on what they did.”

Cable cleared his throat loudly from the doorway leading to the dining room. “We’re all starving. No one else wanted to interrupt but speaking of punishment, it’s like torture to smell whatever Kate made while not being able to eat.”

Kate blushed. “Oh! Sorry.”

Trent grinned. He didn’t even realize the guys hadn’t returned to the kitchen. It was nice of them to stay in the other room so that he and Kate could have some alone time. His pack was pretty great. And hungry. So was he.

He picked up one of the covered dishes, including the wooden board, ready to enjoy his first meal in the dining room with his pack.

Chapter Nine

Kate ignored her hunger, sitting at the table watching the guys dig into the food. She had zero interest in tasting any of it. Real food no longer held any appeal. From their groans and the way they ate so fast, the men seemed to enjoy it. She was grateful that she'd listened to Jay about increasing the portions. Each werewolf had second and third helpings.

Reef swallowed his mouthful, smiling at her. "You have to marry me now, if this is what you can do with the stuff you had me pick up at the grocery store. I was leery about the boxed side dishes, but no more. I'm a believer."

She laughed. Trent growled at him, glaring. It made her crack up harder.

"She added stuff to it," Jay informed them. "Extra butter, chives, and cheese to the mashed potatoes. Some seasoning and extra butter to the stuffing. Those weren't in the instructions. I read them, but she didn't."

"I'm not a big fan of baked chicken, but I love whatever the hell this is," Kleve said, getting another helping of the chicken from an almost empty glass dish.

Parker nodded. "Delicious. I've tried to make the boxed stuffing but it came out dry. My packaged mashed potatoes weren't this good either."

"My mom taught us some great shortcuts to make them better. All of us work, so we had to cut corners during the week." Memories flashed of her mom standing behind the

island in the kitchen, giving them lessons when they were little girls. It made Kate sad. She missed her family so much. “No time to make mashed potatoes or stuffing from scratch when you’re tired from a long day at work and everyone wants to eat within the hour.”

Trent wiped his mouth with a napkin and took a sip of his beer. “What did you do for work?”

Cable answered before she could. “Billing and receptionist for a dentist. She has an associate’s degree in accounting.”

Kate arched her eyebrows at him.

Cable shrugged, staring at her. “I learned everything I could about you after Trent brought you home. It’s my job.”

She glanced at Trent. He was glaring at Cable.

Cable defended his actions. “It *is* my job. My duty to know everything about our pack and keep on top of them.”

Kate wasn’t mad, just curious. “What else did you find out, Cable?”

“You lived at home with your family. One of your sisters worked with you. The older one. She’s a dental hygienist. Also going to night school to become a dentist. The younger sister is still a full-time student. She’s becoming an oral surgeon. You guys wanted to be able to open your own practice one day.” Cable paused. “You were also taking some online business courses. I read that in an interview with your parents after you went missing.”

Tears filled Kate’s eyes as she nodded. It hurt that the plans they’d made would never come true. Her family surely

believed that she was dead. They knew she'd never just take off. "Yes. That was the goal." She stood abruptly. "I'm going to start cleaning up the kitchen." She stepped away from the table.

Trent shoved back from the table and blocked her path. She tried to step past him but he just lifted her in his arms and walked them into the kitchen backward. He put her on her feet when they reached the kitchen and adjusted his hold on her, giving her a hug. He lowered his head, resting it against the side of hers. It put his lips near her ear.

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

"Cable shouldn't have upset you that way by reminding you."

"I asked. That's my fault. Not his."

"I'm going to find a safe way for you to see your family, okay? Just give me a little time to work it out."

She heard something slam in the other room, maybe a fist against the table. It made her startle.

Trent hugged her closer, rubbing her back with his big hand. He nuzzled her with his head. "Ignore Cable. You love your family. They shouldn't suffer thinking you're dead. We'll figure it out. I just need to call in a favor from Graves. He knows people with the ability to alter minds if need be."

She sniffed, clinging to him. "Why would we need someone like that?"

“In case your family freaks out or can’t swear to keep you a secret. Their memory of seeing you would have to be erased. I wasn’t joking about the extreme danger knowing about non-humans would put them in. You know your family well. Could they keep something like that a secret?”

She nodded. “We’re completely loyal to each other and closer than any family I’ve ever met. They’d never betray my trust. Especially if it put all of us in danger.”

“That’s what I figured.” He kept rubbing her back.

Hunger overtook her sorrow, and she stiffened. “You need to let me go.”

He didn’t. “It’s okay to lean on me. I’m here for you, Kate.”

“I haven’t eaten,” she whispered.

“Oh. Fuck.” He released her and backed up. “Right. We ate first. I should have thought of that.” He extended his arm.

“Nope.” Cable was suddenly there. “Not you.” He gave her a frown. “Do you have a preference besides Trent on who feeds you tonight?”

She wanted Trent. Not that she was about to argue with Cable about it. She shook her head. “It doesn’t matter.”

Cable held out his arm and moved closer. “Go for it. Lick, let instincts take over, and bite. Close the marks your fangs make afterward. Got it?”

“Got it.” She avoided glancing at Trent and stepped closer to Cable’s side. His bare arm was exposed, and he lifted it closer to her mouth. She wet her lips and opened her mouth,

knowing what she needed to do. *Lick and bite*. But she felt Trent watching her. She finally glanced up at him. His gaze was locked with hers, and she saw anger there. They stared at each other for a long moment.

“Damn it,” Cable growled. “Step out, Trent. You’re making even *me* uncomfortable.”

Trent tore his gaze from hers, cursed under his breath, and stormed back into the dining room.

She glanced up at Cable to give him a grateful look.

He bumped her chin lightly with his arm. “Feed before he comes back.”

She opened her mouth, focused on his arm, and licked his skin. Cable felt really warm, and she closed her eyes, allowing her fangs to drop. It was getting easier. Instinct took over and she adjusted her mouth a little, gently biting down until blood heated her fangs and it began to fill her stomach.

No arousal struck. It never did unless it was Trent feeding her. He was the only one she was attracted to. Maybe it was because he’d saved her. She’d felt something for him from the moment she’d opened her eyes to see him staring back at her in Rupert’s basement.

The hunger faded and she withdrew her fangs, licking the two holes she’d put in Cable’s meaty wrist. He pulled away and she ran her tongue over her lips and teeth to clean off the blood, before lifting her head to peer at him.

“Thank you.”

He gave a firm nod. “You don’t take much. You’re a skinny thing with small bones.”

“I lost some weight after being turned.”

“I know.” He lowered his voice. “I saw pictures of you pre-Vamp. It’s normal. Shifters eat a lot but don’t gain weight unless it’s muscle. Changing forms is a hell of a workout. Vamps tend to get thin since you live on a diet of blood. To find an overweight vamp or shifter...well, they’d have to be extremely lazy or overindulge with feedings.”

She arched her eyebrows skeptically.

He shrugged. “It rarely happens. Why don’t you go upstairs or watch a movie in the other room? We’ll wash the dishes and put everything away.”

She opened her mouth to protest but Parker entered the kitchen. “We have cleanup duty. Thank you for cooking. All of us want to encourage you to do that again, so dishes are all ours.”

“Thanks.” She fled to the stairs, went to her room, and closed the door. Then quickly realized that she had nothing to do. There wasn’t a TV in her bedroom. Not even a single book to read.

It was tempting to go outside to see the yard, but she didn’t want anyone thinking she’d make a run for it. Her gaze went to the ceiling. She remembered that Trent said she could explore the attic, and he’d mentioned books. She got up and left her room, quickly checking the hallway but not seeing a stairwell to the third floor.

She returned to the kitchen to find Parker and Cable doing the dishes. “Um, how do I get into the attic?”

Cable frowned in question.

“Trent mentioned there were books up there, said I could help myself.”

“Attic access is in Trent’s bedroom.”

“Oh. Never mind.”

“He’s not in the house. He went outside for a run. Go into his bedroom, look for the door to the right. It looks like a closet. It’s the stairs to the attic. There’s a light switch right inside the door.”

“Thanks, Cable.” She paused. “Trent won’t mind?”

“Nope. He clearly gave you access when he told you about it.” Cable turned back to the sink.

She returned upstairs, hesitated briefly, but finally opened Trent’s closed bedroom door. The large bed was made and a lamp had been turned on. She closed the door behind her and found the other door that Cable had mentioned. She opened it and, sure enough, found stairs leading upward to utter darkness.

Kate narrowed her eyes to help her vision adjust. She flipped on the wall switch and lights came on from above. She climbed the wide but steep steps, noticing there wasn’t any kind of handrails attached to the walls. It was an old house, so she wasn’t surprised.

She understood why none of the men had taken the attic space once she took the final step. Anyone over six feet would hit their head. Other than that, the attic was great. It was a massive space that ran along what appeared to be the entire house. Some support columns were evenly spaced but

otherwise, there were no walls breaking up the huge room. Old lights were sporadically placed along the low ceiling.

She reached up, touching a panel. It lifted a little. Some dust and dirt came down, so she dropped the panel back into place, studying all the boxes around her and some old, covered furniture that had been left behind. There was a lot of stuff. The previous owners must not have taken much at all when they'd moved.

She walked over to what appeared to be the shape of a couch and gently lifted the old cover to take a peek. "Hello, nineteen-sixties," she whispered, seeing the pale yellow material with dark brown windmills printed all over the couch. "Maybe the seventies." She dropped the cover and walked to the nearest set of boxes. Someone had used a black marker to write on the tops of each.

Mom's dishes. Tonya's clothes from high school. Matt's sporting gear. Dina's quilting supplies.

Kate moved to another set of boxes. "Lucy collects bears, apparently." She chuckled, reading another. "Wow, spring and winter canning jars. I didn't know they could be seasonal. I guess that's a thing on a farm?" She'd seen a barn behind the house, after peeking out Jay's bedroom window, and assumed the place was a working farm at some point.

She spotted some large wooden chests behind another set of boxes and walked over to inspect them.

The chests were beautiful and looked antique. "Nice." She ran her hands over the nearest one. "Cedar, maybe?" Kate lowered to her knees in front of the largest and carefully figured out the metal clasp that worked as a latch, opening it.

She stared at the contents. It was neatly packed with what appeared to be a huge old set of China dishes. A wooden box also rested on its side. She reached in, lifting it out. It was heavy.

Kate opened it, surprised to find a set of silverware. It was beautiful, probably really old, since the name engraved on them was a brand she'd never heard of before. They might even be authentic silver, since they were so heavy. There were also intricately detailed silver serving dishes and a few trays packed along the sides of the chest. She carefully placed the box back where she'd found it.

A creaking noise had her whipping her head around. Trent appeared in the stairwell, pausing just near the top step.

She smiled at him. "I hope you don't mind."

He finished coming up the stairs, having to bend his knees a little and duck his head to stand in the attic. "I don't."

She laughed. "You can't stand up straight."

He lowered to his knees, walking on them to get closer to her. "Low ceilings don't like tall people."

She glanced up. "It's just panels. You could probably remove them to gain more headroom."

"We took one look up here and decided we didn't have time to screw with this mess. It's too much work." He shot a gaze at the low ceiling. "Especially all that."

"They used to love drop ceilings to conserve heat in big old houses. I read that somewhere, an article about why paneling like that became more popular at some point. It

doubled as insulation. Actually, I've noticed enough about this house to think it might earn a historical designation."

"Really?" He sat on the floor near her. "What makes you think that?"

"All the woodwork. The main stairwell is so detailed. The fireplace mantel in the living room too." She shrugged. "My sisters and I used to take vacations together, staying at old historical Victorian bed and breakfasts. Those were our favorite places to go. This house isn't Victorian, but the crown molding kind of reminds me of those houses. And the woodwork for the doorjambs. The steep attic stairs without railings."

"The house was originally built in the late eighteenth hundreds but then added onto in the late nineteenth-sixties. At least that's what the realtor said. The kitchen got an upgrade around that time, along with the bathrooms being added on the second floor. I can't imagine what it was like when there was just the one on the first floor."

"They probably divided up the original bedrooms to make more. Bedrooms in old houses tended to be larger." She closed the trunk and set the latch, taking a seat on her butt to face him. "The closet in the bedroom you gave me was added after the fact. You can tell by the different building materials. It's also wider than a standard one would be. They just enclosed that portion of the room and added sliding doors."

"I thought all bedrooms had closets."

"Not back then. They used wardrobe furniture pieces to store clothing. I also think my bedroom was originally the

nursery. It would explain the small size and location next to the primary one.”

“You seem to know your shit.”

“It was a game my sisters and I played on those vacations. What did the owners upgrade versus what stayed original in the old Victorians?” She shrugged. “We asked the owners a lot of questions. Probably drove them crazy.”

His blue eyes took on a concerned look. “You deeply miss your family.”

She nodded. “I do. My sisters are my best friends. We did everything together. Especially my older sister, Pam, and I. She’s the one who worked with me. It was her idea to open a dental practice one day. I can’t stand seeing the inside of people’s mouths up close and personal. That’s why I handled the business side of things. Her and Amy would care for the patients.”

Kate got more comfortable. “Amy took it a step further by wanting to become an oral surgeon. She was in a car accident right after she got her license in high school and nailed her mouth on the steering wheel. She needed major work done before she could smile again. It inspired her to be more than a general dentist. Pam jumped all over that.” She grinned. “It meant a lot more time in school, but we all helped her pay for it and covered her if she needed help with anything else, since she didn’t have time to work.”

“Were your parents going into business with you?”

She nodded. “Mom offered to become our front office receptionist. Dad said he’d become our in-house janitor slash

handyman.” She smiled at that. “But really, we were going to make them retire once we got the practice running smoothly. They’ve both worked so hard to raise us and help pay for college. That was going to be a surprise. You know? Buy them a nice cruise so they could travel for like three months. We even researched a six-month one, but we knew they’d never agree to being gone for that length of time. The longest vacation they’ve ever taken is a week. It was on their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary a few years ago. They both always dreamed of going to Hawaii and were finally able to do so.”

He reached out and took her hand. “I’m going to call Graves tomorrow, okay?”

“The judge?”

“Yes. We need someone who can mind control your family, just in case they don’t take the news well. Graves has contacts with such beings, and he can set it up for us.”

“A Vampire?”

“Or a VampLycan. Either will do, if Graves swears that they’re trustworthy.”

“A what?”

He grinned. “VampLycan. Vampires and shifters aren’t the only things out there. Sometimes the two combine. VampLycans are half Vampire, half Werewolf.”

“Shit!” Then she frowned. “I thought you said Vampires can’t have kids.”

“They normally can’t.” He sighed. “I’m not sure how it happened, but I do know it was only Vampire *men* who got Werewolf *women* pregnant.”

“Oh.”

“There are Gargoyles too.”

Her eyes widened. “No way!”

“They mostly live in Europe. At least that’s what I’ve heard. But there are GarLycans in Alaska.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “Lycan is another word for Werewolf. Gargoyles mated with them, and that’s how GarLycans came to exist.”

“Have you ever met any?”

He shook his head. “Graves told me about them over some beers once. He swears the ones he’s met are pretty good guys. He’s worked with them, and he’s blood-related to the VampLycans somehow. I didn’t ask for too many details.”

“Wow. Anything else?”

“There are different types of shifters. Like Jay.”

“And Werewolves attack his kind.”

“They do. I really was shocked when I realized what he was, and learned some of them are still hiding out and surviving in the United States. I wish I could track down his original pride. We’d free the women who’ve been abused.”

“You can’t?”

He shook his head. “Jay doesn’t know where they are.”

She frowned in confusion.

“They pushed him out of a small airplane, remember? Drugged him first. We’re not even sure what state they’re in,

but I'm guessing maybe Wyoming or one of the states surrounding it, based on descriptions of the area he lived in and the harsh winters he described." He shrugged. "Needle in a haystack. They never allowed anyone in the pride to leave their village, allowed no cells or computers to avoid contact with the outside world. There were no human towns nearby, or hell, any humans at all. So he has no clue what state it was."

"Village?"

"That's what he called it. Says they didn't even have electricity."

"That sounds archaic."

He nodded. "They're totally off the grid. It makes sense though. Being in a remote area keeps them safe. Werewolves love to live in wooded areas so they can run, but packs tend to be a bit spoiled. They enjoy all the modern perks like cable and internet. Electricity. That means living closer to humans."

"I'm partial to modern technology myself," she admitted.

He chuckled. "Aren't we all?"

Kate licked her lips. "Are you and I okay?"

"Of course."

She decided to bring out the elephant in the room again. "You've been avoiding me, haven't you?"

He got more comfortable on the floor and sighed. "I have."

"Did I do something to upset you?"

"No."

“Why then?”

He glanced away before reluctantly holding her gaze. “I’m attracted to you, Kate.”

Kate felt her heart race. So it wasn’t just her! The idea of Trent being attracted to her in any way gave her a giddy feeling.

“I rescued you and made you a part of my pack.” He broke eye contact. “I’ll never act on it. I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable. This is my issue. Not yours. I’ll deal with it.”

Confusion and sadness filled Kate. “Why?”

He met her gaze again. “You’re beautiful, Kate. Sweet. Kind. I’m drawn to you.”

“I meant, why won’t you act on it?” She decided to be honest. “I’m attracted to you too. Strongly.”

“Fuck...” Trent ran his fingers through his short hair, messing it up. “I accepted the position as alpha to this pack. It comes with...responsibilities.”

“You’re not allowed to date me?”

He held her gaze, and she was pretty sure that was sadness in his eyes. He didn’t answer her question.

“Are you not allowed to date me because I’m not a Werewolf?”

He softly growled, his hand fisting. “Kate...I’m expected to take a mate at some point and provide pups, preferably at least one male, who will one day lead the pack once I’m too old. *All* alphas have that responsibility.”

It felt as if he’d stabbed her in the heart.

Kate could never have children, of course. Rupert and his nest had taken that ability from her.

“I understand.” She felt tears flood her eyes and knew she had to get away from Trent before she fell apart.

Kate had learned one handy thing about her new body. That she could move faster than humans could. “I’m going to take a shower. I got pretty dusty up here. Good night.” Then she lurched to her feet, moved around him to keep out of reach, and bolted for the stairs.

“Kate!”

She ignored Trent calling out to her but she heard him snarl as she reached the bottom of the narrow staircase. Kate fled his bedroom and went back to her own, bolting the door. She lay down on her bed, pulled a pillow over her face, and quietly cried into it.

She’d finally found a man that she was falling for, but he could never be with her. The Vampires had taken that away from her, too.

Chapter Ten

Trent was in a foul mood. Kate had refused to speak to him or open her bedroom door when he'd knocked on it the evening before. She also hadn't showered. He'd spent hours sitting in the hallway waiting for her to come out. She hadn't.

He'd hurt her feelings. Kate still didn't seem to realize how good shifter hearing was. He'd heard her crying in her bedroom. It had been tempting to kick in the damn door, the urge to hold her had been so strong.

Eventually, Jay had come upstairs. He'd taken one look at Trent's face and Kate's closed door before sitting beside him in the hallway. It was enough to keep him from doing something stupid. Because he probably would have.

He was currently at the office. Trent lifted his head to stare at his best friend, who'd just dropped into a nearby seat at a desk a few feet from his own.

Cable cleared his throat as their gazes locked. "What crawled up your ass?"

"Nothing."

"Right," Reef sarcastically muttered from where he sat in a desk across the room, messing with his cell phone. "You're all sunshine and smiles today, Trent."

He silently acknowledged that he was in a bad mood, but he had no plans to discuss it. No amount of talking it out would change his problem. But still, he didn't like knowing

that Kate was so unhappy. The least he could do was make it possible for her to have a little peace.

He pulled out his cell and dialed Graves. The judge was a busy Were, so he assumed he'd probably have to leave a message. It surprised him when that didn't happen.

"Hello, Trent. How are you?"

Trent noted Graves sounded like he was in a good mood, based on his upbeat tone. "Good. I need a favor."

"Name it."

"You mentioned that you have relatives who live in Alaska. Is it possible that you could introduce me to someone with..." He paused, carefully thinking about his words. They tried to watch what they said over cell phones. It was better to be safe than sorry. "I need someone who's good with memories."

Graves immediately caught on. "How bad is the need and how many saw too much?"

"It's not like that." He cleared his throat. "It's actually complicated. I don't suppose you have time to meet today?"

Graves hesitated. "I can leave now. We'll meet at the halfway point. Sound good? Otherwise, you'll have to wait a few days."

Relief was instant. "I'll meet you at our regular spot and buy you lunch. It's the least I can do. Thank you for making yourself available on such short notice."

"We're friends. That's what we do. See you soon."
Graves ended the call.

“I can’t fucking believe you’re even thinking about doing this.” Cable didn’t bother hiding his anger.

Trent stared at him. “I want to do something for Kate. You don’t have to like it.”

“What about our pack? We come first. And how about common law? Humans aren’t to know about us.” Cable stood from his desk, his hands fisted. “You’re fucking risking us, Trent. Graves is probably going to shit a brick after you tell him your plan. Hell, he’ll probably report us to his alpha. You want to take a *Vampire* to visit her very human family.”

“I’m taking precautions.”

“Goddamn it!” Cable snarled.

“Kate deserves to see her family and at least have the closure of letting them know she’s alive. You saw how upset she got last night.” Trent rose to his feet, also snarling.

“She’s a goddamn Vampire! It’s best if her family thinks she’s dead and she stays the hell away from them. Kate’s still learning control. For all you know, she’ll try to bite them.”

“She will not!” Trent stepped around his desk.

Reef got between them. “Whoa! Let’s not come to blows. Remodeling the office isn’t in our budget.” He held out his arms. “Both of you make great points. Now settle down to calmly discuss this. You look like you’re about to sprout fur and fangs. *No.*”

Trent didn’t want to fight with his best friend. “I’m leaving. Graves is probably getting on the road already. I don’t want to be late.”

“I’m coming with you.” Cable glared at him.

The situation between them was already tense enough. “I don’t need your bad attitude influencing his decision.”

“Either I go with, or I’ll just show up on my own. Either way, I’m going to be a part of this conversation. It affects the future of our pack.”

“Fine. But I’m not changing my mind.” Trent headed toward the door.

“I’m coming too.” Reef moved with him.

Trent was more irritated than ever as Cable locked their office and put on the closed sign. He drove with Cable in the passenger seat. Reef sprawled in the middle backseat, and none of them spoke. Traffic wasn’t bad, and he reached the diner faster than he expected and headed inside, with both males on his heels.

Graves had already arrived. He sat at a large table in the back corner, far from the half dozen humans already eating. They had barely taken a seat when a flirty waitress in her mid-thirties approached.

“It’s my lucky day.” She smiled, pulling a pen and pad from the white apron tied around her waist. “I have four handsome men to serve.” She winked at Graves. “What can I get you?”

“I’ll have a double bacon cheeseburger with fries. A Coke with that.”

“Sure thing.” She turned to Trent next. “And you, honey?”

The last thing he wanted was attention from a woman. “The three of us will have the prime rib sandwiches, cheese on all, and two orders of fries each.” He pointed at Reef. “He’ll also take the fried mushrooms with ranch dressing. Cokes all around sound good.”

“You got it.” She spun away and made a point of swishing her hips all the way back to the kitchen.

“She’s cute.”

“Don’t even think about it, Reef. We’re not sticking around until she gets off work so you can fuck her.” Trent shot him a glare before turning to Graves.

“What happened that you need someone’s mind wiped?” Graves wasn’t known for idle conversation.

“It’s kind of a long story. We went after a Vampire nest,” Trent started.

Graves nodded. “I knew you were going to as soon as I heard about the crimes being committed in the area and suspected it had to be Vamps responsible. You protect the humans nearest to your territory. Was there a problem?”

Trent shook his head. “We located and took out the nest easy enough. The thing is...” He paused, trying to figure out the best way to explain.

“We killed all but one,” Reef blurted. “Kate was being held prisoner by the nest. She’s a sweetheart, and you’d actually swear she was totally human.” He paused. “But physically, she’s not.”

Trent would have punched Reef if they weren’t in public. He saw the surprise on Graves’s face and tried to explain.

“They had her locked up and chained to a wall in the basement. There were signs that she’d been tortured and abused. Her scent was nowhere but in the small room where they had her imprisoned. She wasn’t a part of the crimes being committed. Kate was just another one of their victims.”

The judge leaned back in his seat and his expression almost seemed amused. “Let me guess. You have a new pack member? One that bites?”

Trent felt floored by his accuracy. Graves was smart.

“I’m not even surprised, given your earnest expression. Not to mention how that one spoke about her.” Graves jerked his chin in Reef’s direction. Then he turned his gaze to Cable. “And *you’re* pissed. It’s your priority to keep your pack safe, yet your alpha keeps accepting members who put targets on your backs. This makes the second one.”

Cable nodded. “It’s like Trent is determined to destroy the peace we’ve fought so hard to obtain.”

His words pissed Trent off, but he didn’t snarl since they were in public. He just shot his best friend a warning look.

Graves cleared his throat. “What do you want to do?”

Trent took a deep breath and blew it out. “Kate is tormented because she’s super close to her family. It’s hurting her that they think she’s dead...and she feels they can be trusted with the truth.”

“It’s against the law to tell humans anything about others,” Cable quickly reminded him. “Tell him, Graves. It’s insanity.”

Graves sighed. “I agree. The truth is too dangerous to reveal.”

“It’s important to Kate that her family knows she’s not dead. She didn’t ask to be kidnapped and turned. Those bastards took her entire life away from her.” Trent kept his voice low so their conversation didn’t carry to anyone else in the diner.

Graves nodded. “I get it. You know how close I am to my parents and brother. It wouldn’t sit right with me to let them think I had died, either. There’s another option.”

“I’m listening.” Trent was open to alternatives, as long as in the end, Kate’s family knew she was still alive. Hopefully that would be enough to give her some peace of mind.

“We could convince her family that she was kidnapped, then rescued from human traffickers, and she’s in danger of being murdered if they find out she’s still alive,” Graves suggested. “I can have a VampLykan pretend to be an agent from WITSEC.”

“What’s that?” Reef scowled.

“Have you ever heard of the witness protection program, from the human government? When a human’s in danger of being killed for testifying against highly dangerous criminals, their names are changed, they disappear, and they’re given new lives. It means they must cut all ties with everyone they know.” Graves held Trent’s gaze. “Her family will know she’s alive, but she’ll need to say goodbye to them—forever. Our laws were written and are upheld for the survival of us all. It’s best if this Kate stays far away from her family afterward. It’s for their safety, as well as your pack’s.”

When the waitress came back to their table with a tray full of drinks, Trent mulled over everything Graves said. Kate wouldn't like not being able to see her family again, but a VampLycan with mind-altering skills could convince them to accept the explanation for why she couldn't return to them. It would be difficult for her family to lose her again, but at least they'd know she was alive.

Once they had their drinks, the waitress walked away.

"I like this plan much better," Cable said, the first to speak.

"It's workable," Reef added. "That's a safer story than the truth."

Trent wasn't thrilled but survival sometimes came with compromises. "I can live with it, as long as Kate gets to say goodbye to her family and has closure."

"There're a couple of VampLycans who are due to visit my pack in a few days, conveniently enough. Both belong to my cousin Wen's clan. I'll call him to get their direct numbers and request he ask his clan members to help you."

"Thank you." Trent held Graves's stare. "I'll owe you."

"No, you won't. Friends don't keep score, and if they did, this would make us even after you helped me keep my mate safe from that asshole who took over her old pack."

"I'll cover their transportation and other costs, then," Trent offered.

"Don't worry about it. They don't need the money." Graves lifted his wrapped silverware to free his napkin, his attention focusing on something behind Trent.

The waitress returned with a large tray, passing out their food, and they all dug in. Trent felt a lot better, now that they had a tentative plan on how to make Kate happy. He glanced at Cable, seeing his best friend's mood had also improved. Graves had come up with an option that appeased them both. He just hoped that Kate would agree.

“How's Joni doing?”

Graves smiled at Trent's question. “Really good, except her and my mother spend a lot of time together when I'm working.”

“Why would that be bad?” Reef took a sip of his drink. “You want your mate and mother to get along.”

“You've met my mom.” Graves cracked a smile. “She's trouble. I'm hoping her craziness doesn't rub off on my mate.”

“Your life will never be boring,” Reef teased.

“I've already got enough excitement.” Graves looked at Trent. “Speaking of, do you guys have some spare time to take on a job for me? It's computer work.”

“Always.” Trent paused eating. “What do you need?”

“Are you familiar with Elmer Gillards and his pack?”

“I've heard some things. Nothing good.” Trent glanced around to make sure no humans were near enough to overhear their conversation. “Their men are known to be brutal, treat women like shit, and they sometimes take mates from other packs solely to infiltrate. Most alphas regret accepting them after the fact. I hear they're prone to violence.”

Graves lowered his voice. “All of that is true. Elmer was challenged and killed two days ago. I have a contact in that pack. She called to say her new alpha is cleaning house and changing the rules.” He paused. “You can guess what that means.”

“The worst shitheads are fleeing to avoid being executed by their new alpha and will be looking for new packs to join,” Cable guessed.

“So they can continue to be dicks,” Reef muttered.

Graves gave a sharp nod. “Yesterday, two males from that pack approached some of our single females. Arlis had them chased off. He’s warned our neighboring alphas to be on the lookout.” He reached into his shirt pocket and withdrew a small flash drive. “I scouted Elmer’s pack over a year ago and took pictures of the worst members. Can you have Parker spread a warning to all the packs within two states in every direction? I don’t want to be swamped with calls to judge those assholes once they start abusing their new mates.”

Trent accepted the small device. “Consider it done. Free of charge.”

“That’s a shit way to run a business.”

“I’d consider this community service, since no one wants innocent women getting hurt if they mate with the wrong guy.” Trent pocketed the flash drive. “I’ll get Parker on it today.”

“Thank you. I’ll send the VampLycans to you as soon as they arrive at my pack, day after tomorrow. Both will have the skills you need.”

Trent deeply appreciated it. “Is there some problem that you need help with, since they’re coming all the way from Alaska? You know we have your back.”

“It’s nothing like that. Arlis has made it clear that anyone from his brother’s clan is always welcome. I think these two are coming to seek mates. We do have some single females who might interest them.”

“Shit, your alpha is a VampLycan?” Reef gaped at Graves. “I didn’t know that.”

Trent frowned, also taken aback by that news.

Graves grinned. “No. Arlis is all Were. Trayis is his older *half*-brother. They had the same mother but different fathers.” He finished his food and wiped his hands. “sorry to eat and run, but I need to get back.”

“Thank you for everything.” Trent motioned for the waitress to bring the bill. “Will you let us know when they hit town so we can meet them at the office? I’d prefer that to the house.”

“I’ll give them your pack cell number. Expect a call from Tymber. His younger brother’s name is Yern.”

Trent said goodbye to Graves, paid the bill, and generously tipped the waitress. She had written her number down and slipped it to him on a small piece of paper. He pocketed it to avoid hurting her feelings. He’d toss it later.

“She gave me her number too,” Reef chuckled as they climbed into their vehicle. “I’m pretty sure she also tried to give it to Graves on his way out but he refused. It’s times like

this that I think Weres should wear wedding bands so humans will know if one of us is in a committed relationship.”

“Like that would go over well when we shift.” Cable grunted. “We’d have to buy the same ring in bulk because they’d constantly get lost.”

Trent climbed behind the wheel and started the engine, backing out of the parking space. His mind was on Kate. He hoped that he wasn’t making a mistake by giving her what she wanted. It was possible that seeing her family would only make things a lot more difficult for her in the long run.

But bottom line...he couldn’t stand to see her hurting. It pissed him off and made him feel utterly useless.

All the many ways the reunion could go wrong started to go through his mind. He wanted to come up with solutions for any problem that might arise.

“What do you think?”

Trent jolted from his thoughts to glance over at Cable. “Sorry. I wasn’t paying attention.”

“Reef wants us to invest some pack funds into buying an outdoor pizza oven. I have to admit, I don’t hate the idea.”

“Imagine how cool that would be.” The Were leaned forward from the back. “I bet homemade pizzas are way more delicious than the frozen ones. I watched a few videos online and I think we can learn how to cook them. It doesn’t look too complicated.”

“How in the hell did the topic go from wedding rings to pizza ovens?” Trent shook his head but smiled. His pack amused him.

Chapter Eleven

Kate felt grateful that no one waited outside her bedroom door after she rose for the evening. She quickly made her way into the bathroom, showered, and brushed her teeth. The sight of herself in the mirror had become less upsetting since the first time. A little. She studied her reflection as she spit out toothpaste and rinsed her mouth.

Her face was so much thinner, thanks to the weight she'd lost after being forced to survive on a liquid diet. She didn't want to think about blood, but hunger usually pestered her as soon as she woke, now that she was feeding regularly. It wouldn't be painful for a few hours. Jay had assured her that one day, she'd only need to feed every few days instead of daily. That was something to look forward to.

Her eyes were still unsettling. The color of them had slightly altered. The green used to be a more muted shade. Kate took a deep breath, held her own gaze, and allowed herself to imagine sinking her fangs into flesh. The green brightened, almost glowing. It was strange to witness. Her eyes definitely weren't human-looking anymore.

She closed her eyes, thought back to an ex-boyfriend who'd really made her angry, and her fingertips tingled. Kate opened her eyes to stare at the little claws that had grown out of her fingernails. They were about an inch long and appeared to be sharp. "So weird," she muttered.

“Hey,” Jay called out from the other side of the closed door. “Are you alright? You usually shower and are out in under two minutes from the time the water shuts off.”

“*Happy thoughts,*” she mouthed, remembering a family picnic. Her claws receded until normal-looking fingernails returned. “I’ll be out in a minute.” Kate quickly finished dressing and collected her discarded pajamas.

Jay stood in the hallway, grinning at her. “Do you still feel like cooking? Kleve got home half an hour ago with the groceries you asked for. Good thing I noticed that you’d slipped a note under my door. You could have just handed it to me yourself.”

Kate decided to be honest. “I wanted to be alone with my thoughts for a while. No offense.”

“None taken. Do you want to talk about what happened between you and Trent? He sat in the hallway for hours last night, waiting for you to come out, but you didn’t.”

She shook her head. “Not right now.”

Her friend thankfully let it go by changing the subject. “Here. Give me your laundry. I’m doing a few loads tonight.”

Kate hesitated. “I can do my own laundry.”

“It’s my job. I’ll grab your hamper and get to work. Everyone wants you to do the cooking. I did warn you this would happen.” He winked. “You brought this on yourself.”

She passed over her bundled clothes and couldn’t help but smile. “Fair enough. Here you go. Thank you. I’m going to start dinner.”

“I can’t wait. So it’s okay if I enter your bedroom?”

Kate nodded. “Of course.” She went downstairs and thankfully didn’t run into anyone else. The groceries had been put away, but it didn’t take her long to gather all the ingredients from the pantry and fridge.

“What are you making tonight?”

Kate hadn’t heard Parker enter the kitchen. She turned to face him. He stayed back, as usual, but he looked a tiny bit more at ease around her. His demeanor was just...friendlier. “I’m making mini meatloaves with loaded fried potatoes.”

Parker appeared confused as he repeated her last few words.

“Think pan-fried potatoes with bacon, cheese, and chives sprinkled over them at the end.”

“That sounds really good.”

“I’m glad. I need to sit down with everyone to find out what they like and dislike. It would help me plan meals.”

“We’re shifters.” A ghost of a smile played at his lips. “We’ll eat damn near anything and be happy to have food in front of us. I happen to love meatloaf. We did a job last year for a diner owner who didn’t have any spare cash to pay us. He gave us thirty-five free dinners for locating his runaway teenage daughter. Reef brought me the meatloaf special, and I loved it. I felt a little sad when the debt was paid off. It’s one of my favorite human foods.”

Kate cocked her head. “Human food?”

“I grew up in a pack. My mom’s version of cooking was throwing chunks of meat on an outdoor grill to brown a little. We never had side dishes, sauces, or even seasoning.” He broke eye contact. “I really love human food. I’ll set the table. Thank you for cooking, Kate. We appreciate it.”

“I’m glad to do it,” she said, before Parker fled the kitchen with plates and silverware.

His words circled inside her head as she moved around the kitchen. It stood to reason that Werewolves were raised differently from humans, and his short story brought up a lot of questions, but didn’t want to seem nosy. The still-human part of her was horrified by the idea of children being raised on meat alone. She already felt bad for not adding a salad with dinner to get the men to eat some veggies.

“Meat muffins? Is that a thing? Not that I’m complaining. I’m all in.” Jay entered the kitchen.

Kate smiled at him as she filled another muffin tray. “Mini meatloaves. I didn’t think anyone in this house would want to wait two hours for dinner. Big loaves take longer to cook all the way through. Mini ones are faster.”

“You’re beautiful *and* a genius.”

“Flattery will get you washing out these mixing bowls and shredding the cheese.” She loaded up the oven, wishing she had a second one. That would be at the top of her wish list if the pack ever decided to remodel the kitchen. Double ovens would definitely help her feed six hungry men.

Jay got busy doing the dishes she’d left in the sink. “You really should talk to me or Trent about whatever happened last

night. It's never good to let stuff build up inside. You're part of a pack now, and there aren't a lot of us. That means hashing out your problems. This house isn't big enough to hold a grudge."

Kate hesitated. "Who's home right now?"

"Just us, Parker, and Kleve. Reef, Cable, and Trent haven't come home yet, but they should be here in about half an hour."

She moved closer to her friend, keeping her gaze locked on the doorway that led toward the dining room. "Trent admitted that he likes me but it can't go anywhere. He's expected to be with someone who can give him kids." It hurt to say the words aloud. "And that won't ever be me."

Jay turned, shutting off the water. Anger tensed his features. "That's bullshit! I think being with someone who makes him happy is more important. One of the others can add pups to the pack if they want a potential future leader."

"He's your alpha. That means Trent's the strongest, right?"

Her friend dried his hands and leaned against the counter. "All the guys come from alpha bloodlines. Well, except for me. Prides have certain stronger bloodlines too, but none of them survived the wars. They fought to the death trying to give others time to flee. We were a ragtag bunch of survivors who banded together to form our pride. Unfortunately, a bully was chosen to lead mine."

"What do you mean, all the guys come from alpha bloodlines?"

Parker entered the kitchen, catching the last bit of their conversation. “My father was head enforcer of my previous pack, because he was the second-born son of an alpha. His older brother led our pack. Some sons leave the pack to start their own or take over another. My dad and his brother were very close, so he remained.”

“I feel like I should take notes.” Kate wanted to learn as much as possible.

Parker held her gaze. “First sons are usually groomed to take over the pack when their fathers step down or die. Sometimes brothers will fight it out though, if a younger one is born a strong, fierce fighter. My father and uncle were equally matched but they refused to battle it out. Dad was happy to be an enforcer.”

“You could have stepped up to challenge your uncle’s son one day, right?” Jay asked.

“Yes.” Parker appeared uncomfortable. “But no one would want me to become their alpha. I’m too unstable.”

Kleve strolled into the kitchen. “I smell food.” He sniffed, his gaze locked on the oven. “When’s dinner?”

“In just over an hour.” Kate pulled out three bags of frozen hashbrowns. “Are you or Reef alpha-blooded?”

Kleve’s gaze snapped to hers as he tensed.

“Easy,” Parker rasped. “We were on the subject, and Kate here has a lot to learn. Jay mentioned that we’re all from alpha bloodlines.”

“Except for me,” Jay reminded them.

The Werewolf relaxed a little. “Reef and I would just confuse you, if you want to learn about how packs work. And please don’t bring up this topic around my brother. Reef is sensitive about it.”

Kate instantly felt concerned. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to upset anyone.”

Kleve shrugged. “Normal Werewolves mate before having pups.” Anger harshened his features. “Our mother didn’t have any honor. She tricked our father into fucking her while she was ovulating. He didn’t pick up the scent because they were swimming in the river when she approached him. The pack banished her. She’s lucky my father didn’t kill her outright for trying to force him into mating.”

“Banish? Like, they kicked her out? What about you?” Kate asked. “You didn’t do anything wrong. Did they let you stay?”

“No. They banished her while she was pregnant. My mother found another pack to take her in and lied about having a rogue mate who’d died. She tried it again with the new pack, targeting one of the alpha’s sons. He wasn’t interested in taking her as a mate. The bitch tricked him just like she did my father, and got pregnant with Reef.” The furious look returned to Kleve’s face. “Once again, the male refused to take her as a mate. She was a liar, a trickster, and dishonorable. He didn’t want to banish her, though, because she was carrying his pup. We were allowed to stay but everyone knew what she’d done.”

“Fuck,” Parker muttered. “That must have been hell.”

Kleve gave a firm nod. “The pack basically shunned us but we were allowed to stay inside their territory. Life was

basically hell. Our mother treated us like shit. One night she just took off, not even bothering to say goodbye. Soon after, Reef's biological father mated someone in the pack. She wasn't happy that he already had a son, and she asked her younger brother to kill Reef. Bitch didn't want her son to be second-born. Thankfully, he had a problem with murdering a kid. Instead, Jorgon warned us that she'd probably ask someone else to do her dirty work when he refused. That's when we left."

Kate let everything he'd said sink in. "That's horrible. I'm so sorry that happened to you. How old were you when you left?"

"Twelve. We survived." Kleve shrugged. "Enough said on that subject."

Kate nodded. "I understand."

A sound caught all their attention. Trent and the others had arrived home. Cable entered the kitchen a couple minutes later.

He glanced at everyone, obviously noticing the awkward silence. He grabbed a soda from the fridge as he asked, "What are we talking about?"

"How dinner will be ready in about an hour," Kate answered. "It's getting crowded in here, so everyone but Jay needs to leave. He's helping me." She wanted to avoid seeing or talking with Trent. The pain was still too fresh, knowing that nothing would ever come from their attraction to each other.

She turned away, pulling out three frying pans for the potatoes, her mind on the man she couldn't have. It would be too easy to fall in love with him. He'd saved her life, been nothing but kind to her, and he was super-hot, which sure didn't hurt. Everything about him drew her in. And now she was starting to realize...that might be a problem in the long run.

* * * * *

Trent tried to step around Cable to enter the kitchen but Parker suddenly moved into his path, shaking his head. He jerked his head toward the family room. The serious expression on his face didn't bode well. All three of them moved into the family room. Parker closed the double doors that they usually left wide open.

"What's going on?" Trent wanted to see Kate and speak with her to make sure she was okay. He was annoyed that whatever the current problem was couldn't wait.

The doors suddenly opened and Kleve and Reef stepped inside. The younger brother spoke. "Impromptu meeting? Are we invited?"

They didn't wait for an answer, closing the door firmly at their backs and staying put.

Parker kept his voice inhumanly low when he spoke. His gaze narrowed and locked on Cable. "This has *you* written all over it."

The normally quiet Were then switched his attention to Trent. "You should be with Kate. We all know how you feel about her. I don't give a shit whose son is chosen to become

our next alpha in some distant future. Life is too fucking short to be miserable, and we all know it. The entire point of forming a pack is for us to live our lives *our* way and be happy.”

Cable softly snarled.

Parker got in his face. “We all appreciate that you’ve taken your role as enforcer so seriously, but that doesn’t mean you get to police our love lives. And where is your fucking heart, man? Trent listens to your advice on just about everything, but he shouldn’t on this. You’re so caught up in how a pack is *supposed* to run but you’re forgetting that we’re not like any others. We’ll *never* be like them.

“I overheard Kate telling Jay what the problem was last night.” He turned to Trent. “I see how you look at her. I sense how important she is to you. Follow your heart, Trent. *That* should be your priority. Any one of us could take a mate one day who’ll give us a pup to take over when you wish to step down. And I don’t even see that happening for a century or two.”

“It’s not that simple,” Cable argued.

Parker spun on him again. “Trent has amazing instincts. Ones I trust every day with my life. He met Kate and instantly knew he couldn’t kill her, even though you went to take out that entire nest. He brought her home, made her a part of our pack, and we all know how he feels about her. Don’t be obtuse. Sometimes we just know when we’ve met that one special person we want to spend our lives with. Kate is Trent’s person.”

“You’re a romantic fool.” Cable appeared disgusted.

“Yes,” Parker agreed. “I guess I am. And I *can* be, now that we have a future to dream about. I grew up miserable because I knew I’d never meet the expectations of my pack. *Fuck that.* I won’t ask Trent to deny himself the one woman he has feelings for because according to *normal* pack laws, it’s his duty to take a mate who can birth him a son to replace him as alpha. *You* mate a bitch and birth a son, Cable, if you’re so damned concerned! We all know you and Trent are equal in strength. Hell, I have the strength to lead this pack, I’m just too fucked up mentally to be good at it. Maybe I’ll have a son with a good bitch someday.”

Parker turned back to Trent. “I’d be honored if you trained one of my sons to follow in your footsteps. You don’t need to physically have a son to pass on your knowledge. Be happy with Kate, if she’s the one you want.”

“So would I,” Kleve spoke up. “Honored if you mentored one of my sons, that is. You should be with Kate. I’m not expecting you to produce a child just because you’re our alpha. We picked you because you’re the most stable of us all, and we respect the hell out of you.”

“Exactly,” Reef agreed. “You and Kate make a cute couple. I give zero fucks about which one of us is the sperm doner of the next generation to lead our pack. We’re family above all else. Any kids I might have belong to all of us.”

“What he said.” Kleve nodded. “I’d go get Jay to voice his vote, but I know he’d agree, and let’s face it, his kids can’t become alpha of our pack. We’d get slaughtered if word got out that we had cat shifters. And Parker made a damn good point. It’s going to be a century or two before we let Trent off

the hook as alpha. We've got plenty of time to work this shit out."

Trent felt his chest swell with emotion. His pack was amazing. He gazed at Cable. "I love you and respect your opinion...but I agree with them. I want to see if Kate and I can form a bond."

Cable looked beyond frustrated. "What if you can't? We discussed this! What if it goes bad? Kate's part of our pack now. It could cause major issues in the future if she becomes addicted to your blood and you mate someone else. You'll be just as bad as your father."

"Low blow," Parker muttered. "That was fucked up."

"Totally," Reef chimed in. "Why don't we continue to share feeding responsibilities for Kate so that isn't a potential problem?"

"Do you really think Trent's going to be okay with that if he's fucking her?" Cable took the time to look at each of their faces. "I don't want to be a dick but it's my responsibility as lead enforcer to anticipate the shit that can go bad."

"Fuck," Reef sighed. "He's right. I wouldn't be okay with any of you giving blood to *my* Vampire. If I had one, that is."

"I said to take things slow," Cable reminded him, squirming and looking uncomfortable. "I didn't outright try to forbid you from being with Kate or anything. I just pointed out all the consequences if this goes sideways."

"Right. I'm sure you were all about the consequences," Reef said sarcastically. "So! We all agree that Trent should go for it and be with Kate." He smiled. "Great."

“Just don’t fuck her unless you’re sure you’re totally committed to bonding with her,” Cable added. “And we all agree that we’re shouldering the responsibility to birth a strong Were within the next ten years or so to secure our pack’s future.”

“Ten years?” Kleve scowled. “We’re still young. Most alphas don’t get pressured to breed the next generation until they’re over fifty.”

“We’re a small pack.” Cable sighed. “We need to increase our numbers. The only way male Weres are going to join us is if we birth them ourselves.”

“Or we find more rogues.” Parker smirked. “Not all of them are bad. We’re proof of that.”

“But we’re also pretty fucked up,” Cable grimly reminded them.

“It works for us.” Trent loved his pack.

“Like our kids aren’t going to have issues,” Reef snorted. “We should change our official pack name from R.U. to something like Chaos. Screwed would be too obvious and invite any dickhead with dreams of leading a pack to challenge Trent.”

“We needed a name fast when we registered as a pack.” Trent sighed. “R.U. fit since we’re rogues who united.”

“It does,” Jay announced. “I like Rogues United.”

Trent startled and spun. Jay had actually entered the room through a window. The damn cougar hadn’t made a sound.

“I noticed the house went unusually quiet and excused myself from Kate, saying I needed to use the restroom, so I could hunt you down. I overheard the tail end of the conversation. My vote is that you go for it. You have deep feelings for Kate. She feels the same. My kids, if I ever have any, won’t be eligible to lead our pack, since other packs would instantly declare war on us if they found out. But it doesn’t matter to me *who* the father is, of whatever pup is chosen to lead. Trent has a lot of skills and knowledge to pass on...and so do the rest of you.”

“Fuck, I sometimes really envy you,” Reef muttered. “I didn’t even know you were here until you spoke. How did you get that window open without making any noise?”

“I tend to the house and make the repairs.” Jay shrugged. “That’s one of the windows we replaced last year. I’m good at what I do. Let’s stick to the topic. You and Kate would be happy together.”

Trent looked at Cable. “I think we would be.”

His expression became resigned. “Fine. But again, at least consider not fucking her unless you’re certain she’s your mate. Blood addiction is still a concern. And she should still drink blood from all of us until you actually bond with her. Better safe than sorry.”

Trent nodded grimly. It would be tough to allow his pack to feed Kate, but he never wanted to be like Cruz. Then again, he was pretty sure he could bond with Kate. He thought about her all the time, wanted her more than he’d ever desired anything, and it didn’t matter that he’d be giving up having

pups that were from his bloodline. Having Kate at his side would be more than enough to make him happy.

“I’m going back to Kate now to help her with dinner.” Jay strode around them and opened the double doors. “Break it up before she realizes you’re all in here talking about her.”

Trent felt as if a heavy weight had been lifted off his shoulders as he started to plot how to court her. “I want all of you to make yourselves scarce after dinner. You don’t need to leave the house, but keep out of sight. I’m going to spend some time with Kate.”

The males around him all smiled—except for Cable—and agreed to give them some space and privacy.

Chapter Twelve

Jay and Parker helped Kate take the food into the dining room. She avoided glancing at Trent as she served them dinner, despite feeling him watching her. Once all the men were seated, she excused herself. It was rude, but she just wasn't ready to pretend that everything was fine. It wasn't.

She fled upstairs and entered Trent's bedroom, opening the secondary door just inside. The attic had immediately intrigued her last night. There were a lot of abandoned possessions from the previous owners up there to go through, and it was like stepping back in time. Her gaze drifted to the dropped ceiling. But that needed to go if the large space would ever be usable for her tall roommates.

Turning the attic into a project would keep her occupied for quite some time. It would also make her feel as if she were doing something helpful for the people who'd taken her in. Kate mentally broke up the space, deciding where to begin. She suspected the furniture and a lot of the things inside the boxes could be donated. That would clear up most of the junk. She highly doubted any of the men would ever use anything up there.

A slight creaking noise had her spinning around. Trent's head appeared as he came up the stairs. "Can we talk?" His blue eyes locked on her.

"You should be eating."

"I told them to save me some. This is more important."

“We don’t really need to talk. You should go back downstairs. I’ve seen how the other guys eat. They won’t leave any leftovers for you.”

“It doesn’t matter. What matters is us having a conversation.”

“You made it clear that we can’t ever be together, so that topic doesn’t need further discussion, Trent.”

He climbed into the attic and had to cock his head to the side and bend his knees to avoid hitting his head. She couldn’t help but smirk. He looked funny.

Just like last night, Trent dropped to his knees and walked on them to get closer. “I had a talk with my pack. Or maybe I should say, they had a talk with *me*. Everyone knows how I feel about you. I don’t give a damn about actually fathering children, Kate. I thought it was what my pack expected. That it was something I was duty-bound to do for them. Remember how I mentioned adoption for you one day, so you could still be a mother? I’d be fine with having kids that way, too.”

Kate was too stunned to speak.

“You don’t know all that much about Werewolves, but... we just *know* when we’ve met the woman we want to spend the rest of our lives with. And I think you’re it for me. I’d like to court you and see if I’m right.”

Her knees suddenly felt weak, so she lowered to the floor to keep from falling. “Court me?”

Trent moved even closer, sitting down beside her. “Yes. We can’t exactly go out on the kind of dates humans do, since you don’t eat food and you’re still learning how to be a

Vampire. It wouldn't be safe to take you out in public, either, since someone might recognize you. We could just spend time together, get to know each other better. That is, if you have the same kind of feelings for me."

"I do." A dozen questions filled her head. Kate knew which ones to ask first. "Werewolves have mates, right? Do you think I could be yours? Your mate?"

"I think so. I've never been so drawn to anyone in my life. It was instant from the moment you opened your eyes and spoke to me."

"I was pretty out of it."

He scowled. "I'm so fucking glad we killed that entire nest for what they did to you and others."

"Me too."

He reached out and offered his hand. Kate took it. He was so warm. She loved touching Trent. It made her feel more settled, as if everything was going to be okay. He always had that effect on her.

"How long do you think it will take before you know if I could be your mate or not? Mates are for life, right?"

Trent leaned in a little closer. "Not long, and yes, mates are for life. I'll never want anyone else, and I hope that you'll always only want me, too."

"I'd never cheat on you."

"I didn't think you would. Does it frighten or repel you in any way because I'm a Were?"

“No. I was a little afraid at first, but I know you’d never hurt me.” She used her free hand to touch her chest. “I feel it in here.”

“Your instincts are solid.” He smiled. “I’d like you to meet my wolf.”

“I’d love that.” She inhaled Trent’s scent—and hunger hit. She pushed it back, not wanting to ruin the moment. “When can we do that?”

He squeezed her hand. “How about now? My wolf is still me. Meaning, I still have my human thoughts and mind in my wolf form. Don’t be afraid.”

“I won’t be. Jay’s told me how he’s mentally the same in his cougar form.”

“That’s true.” Trent released her and scooted back. Then he grinned. “I’ll leave it up to you, but you might want to close your eyes, since I’m going to need to strip. Shifting in clothing tends to ruin them.”

“Oh! Of course.” Kate squeezed her eyes closed, and she could hear him moving around as he undressed. It was tempting to peek. She’d bet that he had an amazing body.

“Here I go. I apologize in advance. Some of the noises you’ll hear might make you flinch. It doesn’t hurt, but my bones pop as they transform. Are you ready?”

“Yes. Should I open my eyes to watch or wait until you’re done?”

“It’s your choice. I’m comfortable either way. Shifters aren’t uncomfortable with nudity the same way some humans are.”

Kate only hesitated for a heartbeat before she opened her eyes. Trent was crouched on one knee a few feet away, but she only got a view of his side profile. He'd probably purposely done that so she wouldn't see his cock. His bent knee hid it from her view.

The sight of his muscled body was enough for her fangs to drop. It wasn't from blood hunger. Trent was the sexiest thing she'd ever seen.

He gave her a confident grin, as if he could guess that she found him attractive, before he dipped his head. Hair began to grow out of his tan skin. It quickly thickened into fur.

Kate hid her cringing reaction to the noises he made as his body transformed. Some of them were squishy and gross. The popping sounds weren't bad in comparison. But it was over in a flash. In seconds, he'd turned from a man into the biggest dark gray wolf she'd ever seen.

Trent turned his canine head to reveal that his eyes were the same shade of blue. He opened his mouth, a long tongue hanging out, and she swore he did it on purpose, trying to break the tension in the room. Her Vampire urges were clamoring for her to flee. She resisted. This was Trent, after all.

He stayed still, probably waiting for her to make the first move. She swallowed hard. "You're amazing. I've only seen wolves on television and in movies, but you look much bigger."

He gave a head nod and turned to face her. Then he sat on his furry butt, his tail thumping against the floor. Kate got to her knees and moved slowly toward him. She reached out,

keeping her gaze locked with his to make sure touching him was okay.

Trent held still as she lightly brushed her fingertips over the side of his face. His fur was soft and thick. “This is... amazing! I already said that, didn’t I?” Kate laughed, unable to help it. She ran her hand over his neck and onto his chest. “You’re so beautiful. Majestic. Wow. Just...wow!”

He moved his head, nuzzling the side of her face with his nose. Kate laughed. “Don’t lick me.”

He nuzzled his snout against her throat and sniffed. His nose was a little cold. Kate ran both of her hands over Trent’s fur, digging her fingers in to give him light scratches. He seemed to like it, because he didn’t pull away.

It was a fairylike moment for Kate. She was looking at a real Werewolf. She’d grown up loving fantasy novels about things that didn’t exist, but Trent was real. Pure joy filled her. All her worries faded as she petted the big Werewolf.

Trent finally pulled away, and Kate let him go. He backed up, turned sideways, and started to shift back to human. It was amazing to watch as his snout shrunk, the fur receded, and he became a man again. A fine sheen of sweat covered his muscled body. Again, the only disturbing thing was the sounds. That was going to take a little getting used to. He turned his head and grinned.

“I didn’t frighten you.”

“No. You didn’t.”

“I’m going to go grab a quick shower. Shifting in a short amount of time is a workout. I’ll be right back.” He rose to his

feet.

Kate let her gaze run down his body. Even unaroused, he had an impressive cock. Her cheeks heated. Trent just chuckled as he bent, grabbing up his discarded clothes and shoes. Then he had to walk out of the attic. It was amusing to see him moving across that space, trying to avoid bumping his head.

“Be right back!”

“I’ll be here,” she called out to him as he went down the stairs.

Kate let her mind race with the possibilities of what Trent had shared. He wanted to see if they could have a relationship. It was much more than that, though. Werewolves took mates for life. He’d admitted if they were mates, she’d be the only woman he ever wanted.

Longing hit deep at the thought. She’d lost everything from her previous life, but now she had a chance to build a future with a man she really wanted to be with. “*I’m in,*” she mouthed. Trent was so much more than she’d ever dreamed of finding in a partner. He was kind, thoughtful, responsible, and super sexy.

Kate knew he was right. They couldn’t exactly go on dates to see a movie or enjoy a dinner. It wasn’t safe for her to be out in public, and she didn’t have any desire to eat food. She got to her feet, rushing down the attic stairs. The sound of water running in his private bathroom let her know he was still in the shower.

Kate exited his bedroom and hurried downstairs, finding the rest of men in the dining room, still eating.

“There you are.” Cable looked behind her. “Where’s Trent?”

“Showering. I need help.”

“You can have anything you want after that delicious meal.” Reef winked.

“Knock off your flirting,” Cable snapped. “What do you need, Kate?”

“Did you save any food for Trent?”

“We made him a big plate and put it inside the microwave to stay warm.” Parker stood. “Do you want me to get it?”

“No. I’ve got it. Is there a nice place to have a picnic? I mean, I know it’s dark outside, but...” Kate chewed on her bottom lip. “Maybe that’s a bad idea.”

“No.” Reef suddenly stood. “I see where you’re going with this. The barn’s nice, and we don’t have any animals living in it.” He glanced at his brother. “Grab a blanket and go set it up for them in the loft. Open the upper hay doors, so they have a nice view.” He pointed at Parker. “You, grab the food and some beers for Trent. I’ll get some candles and a lighter.”

“No fire in the damn barn. There’s too much straw left over from before we bought the place.” Cable came to his feet. “We have those battery-operated lanterns. I’ll get them.”

Kate felt a little overwhelmed that they’d so willingly help her set up her first date with Trent. “Thank you.”

“Get our alpha and take him out there in five minutes. We’ve got you.” Reef winked. “It’s the least we can do for you cooking for us.” Then they all burst into motion, leaving the dining room.

“And I’ll feed you,” Jay said. “So you’re not hungry. Is that okay?”

“I kind of wanted to feed from Trent.”

Jay smiled. “Ah. Got it. Yeah, let him eat his food, and then you get yours.”

“Do you think he’ll want to share his blood? I don’t want him to feel pressured.”

“Honey, that man wants you to get *very* close and personal with him. He’d be crazy *not* to share all his body fluids with you.”

Kate snorted a laugh. “You’re terrible.”

“But I’m right.” He tilted his head, holding her gaze. “You do realize this could lead to more than just a feeding if you two are all alone, don’t you?”

“You mean sex? I’m not a virgin.”

“I mean, it could become a lifelong commitment if you go to bed with Trent.”

“I’m falling in love with him, Jay.”

“Weres commit for life if he makes you his mate. Sometimes they make that bond during sex. Fair warning.” Jay paused, cocking his head in the other direction and glancing toward the ceiling.

“What?”

“The shower’s still on upstairs. The pipes in this house are old and noisy. Everyone else is outside.” He lowered his voice. “That means we have a minute alone without anyone hearing what I’m about to say.”

Kate tensed. Was Jay about to warn her off committing to Trent? Tell her something terrible about his alpha? Dread pitted in her stomach. “Just say it.”

“I think you should say yes if Trent asks you to be his mate. He’s the best person I’ve ever met. At least until *you* came here. Now he’s second best.” He winked at her. “My gut tells me you’re meant to be together. Take a chance with him. Don’t let fear hold you back.”

A sense of relief flooded her, and she smiled. “Okay.”

“Good. You two deserve to be happy.” He stood. “Now—the water turned off. Go get Trent. He should be dressed by the time you reach his bedroom. The guys will have the barn all set up for your picnic by the time you take him out there. Have fun.”

“I will.” Kate hurried back upstairs and paused in front of Trent’s bedroom door. She took several deep breaths, then lifted her hand and knocked.

He opened it in seconds. “You’re not still in the attic.”

“I made plans for us. Your pack is pretty amazing, and they’re helping.” She held out her hand. “Will you take a walk with me?”

“*Our* pack.” He clasped her hand. “What are you up to?”

“You said you wanted to court me. Well, my parents raised me to be a modern woman. That means I planned us a

date in the barn.”

Trent appeared genuinely surprised. “Really?”

“Yep. Come on.” She glanced at his bare feet. “Do you need shoes?”

“No. I’m a Were. We have tougher skin, and I heal fast.”

“Okay. Let’s go.”

Trent ended up being the one to lead her to the barn. It wasn’t far from the house. They didn’t run into anyone on the short walk. One of the large doors had been left slightly ajar and dim lighting shone from inside.

“Those aren’t the overhead lights.”

Kate grinned. “I know.”

Trent opened the door and entered first. Kate followed. The barn smelled like wood and hay. Two lanterns hung just inside the door, giving off enough light for Kate to clearly see the large space. A ladder led into a loft above, which was lit with more lanterns.

“I smell food.”

“I asked them to bring your dinner out here.” Kate pointed up. “Do you want to go first?”

“No.” He released her hand. “You go up first. I want to be below you, in case you fall. Have you ever been in a barn before?”

“No.” Kate walked to the ladder and started to climb. The first thing she saw was that the pack had placed a large blanket over a bed of straw. A cooler had been left also. On the lid sat

a cloth-covered lump. Her nose told her it was Trent's dinner. She got off the ladder and walked over to sit on the blanket.

Trent took a seat next to her and carefully removed the cloth from the plate of food. It was an actual platter. They'd also given him silverware with a cloth napkin. "This smells really good."

"I'm just glad they managed to save you some. I've seen all you guys eat," she joked.

He lifted the platter and set it on the blanket between them, before glancing at the cooler.

"Beer for you should be inside."

Trent lifted the lid and removed one. "What about you? Did you eat?"

"Not yet. I'm fine."

That drew a scowl from him.

"Please eat, Trent. I really am fine."

He hesitated but then dug into the muffin-shaped meatloaves. She'd made a garlic ketchup sauce to put on top of each one. Trent seemed to enjoy them and the fried potatoes, based on the low groans coming from his throat as he ate.

"Better than sandwiches?"

"One thousand percent."

Kate grinned. "Good. I really do like cooking. I'm just glad that the myth about Vampires and garlic isn't true. I had to ask Jay about that."

“Why?”

“I like to taste what I’m making, to make sure I didn’t mess up anything. I wouldn’t be able to do that if garlic made me burn, since I use it often in recipes.”

“You’re eating food?”

“Have you ever seen those wine tastings where people kind of sniff it, put a little in their mouths to swish around, then spit it out? I’ve taken that approach to cooking.”

He smiled. “That’s smart.” He finished everything on his plate and his bottle of beer. “Hang on.” He stood and walked to the edge of the loft—then stepped off the edge.

Kate yelped and jumped to her feet, rushing to look down where he’d disappeared. Trent wasn’t sprawled on the ground, hurt from the twelve-foot drop. He was using a hose to drink from in the corner of the barn.

She put a hand to her chest and exhaled loudly. “You scared me.”

He finished drinking and turned, shutting off the water. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think.”

She watched as he quickly came up the ladder and sauntered toward her.

“I really *am* sorry.” He gently cupped her face. “I’m just comfortable enough around you to not hide my Werewolf traits.”

“I’m glad, but I thought you were distracted enough to accidentally fall, since there’s no railing.”

“You can easily drop that distance without getting hurt, too. The trick is not locking your knees when you land. Do you want to learn?”

She shook her head. “Maybe later.”

“I wanted to rinse my mouth. Beer breath isn’t exactly romantic. There’s no hose up here or access to running water.”

“I don’t mind the taste of beer.”

“You might if *I* tasted like it.” He leaned closer. “I want to kiss you. May I?”

Her heart pounded. “Yes.”

“Are you sure? We can move slower.”

“I want you to kiss me.” Kate reached up and placed her hands on his chest. The heat coming off his body instantly warmed her. She closed her eyes. She might be a modern woman, but she wasn’t sexually forward. It was a flaw she wanted to work on with the sexy man in front of her.

Trent’s lips were just a feathery brush at first, but then he deepened the kiss. Kate opened her mouth. The second his tongue met hers, desire burned through her, and she grabbed hold of his broad shoulders. What she really wanted to do was climb up his body to get as close as possible.

He seemed to be of the same mind, since his hands left her face to firmly grip her waist, then he lifted her. Kate didn’t hesitate to wrap her legs around his hips.

She heard the sound of material ripping. She didn’t know if it was her clothes or Trent’s being destroyed, and she didn’t

care. She just wanted to feel his skin against hers without anything between them.

Raw need pounded through Kate, and her body felt as if every part of her ached. Her nipples beaded and her clit throbbed. She started to rub up against Trent. As if reading her mind, he gripped her ass, helping her grind her pussy against the front of his pants. He felt rock hard, and moans tore from her throat as pleasure almost made her lose her mind.

Trent moved with her in his arms, and then they were on the blanket. Kate ended up pinned beneath him. He grabbed her wrists and held them to the ground, breaking the kiss. She cried out in protest—but then shock had her going utterly still.

She tasted blood.

Her fangs were out, and she'd cut Trent's tongue while kissing him! She didn't even taste it, she was so lost to her sexual frenzy.

Some of her arousal dimmed at the idea that she'd hurt him.

"It's okay." He smiled. "I heal fast, remember? My skin is already mending."

His skin? Her gaze tore from his to look at his shoulder. She'd ripped his shirt and there were scratches on his now exposed skin. Kate turned her head, staring at where Trent had her wrists trapped with his hand. Her fingernails had grown into claws.

"Oh my God." Tears filled her eyes as she stared back into his. "I hurt you. I'm so sorry."

“It’s okay. I’m fine. I just think I should feed you before we continue kissing.” He actually laughed. “I’m flattered that I made you lose control.”

“It’s not funny.”

“Werewolf, remember? I’m a lot stronger than you are, Kate. Stop worrying about hurting me. You won’t.” He gently released her and lifted slightly, using one arm to brace himself on the blanket. He used his free hand to grab hold of the front of his T-shirt. He ripped it off with one pull.

Kate stared at his muscular chest. Unfortunately, she became more focused on the blood slowly trailing down his skin from where she’d clawed him. Her desire to have sex with Trent suddenly resurfaced, along with hunger.

Trent tossed his destroyed shirt over the edge of the loft. “I didn’t like that band all that much.” He winked at her. “Drink from me, sweetheart.” He lowered, once again pinning her beneath him. The heat from his chest pressed against hers.

She didn’t hesitate, licking at the blood on his skin. Her fangs were already out. The second she tasted him, another moan tore from her throat. She licked and kissed up to his shoulder, to where she’d clawed him, and licked those scratches.

A low growl came from Trent. “So fucking sexy. Bite me.”

He didn’t need to say it again. Kate sank her fangs into his neck and drank.

Trent’s blood made her totally lose the ability to think—or stay in control. Desire ignited, and she wrapped her legs

tighter around his hips, grinding her pussy against his cock.

“Fuck,” Trent snarled. “Don’t stop!”

Kate couldn’t even stop if he asked her to. She came so hard, it had her screaming against his flesh where her mouth was still latched onto him.

Chapter Thirteen

Trent snarled again as he came. It didn't even matter that his jeans were still on. He'd never lost control that way before, but the sheer eroticism of Kate taking his blood proved too much. Each pull from her fangs went straight to his dick. It felt better than any blow job he'd ever gotten.

He knew she'd come too. Not only could he feel it as her body seized, but the sounds she made and the scent in the air assured him that she'd peaked.

Kate slowly removed her fangs and licked at him. They were both breathing heavily.

"Fuck, sweetheart. That was beyond incredible. I can't wait until we're both naked, if it was this good between us while still clothed."

Kate buried her face in his neck and continued to cling to him. "Should I be embarrassed that I just...um..."

"Came in your pants? I did too." He chuckled, amused that his Kate was a bit shy. "That was too hot to regret. Look at me."

Kate lowered her head from his throat and stared at him. She was flushed from what they'd just done and her feeding. She was so beautiful that he felt lucky she was his. He knew down to his bones that she was.

"Sweetheart, I want to bond to you. How do you feel about that?"

“You mean have sex? Like...actual sex?” She softly smiled. “With our clothes off?”

“I’d like for you to agree to be my mate.”

“Yes.” She didn’t hesitate. “I’ve never felt like this with anyone else. I’m falling in love with you, Trent.”

Elation had him grinning like a damn fool. “I’m already in love with you. Unlike humans, I don’t need to wait weeks, months, or years to be certain that you’re the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with.”

“How do we become mates?”

“We exchange blood while having sex.” He slowly lifted off her to crouch at her side. “Let’s do it now. I can’t wait a second longer, Kate. I want you bare under me. Do you want to go to my bedroom, use an actual bed?”

“No. This is perfect.” Kate released him and reached for her shirt, fumbling to get it off as she sat up.

“Trent!”

Both of them froze, hearing Cable’s shout from outside the barn.

Anger instantly burned through him. “I’m going to kill him.” He knew Cable wasn’t happy that he’d mate a Vampire, but to purposely attempt to stop them from bonding was unforgivable.

“Trent,” Cable repeated, sounding closer. “Sorry to interrupt, but the VampLycans hit town early and called for directions to our territory. I told them to hit up the diner for a meal and we’d meet them at the office in an hour.”

“Fuck.” Trent stood. “I’ll be right back.” He jumped out of the loft and landed below. He reached the barn doors and opened them.

Cable waited outside. His best friend’s gaze ran over him from head to toe. He lingered on the front of his jeans, and the bastard inhaled. Humor sparked in his dark eyes.

“Don’t,” Trent ordered, not wanting Kate to overhear anything his lead enforcer might have to say. “Graves said the VampLycans wouldn’t arrive until day after tomorrow.”

“I spoke to Tymber. They were sent to California by their clan leader on a job, but their target apparently fled to Utah. He and his brother decided to stop over to see the pack, give Alpha Arlis their apologies for needing to delay their visit until their investigation is over.”

“What kind of investigation?”

“I didn’t ask. Either way, they want details on what we need from them. It’s your call if we just meet up with them to talk, or if we get this over with tonight. Tymber said if it was something simple, they could do it right away. Otherwise, it could be days or weeks before they return. I didn’t think you’d want Kate to have to wait that long to see her family.”

“Can we really see my family tonight?”

Trent turned as Kate stepped out of the barn. Her hopeful expression tugged at his heart. Her big green eyes silently pleaded with him to agree. He mentally calculated if that could work or not.

The sun had gone down almost three hours ago. They had enough time to meet with the VampLycans, drive almost two

hours to Kate's family, but it would only give them about ninety minutes for her to say goodbye. Anything longer would require her to be wrapped up and shoved in the trunk to be protected from the sun during the return trip. Trent didn't want her to endure that again.

"Please?"

Trent couldn't destroy her hope by saying no. "If the VampLycans agree to help. Let's go shower and dress. We're meeting them at our office in an hour to see if they can take a drive with us tonight to see your family. You'll come with us, in case they agree."

Kate rushed forward, throwing her arms around him. "Thank you!"

He hugged her back. "Go shower first. Hurry. Every minute counts."

"Okay." Kate released him and took off running toward the house.

Cable stepped closer, watching her go. "I still say taking her to visit her human family is a mistake."

"She needs closure."

"Whatever." Cable sighed. "I'll run interference for you to get to your room without seeing the guys. I doubt you want them to catch sight of the front of your jeans."

"Shut up. Don't you dare say something to embarrass Kate around our pack."

Cable suddenly chuckled. "I guess I should have warned you that would happen."

Trent glared at him.

“When you’re turned on and let a Vamp you have feelings for take your blood...you often blow your load. It’ll keep happening until you learn to override your instincts. Or you make Kate wait to feed from you until you’re ready to mate.”

Some of Trent’s anger dissolved and he scowled at his best friend.

“Hey, you know what we learned about mating growing up. We only get bitten during sex if we’re taking a mate, to help form a strong bond by exchanging blood—and scent marking the female with our sperm. We’re physically wired to do that.” Cable shrugged. “I had feelings for Vivian, so anytime she bit, even when we weren’t actually fucking—boom! I’d have to change my pants.”

“You should have told me.”

His best friend smirked. “And miss this moment? Nope. Give me a minute and then the coast will be clear.”

Trent followed him to the house and counted off sixty seconds before he entered the back door. He heard male voices coming from the family room. Cable was telling them about the VampLycans. None of his pack were in sight, so Trent rushed up the stairs to his bedroom to shower and change.

* * * * *

Kate sat in the backseat of the truck cab with Trent on one side of her, Reef on the other. Cable was in the front passenger seat, with Kleve driving. She stared out the

windows as they entered town. It was strange to see so many people and other cars after being confined for so long.

Trent took her hand, holding it. “Are you doing okay?”

“It’s just weird, seeing normal things in the world again. You know?”

“I can imagine.” He pressed tighter against her side. “Do you want to go back home?”

“No. I really want to see my family.”

“Don’t be afraid of the VampLycans. They aren’t interested in harming us.”

“They’re both of our species combined, so they should be cool with you joining our pack.” Reef gave her an encouraging smile.

“I’m more concerned with my family,” Kate admitted. She turned to Trent. “You’ll make sure I don’t accidentally hurt them in any way?” It was her biggest fear. She’d taken his talk seriously about her being the equivalent of a toddler. Her mind was still human, but her body wasn’t. She could possibly harm her mother just by giving her a hug or something, with her new strength.

“I promise, sweetheart.”

She trusted Trent. “Thank you.”

“We’re here,” Kleve announced. “And so are they.”

“Reef, open the shop. We don’t want to do this in the parking lot,” Trent ordered.

Kleve parked near another vehicle. It was an SUV with a rental sticker. Trent hesitated before he opened the door. “Give

us a minute. Stay put, Kate.” Then he got out, along with the others.

Kate watched with trepidation as two large men climbed out of the SUV. Both were tall, muscular, and had longer hair pulled back in ponytails. They wore all black, from their T-shirts to their cargo pants, and military-style boots. A shiver ran down her spine as the strangers glanced her way, before quickly giving their full attention to Trent.

They looked dangerous.

“Thank you for coming. I’m Trent.” He stopped a few feet away, then introduced the rest of his pack. “Reef is the one unlocking our business and turning off the alarm.”

“It’s good to meet you all,” the slightly taller one said with a nod. “I’m Tymber. This is my younger brother, Yern.” His gaze turned to Kate again, before sliding away. “Graves filled us in a little. She’s safe with us.”

“Kate,” Trent softly called out. “Come to me.”

Kate slid out of the truck and closed the door. Another shiver slid down her spine but she forced herself to walk toward Trent, despite how much she felt like she wanted to flee. He reached out his hand and she took it, pressing against his side. The heat coming off his body helped her throw off the foreboding feeling.

“This is Kate.” Trent released her hand and put his arm around her, drawing her even closer. “Let’s take this inside.”

“Follow me.” Kleve waved them all forward.

Both strangers did as asked. Kate couldn’t help but openly study the inside of the large office when they entered.

There were four desks set up in the roomy space. A hallway led toward the back of the building. Six upholstered chairs were lined against the front wall like ones found in an upscale waiting room, three on each side of the door.

Reef and Kleve began pulling the chairs away from the wall to form a circle in the front of the room. Trent had Kate take a seat, and he moved his chair closer, taking her hand as he sat. The two strangers ended up directly across from them. Kleve and Cable took the remaining two chairs. Reef leaned against the front door, almost as if he were guarding it.

TyMBER gazed at Kate. “We’re not going to hurt you. There’s no need for you to be uneasy.” He looked at Trent next. “Graves said you wanted help dealing with her human family. Are they a threat to our existence?”

“No. Kate was kidnapped by a nest, kept prisoner by them for eleven months until we freed her, and then became a part of our pack. She was very close to her parents and sisters.”

“They think I’m dead,” Kate blurted. “I don’t want them to suffer that way. I can’t stand knowing how much they must be grieving over my disappearance. I want to see them and let them know I’m alive.”

TyMBER’s expression softened as he studied her. “You’ll put them in danger if you allow them to know about Vampires, or anything else not human. It won’t matter if they love you enough to accept what you’ve become and keep your secret.”

Yern cleared his throat. “Every human who knows about Vampires can be killed for that knowledge. One of your family might cross paths with a Vamp, give away that they realize

what they are in some way they don't mean to, and cause that Vampire to question them." He glanced at his brother, who nodded. He turned his attention back to her. "Don't be alarmed, Kate. I'm going to show you something. It might be unsettling."

As she watched, his brown eyes began to turn amber, brightening considerably.

"I can look at a human and force them to tell me the truth. If a Vampire does that to one of your family members, whatever nest the Vamps belongs to will hunt you down for sharing their secret, probably kill your family in retaliation, despite being able to just erase their memories, and then attack your pack. That nest will likely want to wipe every one of you out."

"Some humans are immune to our eyes. It's rare, but it happens. It's usually an instant death sentence when a Vampire comes across one of those. They can't mess with their memories to erase the encounter. Most nests are absolutely vicious, and they don't have any compassion. It sounds like you know that firsthand."

Tymer took a deep breath, blowing it out. "We can make your family easily believe that you were taken by a human trafficking ring, escaped, and are now being hunted by those criminals to prevent you from helping law enforcement and testifying against them."

"Witness protection," Yern simplified. "We'll convince your family that you need to take a new identity for your safety and theirs."

“We’ll be able to ease their pain over losing you by making them believe it’s for the best, and focus on their happiness that you’re alive and well.” Tymber paused. “It’s the only way to keep your loved ones truly safe.”

Kate felt her heart break a little. She’d hoped that she could see her family every so often. Tears filled her eyes and slid down her cheeks.

Trent released her hand and slid off his chair, crouching in front her. He cupped her face, using his thumbs to brush away her tears. “I know your family’s safety is the most important thing. It will be hard to say goodbye, but we’ll help you keep an eye on them from a distance.”

She managed to nod. “What if they want to come with me? We’re super tight. I think they’d give up everything so we could stay together as a family.”

“We’ll convince them that isn’t possible,” Tymber countered. “The only way this can really go wrong is if any of them are immune.”

Trent turned his head. “It’s a risk we’re willing to take. Can we do this tonight? Her family lives one state over. It’s a little under a two-hour drive.”

“It’s going to be after midnight by the time we get there,” Reef reminded them.

“That’ll actually work in our favor if they’re in bed sleeping.” Tymber stood. “We’ll sneak in and test them to make sure they aren’t immune.”

“That’s the best-case scenario,” Yern nodded, getting to his feet too. “If they aren’t, we can gently knock them out and

they'll believe it was just a dream when they wake up.”

Kate didn't like hearing that. “Knock them out? You can't hurt my parents or sisters.”

“We won't,” Yern promised. “Trust us. We've got a lot of experience doing this kind of thing.”

“Speaking of, what kind of investigation are you doing?” Reef asked.

“Our clan leader sends us after possible issues that involve half-breeds or abandoned pups. Our specialty is retrieving children.” Tymber grimaced. “It happens sometimes, if they end up in the hands of humans.”

“It's usually not the case, thankfully, but yeah, it happens.” Yern's expression turned somber. “For example, four months ago, we found a caged half-breed child.”

“The bastards who had him thought he suffered from hypertrichosis—otherwise known as Werewolf syndrome, where people grow excessive hair. It's extremely rare, but it happens sometimes in humans. He was too young to fully shift, but he grew fur in patches trying to protect himself against their constant physical abuse. The fuckers whipped him often. They wanted to make a few bucks by selling tickets, showing him off as some freak-show attraction.” Tymber snarled. “I wanted to kill them all.”

The story horrified Kate. “How did they even get their hands on him? Where are his parents? His family?”

“We don't know,” Tymber answered. “He's three, and he has no memory of his parents or his past before being caged and put on display by the bastard humans who abused him.”

One of the couples in my clan adopted him. Velt is doing really good now.” He smiled. “That’s the name he liked best.”

“What are you looking for this time?” Reef clearly wasn’t letting it go.

“Someone reported a young boy seen running with a wolf in Sequoia National Park. We think it was a rogue with his child, who accidentally got spotted by humans. A man renting space in an RV park had a son who matched the description of the boy. The authorities were starting to make that link, so we had to do some mind wipes.” Tymber shrugged. “A woman who parked next to them overheard the father telling his son all about Zion Nation park, so we’re hoping to find them there.”

“What will you do when you find them?” Kate hoped it wasn’t something terrible. Tymber had just said it might be a father with his son.

The tall VampLycan met her gaze. “There are a few Lycan packs in Alaska who owe us favors. We don’t kill rogues unless they’re insane or murderers. Everything we’ve learned so far implies this male loves his child, and they’re probably living mobile so they aren’t attacked because they’re on their own. We’ll get them up to Alaska and find a pack who’ll accept them.”

Kate breathed easier, glad to hear it.

“We need to go.” Trent stood and pulled her to her feet. “I want Kate safely back home before the sun rises.” He looked down at her. “Are you ready to see your family?”

“Yes.”

Chapter Fourteen

Kate fretted, wringing her hands as she stared longingly from across the street at the home she'd been raised in. The two VampLycans had approached the dark house about five minutes before. Both had sworn they wouldn't hurt her family, they only needed to make sure they could be mind-controlled before allowing her to see them.

“What's taking so long?”

Trent reached over, undid her seat belt, and lifted her onto his lap in the back of the truck cab. “There are four people inside and only two VampLycans. They'll turn off the porch lights when it's safe for us to enter. Breathe, sweetheart. I trust them.”

“You just met Tymber and Yern,” she said, letting her frustration show. “What if my dad attacks one of them? He's super-protective of my mom and sisters.”

Cable sat in the front passenger seat with the window down. “I haven't heard any shouts, screams...any disturbance of any kind. It must be going well.”

His bored tone didn't sit well with Kate. She softly hissed.

Trent held her tighter, using his hand to gently caress her back. “Patience. I know it's difficult. We need to do this safely, remember? The VampLycans aren't going to hurt your family.”

“Yern said they’d have to knock them out,” Kate reminded him. She wasn’t about to forget that.

“*Gently* knock them out,” Reef quoted. “And only if they’re immune to mind control. Plus, VampLycan blood can heal minor injuries on humans if an accident happens.”

That didn’t make Kate’s worry fade.

“There,” Kleve announced. “The lights went out. Let’s go.”

Kate had missed seeing that entirely, since Trent had distracted her, but she was more than ready to go inside the house.

Trent’s hold on her tightened, preventing her from climbing out of the truck. She glared at him.

“Slow and stealthy,” he ordered. “We don’t want the neighbors to know we’re here.”

She nodded.

Trent opened the door and he illustrated his strength by keeping hold of her as he climbed out, before depositing Kate on her feet. He kept hold of her hand as they walked across the street. She figured it was to prevent her from sprinting to the porch.

Kleve and Cable stayed behind in the truck, and Reef walked at her other side. They were just climbing onto the porch when the front door opened. It was utterly dark inside, but Kate’s Vampire vision gave her the ability to see. Tymber stepped back, making room for them to enter.

“Go into the living room,” he whispered. “Yern has them all tranced. Don’t be alarmed by seeing them blankly sitting on the couch.”

Kate tore her hand out of Trent’s and rushed forward. A dim lamp had been turned on in the living room. Yern stood in the corner by the fireplace. Her parents and two sisters were huddled together on the couch. The four of them barely fit. All of them wore their night clothes.

Tears blinded Kate at seeing them. Her knees weakened, overjoyed and relieved that they were there, safe and alive. She must have swayed a little on her feet because Trent was suddenly behind her, gripping her hips.

“Steady, sweetheart. Is their scent calling to you? Do you feel bloodlust at all? Be honest.”

She shook her head, reached up, and wiped the tears from her eyes. Her family sat there with their eyes open, staring straight ahead, but they did occasionally blink. Her gaze went to Yern. “What’s wrong with them?”

“They’re under my control. I told them I’m a federal agent, flashed them a fake badge I keep for situations like this, and told them that you’re alive, and gave them the story about you being taken by human traffickers. They’re awaiting your arrival. Are you ready?”

She wasn’t sure what to do or what to say to her family, but she nodded, wanting them to snap out of whatever Yern had done to them.

Yern loudly cleared his throat. All four looked at him. Then he said one word.

“Wake.”

Kate’s family instantly became more animated. Her father wrapped his arm around her mom, his gaze locked on Yern. “Did you arrest the people who took our baby? When is she going to be here?”

“Dad,” Kate choked out.

All four looked her way. Her youngest sister was the first to launch off the couch. Amy slammed into Kate, hugging her hard. Her older sister was a second behind, also hugging her. Sobs broke from her mother as she reached her daughters.

Kate found herself surrounded by her family as they all tried to hold her.

She realized Trent had released her and moved away, since her dad was the one now at her back. He kissed the top of her head. She turned her head to smile at him through her tears.

“I’ve missed you all so much,” Kate sniffed.

“You’re alive!” Her mom gently pushed Amy out of the way and quickly assessed her face in a way only a mother could.

Her eyes widened and she stumbled back.

Kate was instantly alarmed, reaching for her. “Mom!”

Her mother kept backing away, staring at her in alarm. “Who are you?”

“Mom, it’s *Kate*.” Pam went to their mother. “You’re just in shock. It’s her. She’s just lost weight.”

Her mother kept her gaze locked on Kate's face. "The eyes are different. I know my babies. You're not my Kate! The body is different too. Who *are* you?"

Kate's father kissed the top of Kate's head again. "Margie, it's Katie. This is our little girl."

"It's not, Aaron! I don't know who that is, but it's not my daughter."

Yern suddenly stepped next to her mother and snapped his fingers, drawing all their attention. His eyes turned amber, glowing. "Kate has spent every day locked in an underground cell while her captors searched for the perfect buyer. They barely fed her enough to keep her alive. That's why she's thinner and paler. Kate's eyes look a little different because they kept her heavily drugged. Our doctors have to give her small doses still, while she's slowly detoxing. This *is* your daughter, Mrs. Murphy."

Her mother nodded as if she hadn't just been frightened of her own daughter, hurrying back to Kate. She hugged her, softly crying. "I'm so happy you're home! We've missed you so much and been so worried."

Kate's family group hugged, just holding on to each other. With their bodies pressed against her, their warmth surrounding her cold body, she realized she could hear their heartbeats. Her gums throbbed, and she started to panic as hunger stirred.

She wiggled out of their hold. "Trent!"

He was there immediately, using his body to put himself between her and her parents and siblings. Yern and Tymber

took control of her family, having them sit on the couch again. Kate hated to see all the emotion leave their faces, but she also felt instant relief.

“Breathe through your mouth,” Trent coached her. “Look at me.”

Kate lifted her chin to hold his gaze. He glanced down at her mouth as she opened it to do as he’d said, revealing her extended fangs.

He smiled gently. “You’re doing great.”

“I could hear their heartbeats and got hungry,” she softly hissed. “How is that great?”

“You stayed in control and resisted.” Trent rubbed her arms in a soothing way.

“They’re the first humans you’ve been around.” Reef had moved closer. “You’re doing amazing, Kate. Bad would have been if you’d sunk your fangs into one of them to snack on.”

Kate looked at her family—and in that instant, it became crystal clear to her exactly how much she’d changed. She’d barely spent a few minutes with them and her fangs had descended. They didn’t smell like home anymore, but...food.

Tears filled her eyes.

“It’s okay, sweetheart.”

She shook her head at Trent. “It’s not. You tried to warn me. I didn’t believe that I could ever be a danger to them. But I am.” More tears spilled down her cheeks. “I love my family so much, but I want to bite them.”

He wrapped her in his arms, holding her close. “It’s a natural desire as a Vampire, unfortunately. You didn’t hurt them though. We’re going to get through this together.”

Kate wasn’t afraid that she’d hurt Trent. He felt like safety and acceptance personified.

Some of her distress faded as she clung to him. *He’s my home now.*

That epiphany made her feel better.

“It’s time to say goodbye to them,” Trent whispered into her ear.

She sniffed, trying to get her emotions under control. “Please don’t let me near them. I don’t trust myself.”

“You’ll regret it if you don’t say goodbye. I’m right here with you. I promise I’ll pull you away if you start to lose control. Do you trust me?”

Kate pulled away from his chest and looked up at Trent’s handsome face. “Completely.”

“Let’s do this.” He slowly released her. “Breathe through your mouth. That will help you not smell their blood.”

She understood, and returned her attention to her family. They remained on the couch, with Yern crouched in front of them. His eyes were glowing amber as he whispered to them. She hadn’t realized he’d been speaking to them while Trent was comforting and calming her.

“The criminals who kidnapped Kate are going to keep looking for her. She saw and heard too much. That’s why she needs to go into witness protection. You want her to be safe.

It's very sad that she can't come home to live with you, but you understand this is how it needs to be. You will also keep this secret from everyone but each other. No one else can be told, or it would put your daughter in danger. That's something you would never risk doing. The priority is that Kate is safe, and you're happy about that. Each one of you is going to be okay with this. Now it's time to say goodbye and wish her well. If anyone asks, Kate is still missing. Do you understand? Nod if you do."

All four of them nodded their heads.

Trent took Kate's hand and led her to the couch. Yern rose, getting out of the way. Kate hesitated before going to her knees before them. Her family snapped out of whatever spell the VampLycan had them under.

Her mother leaned forward. "We're so proud of you for helping the FBI identify and capture those awful criminals who're selling people." Her voice broke. "I just wish it didn't have to be you."

"I know, Mom." Kate reached out and caressed her cheek. "I love you so much." She met the gaze of each of her sisters. Both had started to cry. "You guys are going to do great without me. I won't really be gone, because I'm always in your hearts. I'll be thinking about you all the time."

"This fucking sucks!" Pam blurted.

"It's not fair." Amy's grief quickly turned to anger. Her baby sister had always had the worst temper. "I hope they execute all those motherfuckers you help find!"

"Language," their father muttered.

Kate looked at him. “I love you, Daddy. I know you’ll take care of them.”

“This is breaking our hearts, but losing you to death would hurt far worse. The agent says that sending you away and pretending you’re still missing is the only way to make sure you’re safe. So that’s what we’ll do. We love you, Kate. Every day, you remember how much we love you.”

“I will, Daddy.”

“It’s time.” Yern stepped forward. “We can only avert satellites for so long to make sure the house isn’t under surveillance from the sky. Bringing Kate here to see all of you was very risky but that was one of her demands to go into the program.”

Her family gripped Kate’s hands and arms. She was glad that they didn’t pile on her in another hug. It was too risky for them to get that close to her again. “I love you all so very much. Every night when the sun goes down...know that I’m thinking about you.”

“We’ll do that too,” her father promised. “Think of you.”

Trent pulled Kate to her feet and led her away. Kate turned, taking one last look at her family. Her father had stood, as if he was going to come after her. Tymber cut him off, blocking his path.

“Wait!” That was her mother.

Kate stilled. So did Trent.

Her mother rose, sparing a pleading look at Tymber. “Let me give our Kate her keepsake box. It’s a family tradition for every girl to have one and take it with her when she leaves

home to spread her wings. There are sentimental mementos, some family jewelry and important photographs. Please?”

“Get it quickly,” Yern ordered. “Tymber will go with you.”

Kate’s mom fled toward the back of the house with the tall VampLycan following her.

“Satellites?” Reef whispered the words so softly, Kate doubted her family could hear him.

Yern shrugged. “I saw it in a movie,” he whispered back. “Humans will believe anything while tranced.”

It didn’t take long for her mother and Tymber to return. The old breadbox-sized wooden chest was clutched in her arms. “Here, baby. I wish we could go with you, but the agent explained the program doesn’t allow it. We love you. Don’t you *ever* forget that.”

“I won’t, Mom. I love you too.” Kate took it, and her mother hugged her.

Trent intervened after just a few seconds, gently pulling them apart. He wrapped his arm around Kate’s waist and got her out of the room. They stopped at the front door. Reef stayed with them. In less than a minute, Tymber followed.

“Go,” Tymber said. “We’ll stick around for a little bit to make sure Yern’s commands are firmly set.”

“Thank you. My pack owes you.” Trent gave the VampLycan a nod.

“You can repay us by calling me if you come across any kids in need of a home. Our clan leader, Trayis, mated to a

half-breed. Shay's pack didn't always treat her right. He's made it our mission to rescue as many as possible, so they have a place they can be fully accepted." Tymber passed over a card he took from his pocket. "My direct line. I can't always answer but I'll call you back as soon as I'm able."

"You have my word," Trent swore, taking the card.

They left the house and returned to the truck. All three of them climbed into the back, Kate sitting between Trent and Reef again. Kleve started the truck and drove away.

Kate's gaze stayed on her house until she couldn't see it anymore.

"How did it go?" Cable twisted around in the passenger seat to study her. "What's in the chest?"

"Not now," Trent sighed. He put his arm around Kate and drew her close. "It's going to be okay, sweetheart."

She clutched at her keepsake box, grateful that her mother had remembered it. "I know. I just love them so much, and I hate that I can't be a part of their lives anymore. I'm going to miss out on all the wonderful things I always looked forward to. You know? Like when my sisters get married and have babies."

"We'll get through it together."

Kate put the box on the floor by her feet and cuddled into Trent. Him holding her helped more than she could say.

"The VampLycans are pretty damn cool." Reef chuckled, telling Cable and Kleve what happened inside, including the story about the satellite.

“I’m just glad the cops didn’t show up and it seemed to work.” Cable’s mood seemed lighter. “That went better than I thought it would.”

“You worry too much.”

“You don’t worry *enough*,” Cable shot back at Reef.

“You’re just jealous because I have the best hair.”

His brother groaned loudly from the driver’s seat. “Not this shit again, Reef. I don’t want to spend the next two hours hearing you lecture us on quality shampoo and deep conditioners. I can’t believe we’re related sometimes.”

“You totally love me. You’re just cranky because you come in second in the best hair department in our pack. Just remember that you were born first, so there’s always that.”

Kate couldn’t help but smile reluctantly as she listened to the two brothers bicker. They kind of reminded her of her sisters. Amy and Pam could argue about anything just for the fun of it.

Trent kissed her head. “I love you.”

His words warmed her heart. “I love you too.”

“Awww. I love you all.”

“Shut up, Reef,” Cable growled. “I barely tolerate you. You’re lucky to still be alive.”

Reef burst out laughing. “Love to you is making death threats. There’s proof that you love me back!”

“We’ll make it home before the sun rises. Tomorrow night, we’ll finish what we started earlier tonight,” Trent murmured.

She snuggled against his broad chest. “I look forward to it.”

“Trent and Kate, sneaking into a barn to M-A-T-E,” Reef sang.

“That doesn’t rhyme. Listen and learn. I have an idiot brother, who sometimes I really want to smother.” Kleve paused. “See how that works?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Cable sighed. “This is why I don’t like going on road trips with you assholes. Turn on some music, Kleve.”

Kate chuckled when the brothers and Cable started to argue about what they wanted to listen to. “Are they always like this?”

“Unfortunately.” Trent didn’t sound as if they were annoying him though. “We really need to find a rogue with construction experience so we can have him build an addition on the house. I’m dreaming about a bedroom off the side of the garage, so we don’t have to sleep on the same floor as them once we’re mated.”

“I’m going to clear out the attic and start taking down the drop ceiling, so you guys can walk around up there without ducking or twisting your heads sideways.” Kate lifted her head and winked at Trent. “It would make a nice place to have picnics.”

He grinned. “I’ll help.”

“We’ll all help,” Cable said. “Because I’m too close to Trent’s bedroom. I don’t want to hear you two when I’m trying to sleep at night.”

“Trent and Kate, sneaking into the att—”

“Shut up!” Cable, Trent, and Kleve all snarled at Reef.

He just laughed. So did Kate.

Less than two hours later, they parked next to the farmhouse. Kate could feel that the sun would rise soon. Trent carried her keepsake box up to her bedroom and followed her inside, placing it on the small dresser.

“I wish you could sleep in my bed. I’m going to sunproof my bedroom and bathroom today. Will you move in with me tonight?”

“Yes.” Kate didn’t have to think about it.

He licked his lips. Kate watched, wanting to kiss him.

He seemed to read her mind. “I’m taking my time with you when we mate. That means we need to wait until tonight. So hold that thought.” He reached out and brushed his thumb over her jawline. “I’ll make sure I sleep today, too, so I’m well rested.”

Kate wanted to invite him to share her bed, but it was a twin and he would never fit with her. He winked and then walked out of her room. It was tempting to follow him but the pull of the sun started to make her feel tired. She had just enough time to change clothes and crawl into bed before she passed out, dreaming of Trent.

Chapter Fifteen

Kate opened her eyes, instantly awake. The sun was almost completely down. She sat up and pushed off the covers, getting out of bed. A light tapping on her bedroom door surprised her.

“It’s Jay,” her friend called out. “Trent, Cable, and Kleve had an emergency at work. I promised to let you know they’d be home in about an hour. Trent’s sorry he couldn’t be here when you woke but he said he’s really looking forward to your plans tonight.”

She swiftly moved to the door and opened it. “What kind of emergency? Are they okay?”

“They’re fine. One of our longtime human clients had a break-in at his home a few hours ago. He requested that they investigate to find out who did it and hopefully recover some of the items they stole.”

“Isn’t that a job for the police?” Kate tried to hide her disappointment over not being able to see Trent right away.

“The local police haven’t exactly built a good reputation for solving crimes. We get a lot of business sent our way because we have a better track record for not only finding who pulled off a crime, but doing it fast enough to recover any stolen property before it’s sold.”

Reef came upstairs and strolled their way. He grinned. “Kleve just texted me. They got the bastards. One of them cut his hand when he reached inside the window they broke to

gain access to the house. Cable put on a big show in front of the cops and led them to a house two blocks over. They found the missing laptop, jewelry, and cash in one of the idiots' backpacks."

Kate quirked a brow. "What kind of show?"

"Cable pretends to have extensive tracking skills." Reef grinned. "Like he followed their footsteps through crushed grass and shit, right to their location. In actuality, the one bleeding left enough drops of blood at the scene for him to track the scent right back to their house."

"Are they on their way back?"

Reef gave Jay a look. "The cops are keeping them for a little bit to answer some questions, since you know how pissy some of them get with us."

"Why are they pissy?" Kate asked. "Aren't they grateful the crime was solved and they've recovered the stolen property?"

"You haven't met some of the cops who work in this town." Reef rolled his eyes. "Most of them are cool, but they have some real morons on the force. Kleve said Lazy Idiot is there. It's what we call him, because he's more than earned the nickname. He likes to harass us every time he gets the chance. I swear he must be family or something to the police chief, since he hasn't been fired. We've had a couple run-ins with him where—gasp!—we actually made him do his job, or we showed him up in front of his coworkers." Reef shook his head. "So his idea of payback is screwing with us and wasting our time when given the chance."

“The upside is that we get a lot of business because of cops like him.” Parker came out of his bedroom to join them. “The money just hit our account. Clive must have been sweating it big time with his personal laptop stolen. We’re five grand richer.”

“Why?” Kate asked, shocked by the huge amount for what sounded like a simple case. “Who’s Clive?”

“He owns a bunch of rental properties around town. We do background checks for him on potential renters and hunt down the ones who take off owing him money, so he can have them served with court papers to recoup his losses.” Parker grimaced. “He’s scum, but he pays on time and gives us steady work. Anyway, the human likes to cheat on his wife with hookers, so I’m guessing that’s why he offered us so much to try find his laptop.” Parker shuddered. “I do *not* want to know what must be on his computer for him to shell out that much. It’s probably sex videos he recorded of himself.”

“I’ll shower and start dinner.” Kate inched around the guys to reach the bathroom, not interested in more details about Clive.

“You don’t need to cook tonight. Trent asked me to tell you they’ll hit the drive-thru so you don’t have to worry about feeding us. There’s a fast food place right down the street from where they are.” Parker grinned. “We’re getting buckets of fried chicken. Extra crispy with our favorite sides!”

Reef and Jay high-fived and both started to do a funny dance in the hallway. Parker joined in. It was hysterical to see all three large males being so silly. Kate entered the bathroom

laughing and closed the door. Her humor quickly faded as she brushed her teeth, stripped, and climbed into the shower.

Her and Trent would officially mate after he got home, and the anticipation was killing her.

She put on the robe that the guys had gifted her to keep in the bathroom, which she kept on the back of the door. The men weren't in sight when she cracked the door, so she hurried into her room.

She chose to wear one of the few dresses she'd bought online. It was a dark yellow, high-waisted maxi dress with short sleeves. It matched the bra and panty set she'd also chosen in that color. Kate hoped it wouldn't contrast her unusually pale skin as starkly as black would.

"Comfortable but kind of sexy," she whispered, running her hands over the soft material. It reminded her that she really needed a mirror in her bedroom.

Kate left her room and made a quick trip back into the bathroom to brush out her damp hair and pull it back in a loose ponytail. Reef had a drawer full of hair ties that he'd offered to share with her.

"You look beautiful," Reef said softly.

Kate startled and turned her head to see him standing in the open doorway. He hadn't made a sound. "Thank you."

"I mean that in a brotherly way. You're going to become our sister for real once you and Trent mate. You'll also become our official alpha bitch." Reef smiled and backed up to let her exit the bathroom. "Maybe we can change the title to our alpha Vamp, since you're not a Werewolf."

“Does that matter?” It was something new for her to worry about. She stepped out into the hallway.

“Not to us, and it’s our pack.” He shrugged. “We don’t exactly live by the same rules as the rest do. Jay is proof of that.”

“I heard my name.” Jay came out of his bedroom. “What’s up?”

“Will Kate be our alpha bitch or alpha Vamp after she mates to Trent?” Reef grinned. “Do we vote on it or let Kate decide what official title she likes best?”

“Don’t be an idiot. She’s a Vampire. Other packs probably won’t kill her on sight the way they would with me, but Trent is never going to put her at risk by introducing her to them regardless.” Jay let his gaze slide over Kate from head to foot. “I knew that dress would be flattering. You look like a ray of sunshine.”

Parker came back out of his room. It amused her how much they all ended up chatting in the hallway. “Cable texted. They just left the fast food place and are on their way home. I’m going to go set the table.”

“I’ll help.” Kate wanted to do something. “How long do you think it’ll be before they get here?”

All of them headed downstairs. Reef answered, “Probably fifteen minutes.”

Parker grabbed plates while Kate got silverware. Jay volunteered to get napkins.

Reef opened a beer and sipped it as he followed them from the kitchen into the dining room. “We’ll make ourselves

scarce after we eat. Tonight is the night.” He winked at Kate. “Lots of sex. Trent’s going to want to scent mark the hell out of you.”

“Stop teasing,” Parker chastised. “You’re making her blush.”

“It’s okay. It makes me feel like part of the family,” Kate admitted. “My sisters and I always teased each other.”

“See? I—”

Boom!

The loud noise cut off what Reef was about to say, and they all went still.

Boom!

“Is that gunfire?” Kate glanced at the men.

“Yes.” All traces of Reef’s good mood vanished as he set down his beer. “That was close.”

Parker pulled out his cell phone. “None of the perimeter alarms have gone off.”

Boom!

“Shit.” Parker was also looking at his phone. “I don’t see anything on the trail cams. I’m scrolling through the feeds.” He suddenly snarled. “Two human males with shotguns are in our territory, by the widow’s road. We have invaders.”

“Fucking poachers,” Reef spat.

“Poachers?” Kate asked.

“We own a lot of land. Sometimes humans show up to illegally hunt. It’s happened twice before,” Jay explained.

“Let’s go.” Reef hurried out of the dining room. “Jay, take to the trees. Parker, you’re with me.”

“What are you going to do?” Kate hurried behind them as they made their way out of the house.

Reef spun as soon as he walked out of the back door. “Parker and I will tell them to get the fuck off our land, while Jay shifts, ready to pounce on them if the bastards decide to shoot at us. Stay here, Kate.”

“Maybe I should go. I doubt they’d feel threatened enough to shoot if confronted by a woman.”

“Fuck no!” Reef shook his head. “We don’t have time for this. Stay in the house.”

He and Parker ran off together into the tree line to the left of the house. Jay was already gone, leaving behind his discarded clothing on the ground. She hadn’t even noticed him stripping and shifting into his cougar form.

Boom!

The shot sounded much closer. Kate softly cursed and went back inside the house. She wasn’t sure if being shot would kill her but she didn’t want to find out. The highest point of the house was the attic. There were windows up there that faced where the men had gone to intercept the poachers. She hurried upstairs but kept the lights off. The old curtains in the attic made her sneeze from dust as she moved them aside to peer out.

The glass was too dirty to see through from probably decades of never being cleaned. Kate tried to open the window, but it had been painted shut. It was another thing to

add to her list of projects. She spun away, glad for her night vision as she made her way back to the stairwell and went downstairs.

It was tempting to go outside, but then no one would be home to tell Trent what was going on. He, Cable, and Klevé could go assist the rest of the pack to deal with the men with guns. She also suspected that no one would be happy if she tried to help them deal with the trespassing humans.

Kate went into the kitchen, deciding to wash the few dishes in the sink to pass the time. She had just finished them and turned off the water when a chill ran down her spine.

“Abigeal.”

The soft, raspy voice had Kate spinning around, horror and terror filling her at the same time.

She’d have known Remi anywhere. He was the spitting image of his father, only a younger version with fewer wrinkles. His uncanny resemblance to Rupert filled her with terrible memories.

“I couldn’t believe it when I saw your photos on television a few months ago. Your parents were speaking on the news about your disappearance. And I’ve finally found you!” He stepped inside the kitchen. “I’ve been watching the house where you lived every night since. I knew you’d have to return home at some point.”

Kate tried to back up but bumped into the counter. “Stay away from me!”

“Don’t be frightened, my love. You’ve been reborn just for me.” He inched closer, opening his arms as if he planned to

hug her. “We don’t have much time before the dogs return. Come with me, Abigeal.”

Kate slid sideways, thankful that the island was between them. “No. My name is Kate.” The shock was quickly wearing off as his words sank in. She guessed he was calling the Werewolves dogs. Terror turned rapidly into anger as her mind replayed all the suffering she’d endured for the eleven months that she’d been kept prisoner by his father. “I’m not going *anywhere* with you.”

“You are my Abigeal reborn in the flesh, because our love was destined.” A flash of anger showed in eyes that were eerily like his father’s. “Come to me, my love.”

Rage filled Kate. He wanted to take her away from Trent, to imprison her again! Her human life had been stolen away because of the Vampire in front of her. Rupert and his nest had kidnapped her because of *him*.

Worse, the bastard admitted to watching over her family. He could have hurt or even killed them. All because he’d seen them on the news, pleading for her safe return.

What would he do to them now, if she didn’t go with him?

Her fingernails grew into claws and her fangs descended as she hissed.

Remi responded by flashing his own fangs, and his eyes began to glow. “Whoever turned you will die. That should have been *my* privilege.” He inhaled. “I don’t smell another Vampire. Where is your master? I will rip the heart from his chest for touching my wife!”

“Your *father* did this to me.”

“Papa did this? And why are you with these dogs? Did he hire them to safeguard you? I wouldn’t have tranced the humans to lure the dogs away if I’d known they worked for him.”

“Your fucking crazy papa is dead!” Kate spat.

He physically jerked as if she’d slapped him. Kate tore her gaze off him for a split second, looking for a weapon. Literally the only thing within reach was the sugar bowl with a lid. She glared back at him, grabbed it, and pitched it at his head as hard and fast as possible.

Kate didn’t wait to see if she hit him. She was already in motion before the glass shattered. It sounded as if it had hit the wall instead of her target. Remi had come in through the kitchen door from the hallway. That left her only the dining room to escape to.

“Abigeal!”

His bellow had her grabbing hold of a chair and spinning. They’d set the table but there were no knives. Just forks, a few spoons, and plates. The chair was the only weapon she could think of. She lifted it higher, almost like a lion tamer would to protect herself against a dangerous animal as she pointed the legs at Remi.

He stormed after her. “What do you mean, my papa is dead?”

Kate backed up. “He’s nothing more than ash. And do you know what? He deserved it! That bastard whipped me almost every damn night! I’m *Kate Murphy*. Not some

Vampire you once married. Abigail is *dead*, Remi. I'm not her!"

His eyes glowed brighter and his fangs seemed to grow longer. It made his face monstrous. "You're lying. My papa is fine. I'll take you to him and have him explain. It should have been *my* blood that transformed you. You're *my* bride."

That snapped the last of Kate's temper. She screamed as she plowed forward, using every ounce of strength and speed she possessed to slam the chair into his chest. His eyes widened as she made contact. The chair broke but the impact sent him flying back into the kitchen. He hit the island and crashed to the floor.

The chair came apart in her hands, broken in at least a dozen pieces. She dropped the back of it and bent, picking up one of the wooden legs. Remi sat up, gaping at her.

"Fuck you!" she shrieked, and rushed at him again.

Remi flinched and threw up his arm to protect his face. Kate threw herself on top of him. One of her knees slammed into the front of his slacks, nailing him in the junk. Her other one made painful contact with the hardwood floor. It barely registered.

She gripped the chair leg with both hands and rammed the broken end into his chest.

Warm wetness splashed Kate. The shock of it, along with the realization of what she'd just done, had her staring down at her hands, still gripping the thick wooden chair leg.

It had pierced Remi's chest, buried deep, and blood coated her hands, his shirt, and the front of her dress.

Remi's hand had fallen away from his face, so she could see his mouth stretched wide, as if he wanted to scream, fangs exposed. But he didn't make a sound. She watched as the life left his eyes. The glow faded...and then he wasn't breathing.

She'd staked a Vampire.

A whimper came from Kate as she released the chair leg sticking out of Remi, jerked away, and her ass hit the floor. She scrambled backwards, her bloody hands slippery on the hardwood.

Remi didn't move. She'd killed him. The grisly sight of what she'd done made her gag. Fortunately, she had nothing in her stomach to puke up.

Kate hit the lower cabinets and forced her gaze away from the body. She reached up, gripped the counter, and used it to pull herself onto unsteady feet.

Remi's eyes were still open, his mouth too, and that chair leg looked obscene, embedded deep in his chest. She verified once more that he wasn't breathing, since he didn't move at all.

"Why aren't you ashing?" Her voice came out shaky. All the Vampire movies she'd watched streamed through her head. Some of them had staked Vamps igniting into flames. God, she hoped that wasn't the case. She didn't want to set the house on fire. Kate glanced toward the pantry. She'd seen a fire extinguisher in there. It would mean going near the gruesome body to get it.

She remembered another movie where the Vampires had to be dragged into the sunlight before turning to ash. Kate

couldn't do that, obviously, since she'd burn too. And anyway, it was dark out.

The one time she'd seen a Vampire ashed had been when Rupert had torn out the throat of one of his nest with his fangs. He'd then ripped off the guy's head. It wasn't something she'd ever be able to forget.

Trent should be home any minute. He'll know what to do.

Kate nodded frantically, trying to calm down. The smell of blood was strong in the kitchen, since it was all over the body. She glanced down. Another gagging fit hit as she realized so much of Remi was literally on her now-ruined dress. Kate wanted to reach up to cover her mouth but they were coated in his blood.

Even when she managed to slow her breaths, her claws and fangs wouldn't retract. It must have been because of the blood. The smell was so strong that she could almost taste it.

"I need a shower." A sob threatened to choke her as she thought again of how Remi had found her—because she'd visited her family the night before to say goodbye. Her family had been in danger from a Vampire *for months*, just because he'd seen her on television.

"You followed us home, didn't you?"

He couldn't answer.

So she answered for him. "Yes. And you said you tranced humans. That means you sent those men with guns so the guys would leave me alone in the house. Bastard!"

Remi's hand suddenly twitched.

Kate gasped, hoping she'd imagined it. It wasn't so. He blinked and his mouth closed. It opened again almost immediately, and he hissed.

“Betrayer! You...hurt...me!” He hissed again. “You will...learn.”

Kate's memory flashed to the whip his father had used to tear open her back as punishment for not playing along with his insanity. How often he said those exact words.

It *really* pissed her off that Remi wasn't dead.

“You're right. I'm learning.” Kate hurried to a set of cabinets near the oven, keeping the island between her and the recovering Vamp. She quickly yanked them open. There were three various-sized cast iron skillets stored inside. Kate grabbed the largest, heaviest one on the bottom. The other two clattered to the floor as she viciously yanked out the one she wanted.

“Fucking die!” Kate screamed, using both hands to grip the handle of the heavy cookware and rushing at the monster who wanted to do her more harm.

Remi had pulled the chair leg from his body in the seconds it had taken her to gain a new weapon. It was a ghastly sight, since he had a huge hole in his chest. Kate got a good view of it when he twisted his upper half to look at her as she came rushing around the island. His eyes widened as Kate attacked.

She bashed him in the head as hard as she could.

He shrieked from the pain of the heavy skillet nailing him in the side of the head.

Kate hit him a second time, and he dropped to the floor, going still again.

She didn't care. She dropped to her knees, raised the heavy skillet, and nailed him yet again.

“Die, you motherfucker!” she screamed, determined to crush his head until there was no way Remi could come back to life.

“What the hell?”

Kate froze, twisting her neck to look behind her. Cable had run into the kitchen. Someone shoved him out of the way—and there was Trent. Fur started to sprout across his face as he rushed toward her.

She flinched, expecting a brutal impact, but Trent didn't slam into her. He grabbed her around the waist instead, yanking her away from the Vampire sprawled on the floor. The skillet fell from her hands as she was lifted away from Remi.

Trent handed her over to Cable. His voice sounded inhumanly snarly as he spoke. “Keep her safe while I take this piece of shit out.”

Cable wrapped his arms around Kate, being surprisingly gentle. “I've got you. It's going to be okay.”

Trent had shifted into something that looked like a furry, terrifying man. He stood on two legs but mostly appeared like a beast. “You trespassed into my territory and came after *my* mate?”

Remi only moaned, writhing on the floor and trying to hold his severely damaged head. He seemed to be in too much pain to care that a Werewolf stood over him, claws extended.

Kate could see that parts of the Vampire's head looked... flattened. She'd done a lot of damage to him. "That's Remi," she said, her voice shaking. "He followed us here from my parents' house."

Trent whipped his head her way. His normally blue eyes had become pitch black.

Kate nodded, silently answering his unspoken question. Yes. Rupert's son. The reason she'd been kidnapped.

Trent focused back on the severely injured Vamp. "It's the last thing he'll ever do. Cable, get her out of here."

Kate tried to wiggle out of the enforcer's hold but he was too strong. He spun, lifting her right off her feet in the process, and moved them into the hallway. Cable kept going until they reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Stop struggling, Kate. Trent doesn't want you to witness what he's about to do."

"I have to make sure Remi dies!"

Cable released her but blocked her path when she tried to rush around him. "Kate." He lowered his voice. "You're a Vampire. Trent doesn't want you seeing one of your kind getting ashed. Go upstairs and shower." He visually examined her. "How hurt are you? Do you need my blood to heal?"

"It's all Remi's. His heart popped like a water balloon when I staked him."

His eyes grew almost comically wide and his mouth dropped open.

"But he didn't die."

Cable snapped his mouth shut. “Yeah, they don’t die that way. It’ll stop their hearts for sure if you jab it with a pointy weapon, make them kind of pass out from the shock, but they recover within a few minutes.” His expression changed to amusement. “Bashing a head in won’t kill a Vampire either, but I will *always* cherish the memory of seeing you try.” He actually laughed.

“That’s not funny, Cable.” She looked down at her bloody hands. They were shaking. “I’m going to have nightmares about this. I didn’t even know he was in the house until he spoke. I was doing the dishes, and he...”

Cable gently gripped her wrists, making her look up at him. “The best way to kill a Vamp is decapitation. You did good, Kate. I’m sorry we weren’t here when you needed us.”

Trent came out of the kitchen. He had transformed back into human in appearance but his eyes were still black. Kate watched him wiping his hands on his jeans, leaving behind blood and ash. “Move, Cable. Kate, drink from me now so you’re no longer injured.”

“I’m okay. All this blood was his.”

He came to a halt. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Both of you need showers. Go upstairs. I’ll grab the food from the truck and call Kleve to see if the hunters have left yet.” Cable looked at Kate. “Parker called us about them, so Kleve went to help.”

“Remi tranced them,” Kate admitted. “He told me.”

Trent growled. “We’ll be upstairs.” He stepped around Cable and pulled Kate into his arms, hugging her.

She tensed. “I’m all bloody.”

“I don’t care. *Fuck.*” He buried his face in her neck. “I could have lost you. We’re mating right now. We’ll be in my room.”

“I’ll save you some food,” Cable promised. “Go. I’ve got this.”

Chapter Sixteen

Trent took Kate to his bathroom and turned on the shower. Fury still rode him as he thought about the Vampire who'd come after Kate. She should have been safe in their territory. The farmhouse was their sanctuary. It had been invaded and desecrated. The pack would be spending hours cleaning up blood and ash in the place where their food was stored and prepared.

"I'm okay, Trent," she said. "I can hear you continuously growling under your breath."

He studied her eyes. She seemed emotionally stable. "We failed to keep you safe. *I* failed you."

"No. None of that is true. Remi saw a news story about me months ago and admitted to stalking my family. He only found me because *I* begged you to let me see my parents and sisters. I'm not letting you take the blame for what I did. I endangered the pack. And maybe it's a little on Remi, for being nutso about his dead bride."

"He had to have followed us home, since we got here before sunrise. The license plate on the truck would have led him to our business in town. I wasn't looking for a tail. Damn." Trent kicked off his shoes. "Let's wash the blood off. Are you sure none of it's yours?"

"I might have some bruising in a few places from when I attacked him, but I'm not in any pain."

He inwardly flinched. “I’m sorry you had to defend yourself.”

“*I attacked him,*” she repeated.

Trent tore off his shirt, tossing it on the bathroom floor. “What did you do? Besides hit him with a pan, of course.” He shook his head slightly, still surprised by that.

“Remi looks so much like his father...and then he called me Abigeal.” She stripped out of her dress as she talked. “He opened his arms, coming toward me like we would actually hug or something. I just snapped.” Tears filled her eyes. “I channeled my baby sister. Amy has always had a bad temper. Pam and I were constantly stopping her from hitting idiots who pissed her off.”

He closed the distance between them, cupping her face. “It took a lot of bravery to fight him off and defend yourself.”

“You’re not hearing me.” She gripped his hands. “I threw something at his stupid head, ran into the dining room, and then charged him with a chair. I wanted to hurt Remi like his father hurt *me*. I was kidnapped because he’s crazy, and his father thought I could make him sane. Him calling me Abigeal just reminded me of everything they did to me. I got *so* mad! When the chair broke, I used one of the legs to stake him in the heart.”

Trent tried to hide that her confession floored him. His sweet, gentle Kate had caused that nasty chest injury he’d seen on the Vamp. He hadn’t given much thought to how it might have happened—he was too busy tearing the Vamp’s head off. All that mattered was Kate’s safety and making sure Remi would never be a threat to her again.

“But he wouldn’t die. That’s when I went for the cast iron skillet. I was just so angry that I wanted to bash him into oblivion. I wasn’t letting him take me away from you.”

“I’m so proud of you.”

She studied his eyes.

He leaned in and kissed her. She needed to know how he felt about her and that was the best way. Kate responded by opening her mouth to him and moaning. Trent released her face and gripped her hips, picked her up, and walked them into the shower. The warm water soaked their remaining clothes.

She whimpered when he put her down and broke the kiss. His hands shook from wanting her so badly as he helped her remove her bra and panties. The water at their feet turned red from the blood washing down their bodies. Kate tore at his soaked jeans, helping him get them down, and he kick them away. Then he kissed her again, pulling her against him.

Kate wrapped her arms around his neck as he lifted her. Trent adjusted his hips, positioned her, and rubbed against the seam of her sex. She was ready for him when the swollen head of his dick slid against her slick folds. He was so hard that he didn’t need his hand to guide himself inside. He pushed in and groaned at the feel of her tight pussy accepting him.

Kate threw her head back. “Yes!”

“Bite,” he snarled, exposing his throat. Trent locked his legs, knowing what would happen next.

The feel of her fangs sinking into his flesh was exquisite pain that quickly flashed to extreme ecstasy. He thrust his dick into Kate deeper, pinned her against the tiled wall, and

instantly started to come as she drank. Her pussy milked him as her own release hit, and it was the most intense thing he'd ever experienced.

He nuzzled into her neck. "I'm going to bite you, Kate. Will you be my mate? Spend forever at my side? Let me love you?"

Kate didn't stop taking his blood as she gave a nod. That was enough of an agreement for him. He licked the skin on the top of her shoulder and gently bit down until he broke the skin. The taste of her blood filled his mouth.

Desire burned through him again, and his dick turned rock hard, as if he hadn't just gotten off. He started to thrust, making Kate moan and cry out as he fucked her hard and deep against the wall. Instincts took over. It was all about making her his. Bonding them. Marking Kate with his bite and filling her with his seed so everyone would be able to scent that they were mates.

Once they came again, each eased their fangs out of the other. Kate stared at him with wonder as he regretfully withdrew his dick too, then helped her to stand.

After soaping and rinsing her quickly so no trace of Remi's blood remained, he reached over to shut off the water. "I love you."

"I love you too."

He backed out of the shower, grabbed a towel and started to dry her off. He didn't care that he dripped water all over the floor from his own body. He'd clean it up later. Once he felt

she was good, he grabbed another towel and quickly rubbed his hair and body.

“You’re sleeping with me from now on. I had Jay seal off my windows today. Parker helped, and he sent me a text to say they’d finished.” The curtains were drawn when they entered the bedroom, so he was sure she hadn’t noticed. He swept Kate off her feet, had to turn sideways to fit them both through the doorway, and carried her to his bed. He gently put her down. “You’re my beautiful mate. I’m so glad you came into my life.” He stretched out next to her, and they both turned to each other.

“Me too.” Kate smiled at him. “You’re my heart. My future. My everything.”

“I think I knew you were my mate the second you opened your eyes in that damn basement. It’s like you were looking right into my soul, and it recognized you.”

“Despite me being a Vampire?”

“It didn’t matter,” he told her honestly. “You were meant to be mine. Human. Vampire. Werewolf. It didn’t fucking matter. You’re my soul mate.”

“I feel the same way. I saw you and thought you were the man of my dreams.”

“We found each other, and I’m never letting you go.” He rolled her onto her back, climbing over her. Kate wrapped her legs around his waist and lifted her mouth to his. Trent kissed her. He planned to make love to her all night long. They had a lot to celebrate.

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Cable put away the mop and walked into the dining room. Parker had his laptop in front of him, typing away at the keyboard. Reef was finally unbagging the food that they'd brought home. It might be a little cold, since they'd had to clean up the kitchen before eating. But who didn't love cold fried chicken?

Kleve returned from taking out the trash and joined them.

Jay entered carrying a chair from the basement to replace the broken one. He put it down and took a seat.

Kate cried out Trent's name, and he snarled from above.

All of them looked at the ceiling.

"And this is why we never bring women home," Reef joked. "Old houses have thinner walls."

"I think it's because they didn't use insulation products for interiors when this house was built. They only worried about filling the exterior walls with something to keep the heat in and the cold out." Parker closed his laptop. "I looked it up. They have this foam stuff we could inject into the walls. It might help with soundproofing."

"I'm glad they mated, even if they *are* loud while they go at it." Kleve grabbed a paper plate and some fried chicken from one of the seven buckets. "Trent deserves to be happy, and Kate is perfect for him. I like her."

"Am I the only one who's a bit turned on?"

"Shut up, Reef." Cable filled his own plate. "We're pretending that we don't hear them."

Parker pulled out his cell and turned on music. He didn't have the volume up very loud. "There. Focus on that, horn dog." He sat the device flat on the table.

Reef snickered. "Says the guy who barely gets laid and has a lot of practice pretending that sex isn't something he wants."

"Stop." Kleve shot his baby brother a warning look. "You're being a dick."

"It's okay." Parker smiled. "I never take offense to what Reef says, considering his brain is located in his pants and that's all he thinks with."

Reef smirked. "You say that like it's a bad thing."

Cable took a sip of his beer, then set it down. He might have used a little too much force, since he shook the table. Every gaze turned his way. "It's time to get serious. We were invaded tonight. I want to pump up our defenses." He looked between Parker and Jay. "I want more trail cameras installed. Motion sensors. The works. We got five grand today that we weren't expecting. I say we use it."

Jay swallowed his mouthful. "We can do that. I'll put a few more up in the trees and trim some branches to give the cameras a better range of visibility."

"I'll order some tomorrow and show Jay where to put them to give us the best coverage. We're on it," Parker promised.

"I wouldn't say it was an *invasion*. One Vampire used two humans he tranced into shooting their shotguns into the air, just to try draw us away from Kate. It ended well. The

humans are home safe and too terrified to ever come back. We cleaned up the last traces of dead Vamp. He's never going to be a threat again."

The glare Cable sent Reef's way had the male sitting up straighter. "What if it had been a small pack that heard about us and wanted to steal what we've built? I worry about that shit all the time. It's my job. Being serious right now is *yours* as a fellow enforcer."

"I'm sorry." Sincerity shone in Reef's eyes. "You know I like to use humor to defuse my anger. I'm pissed about what happened, okay? I know you all are, too. It's not like we can kill the fangy fucker all over again to vent."

"I know. It's why I didn't lunge over the table to bitch slap you." Cable knew his lips twitched as he fought a smile. He actually appreciated Reef's tendency toward humor, and he *was* entertaining. "Our pack just changed. We went from six males to having a mated pair. It's time we get our asses in gear and stop just thinking about the future in the abstract. Kate strikes me as the motherly type."

"She wants children," Jay admitted. "Trent talked about possibly finding her one in need of a home in the future, when she's safe to be around them full time."

"I'm aware. I also doubt that it would just be one. Kate will have Trent bringing home every stray pup we find." Cable glanced at all of them. "That's also why we're going to tighten our security and expand our territory. That means less screwing around and taking on more jobs to buy more land."

"I'm cool with that." Reef raised a drumstick in the air. "Can I moonlight as a stripper when I'm not at work? I bet the

ladies would tip me well. I'll make money rain by shaking my fine ass."

"Fuck no." Cable couldn't hold back his laugh that time. "You're impossible enough already with the humans. Unleashing you on sex-hungry women willing to pay to see men take off their clothes is not an option. Your bloated ego wouldn't fit in the house. We're cramped enough."

"On that subject, we'll need to add more bedrooms if we grow our pack." Kleve sipped his drink.

"Kate thinks there's enough attic space to separate it into at least three or four bedrooms and a bathroom." Jay shrugged. "It's a solution without having to literally build from the ground up. I'm going to help her clear all the junk out and remove the drop ceilings, so we can walk around up there without ducking."

"Plans and options are good." Cable felt a sense of pride as he made eye contact with each of the males he considered brothers. "This is why we came together and formed this pack. We—"

All of them looked at the ceiling again as a howl came from above.

"What in the hell is Kate doing to him? I've screwed a lot of women, but nobody made me howl during sex," Reef muttered. "Should I feel jealous of Trent right now?"

"Maybe it's a mate thing," Kleve suggested. "I was told mated sex is always better."

"I bet he's working up quite the appetite." Parker stood. "I'm going to make a plate and leave it outside their bedroom

door.”

Jay stood too. “I’ll grab a cooler. Cold fried chicken is good, and it doesn’t sound like they’re stopping anytime soon. The food won’t go bad if it’s chilled.”

“Probably at sunrise, when Kate has to stop,” Parker added.

Cable sat back as the two males got busy to make sure food was waiting for their alpha when he needed it. That’s what pack did. They looked out for each other. He smiled.

“You look happy. I’m surprised.” Kleve studied his face. “I didn’t think you wanted those two to mate.”

“I don’t accept change easily.” Cable took a deep breath and blew it out. “But I’ve come to terms now that it’s unavoidable. More of us will take mates. It always happens in a pack. That shit is like...contagious or something.”

“Only *you* would talk about mating like it’s a disease.” Kleve shook his head. “I can’t wait to see when some woman comes along that you can’t resist.”

Cable flipped him off.

His packmate grinned. “Trent was as damaged as you are, and he found Kate. It’s possible you’ll find someone who makes you want to risk your heart.”

“Time will tell,” Cable muttered.

*More stories about the pack will be
coming.*

About the Author

NY Times and USA Today Bestselling
Author

I'm a full-time wife, mother, and author. I've been lucky enough to have spent over two decades with the love of my life and look forward to many, many more years with Mr. Laurann. I'm addicted to iced coffee, the occasional candy bar (or two), and trying to get at least five hours of sleep at night.

I love to write all kinds of stories. I think the best part about writing is the fact that real life is always uncertain, always tossing things at us that we have no control over, but when writing you can make sure there's always a happy ending. I love that about being an author. My favorite part is when I

sit down at my computer desk, put on my headphones to listen to loud music to block out everything around me, so I can create worlds in front of me.

For the most up to date information, please visit my website. www.LaurannDohner.com