

A photograph of a man's muscular torso, showing his chest, abdomen, and arms. He has a large red bow on his right shoulder and a tattoo of a compass rose on his left arm. The background is dark and textured.

THE DARKNESS SERIES
BOOK NINE

JAMESON

USA TODAY
BESTSELLING
AUTHOR

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BREENE

JAMESON

Darkness #9

K.F. BREENE

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SYNOPSIS

With his friends matched up and kids running around, Jameson expects this holiday season to be like the last couple: uneventful, fraught with parties he'll have to attend as the only single guy, and above all, quiet.

That is, until a strange entity is suspected to be creeping around the shifter compound. Suddenly, it looks like the humans researching shifters are back, and the only person who can keep them safe is one of Jameson's kind.

Teamed with the new beta of Tim's pack, a fiery shifter who has fought her way to the top, suddenly Jameson's lifelong aversion to shifters is tested. He must face his mistrust, the enemy, and above all, the holiday mirth he's tried so desperately to avoid.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you everyone who has loved and read this series from beginning to end. You've made it great, and made coming back to it for this last book a pleasure. I had wondered about Jameson's story, and with your continued interest, there was a point in writing it.

So thank you, everyone. This book is for the Darkness readers.

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CHAPTER ONE

Jameson walked through the empty halls of the mansion, the hollowness pressing on him. Once upon a time the massive house was filled with warriors and naked people, idling or rushing depending on their schedules. They loitered on the couches or strategized around the tables, planning their nights and their species' survival. And while, during much of the year, their people still had those duties, everything slowed down for the holidays until the place was nearly a standstill of smiling people. That, or empty, like now.

He peered into the vast kitchens. The two cooks, leaning against the stainless steel counter, glanced up. Then pushed to standing.

"Are you hungry, sir?" one of them asked.

"There are only a handful of people around," Jameson said. "You can leave."

One stared at him while the other, very slowly, reached for his apron strings.

"Are you sure, sir?" the cook that hesitated said. "Did you want a plate before we go?"

"I'm sure. Take off." Jameson pulled back from the doorway.

"Thank you, sir! Merry Christmas!"

Jameson gritted his teeth. Their people never used to celebrate Christmas, or any human holidays. Then Sasha strolled in and dragged a horde of humans behind her, popping out kids left and right, mingling magic, messing up their entire system...

Admittedly it was a good thing, since with Sasha and the humans came

power and procreation, not to mention peace and survival, but in times like this, when he had nothing to do but wander through empty corridors in an attempt to avoid the family life of Christmas Eve, the way things used to be slapped him in the face.

His phone rang as he walked out the back door. He fished it out of his pocket and scanned the screen. *Speak of the devil.*

“Jameson,” he said into it.

“Hi. We have a job for you if you want it.” She paused for a moment. “This is Sasha, by the way.”

“I know. I read your name on my phone.”

“Oh, great, you can read. I wondered.” Jameson couldn’t help cracking a smile. “Right, so Tim has called in a favor,” she went on. Jameson’s hand tightened in irritation. “Don’t sulk. I can hear you sulking.”

He shifted his weight, waiting her out as the frigid night seeped through his jacket and scraped his skin. She knew he had no love for the shifters. Some of them, individually, were fine. He’d admit that. But as a whole, they couldn’t be trusted. He’d lost a parent proving exactly that.

“The shifter compound in the woods is being plagued by a few humans,” she said. “They’re sneaky. Tim thinks it has to do with that lab that caught Ann a few years ago.”

“We destroyed it,” Jameson said, walking again to keep his internal heat up. “Their records, the board of directors—everything attached to that lab is destroyed. I made sure of it.”

“I know. And we all know how thorough you are. But these guys seem like special ops, and they are taking things like hairbrushes or women’s products. *Used* women’s products.” She paused again. “Do you know what I mean by used women’s products?”

Jameson rolled his eyes. He increased his perimeter check. “I do, yes. Just because they didn’t catch a hiker wandering too close, doesn’t mean they are dealing with special ops.”

“Female hikers, then? Needing to break into a cabin in search of a hairbrush and used tampon?”

“Hairbrushes go missing all the time. I find stray ones around the mansion constantly.”

“And the used stuff?”

Jameson bent to touch his hands to the ground, a strange divot catching his eye. His fingers touched springy grass, the shadows tricking him. Now

Sasha had him jumping at ghosts.

He kept to the perimeter check, though. Just in case. “How could they possibly know those items went missing? Do you catalog all the tampons you use?”

“Of course not. But when I go to throw something away in the bathroom garbage—which is a small canister, by the way—and *all* the dirty ones have been picked out, leaving the rest of the trash behind, I get a wash of horror.”

Cold filtered through Jameson’s middle, and it wasn’t the weather. “It happened to you?”

“Not in the way you’re thinking.”

The breath left Jameson in a relieved rush. He might lament the new lifestyle on sad, lonely days like the ornery bastard he was, but if anyone tried to harm Sasha in any way, he’d burn the world down to right the wrong.

“Calm down, killer,” she said in a light tone. “I swear, you males are all the same. Really touchy. And you breathe really loudly when you get worked up. I know I’ve mentioned that before, but you guys still do it. Take a lesson from the females, will ya?”

“Get on with it,” Jameson barked.

She laughed. “Right. So the shifters used me as a guinea pig to see if I would notice little things, like a hairbrush, underwear, and, finally, that. It wasn’t until *that*, specifically, that I got really freaked out. The other stuff, continually happening, made me start to wonder, but *that*... No. That’s just weird.”

“This happened to more than one female?”

“Yes. Two they are sure about, and the little odds and ends missing for the others.”

“Birth control?”

Sasha paused for a moment. “I’d have to ask. I’m not sure.”

“Condoms?”

“None of the men think anything is missing.”

“Males don’t notice those things as much, which is why they discount it when females do. Have the females noticed any condoms missing?”

“Not that I’ve heard. I can ask.”

“The males are trying to pay attention?”

“Jameson, they aren’t idiots.”

He prevented himself from sniffing in derision. Sasha would just make fun of him for one mistake or other that he’d had the misfortune of her

witnessing.

He worked his way around to the front. Nothing seemed amiss.

“So Tim is thinking someone is getting intel on DNA and breeding capabilities?”

“See?” She sounded smug. “I told him that would be your first conclusion. He thought you’d immediately go to someone wanting female shifter habits and schedules.”

“Like he did, I assume.”

“Don’t be rude.” He could hear Sasha shifting. “So yeah, he thinks the hairbrushes are for DNA—the hair—and possibly fingerprints. Some of the shifters would show up in human databases because...well, they are technically human, as far as society is concerned. Some thought lost or dead, but still on the grid, unlike you guys. I don’t understand why they had to take the used period stuff, though. A look would tell them that the females have their periods like humans do.”

“They can compare the discharge of a human to a shifter, to see if the uterine lining is the same or different. They can see what it is made up of, and possibly start formulating ideas on incubators. If any of this is true, someone is looking into shifter breeding capabilities.”

“Wouldn’t they need a male for the other half of that?”

“No. They’d need a human female that was willing to have unprotected sex. With how much time shifters spend in bars, I’d assume the intel team have all they need from the males. Females aren’t as gullible there, either.”

“Well my goodness, Jameson, you are certainly showering my sex in compliments. Has the Scrooge in you finally withered away?”

Jameson let himself into the front door, ignoring her. He didn’t want a reputation for being easily baited, like Charles had gotten. “Where do I fit into all this?”

“Like I said, Tim called in a favor. Stefan wants you to head out to the compound and check out the shifters’ surveillance and equipment. Where they are lacking. Tim is fully prepared to buy whatever you suggest. He’s more than a little on edge about all this. That lab made us all realize that hiding from humans is becoming harder as technology gets better.”

“If he’d amped up his technology when we did, he wouldn’t be having this problem.”

“Please don’t gloat when you meet his beta,” she said dryly.

Jameson scrubbed his fingers through his hair. “Where and when?”

“Are you coming for Christmas Eve dinner?”

“You know the answer.”

“Then now. As far as where, you know the answer.”

“Where do I meet my contact, I meant.”

“Just show up at the compound. She’ll find you.”

She’ll?

Jameson had heard a new shifter from out of town had risen in the ranks and newly taken the beta spot, but he hadn’t heard it was a female. That was surprising. While females could be just as, or more, ruthless than their male counterparts, usually they weren’t as strong or large. Female hyenas were the exception within the sexes, but even then, a larger predator would still win out.

“Is this a mate of Tim’s?” he asked, hating to walk into a situation with which he was unfamiliar, no matter how possibly trivial.

“No. Tim’s woman, at the moment, is human. She doesn’t know he’s a shifter. He’s an idiot, I know. I’ve told him a million times.”

Jameson bet that went over well.

“You are coming for Christmas, though,” Sasha said in a firm voice. “And you have to stay all day. It’s family time. No exceptions.”

“Yeah.” Jameson let himself into his room.

“Okay. Good. See you tomorrow.”

Jameson tapped the phone off without saying goodbye, something Sasha hadn’t browbeaten into him yet, and chose some warmer clothes that he could still move in. After grabbing a backpack of tools, and strapping on his weapons, he headed out.

AN HOUR later he drove off the road halfway down the hill from the compound, then turned and reversed into a dense canopy of trees. Branches slid against his paint, making him wince, until he was far enough in to provide adequate cover. Once out, he covered his hood with a camouflage sheet and threw a few more loose branches on top. Someone patrolling should see it, but a normal passerby would probably miss the vehicle.

This was the first test.

Hiking up the hill, he stayed off the roads and kept his eyes down, looking for tracks. Fairly soon he came across an animal print—a paw belonging to a great cat. Maybe a larger male mountain lion, but probably

something a little bigger.

He changed course now, finding a few more animal prints of different sizes and shapes, some belonging to wolves, one to a creature he couldn't identify, but smaller in size. And finally, what he'd been looking for.

He crouched down beside the boot tread, measuring it with his hand before snapping a picture. Judging by the impression and size, it was a male. He didn't smell anything, which made sense because the print was on the older side, a few days, maybe a week. With the ground half frozen and no snow having fallen in the last few weeks, evidence of this person's snooping was as clear as day.

He progressed, following the tracks easily until they were a little closer to the compound. Near a tree, they disappeared, but it wasn't hard to deduce where they went.

Jameson followed, noticing missing bark and bent twigs until he identified a sort of perch. There he found signs of unconscious boredom—a spot in a branch picked away, a worn area where a boot tread rubbed repeatedly as the wearer bobbed his knee, and a couple scraps of a protein bar.

He lowered himself quietly, paying attention to his surroundings, and continued on his way, finding another set of tread. Larger, deeper, this was a bigger male or a giant female, with much better training. He lost the trail a couple times, only finding traces a little later. A strange smell greeted his nose, almost flowery. Like the flowers in the area, but too strong, not in the right location, and mixed with alcohol.

A scent disguise, probably.

Jameson stopped following the tracks and just let his nose guide him, taking him to the edge of the south side of the compound where scores in the trees still lingered after more than three years. It was in this area that Sasha and the shifters battled Andris, one of Jameson's kind questing for power. The shifters had proven themselves good in a skirmish at that time.

A flash of pain made him move on, the memory of losing his father still cutting deep even after all these years.

The trail took him between two bungalows where the tracks deepened and the smell strengthened, not more than hours old, making a couple things clear: he was not dealing with a hiker, and he was dealing with more than one person. He bet each person made return trips, but he couldn't be certain about that with the lack of evidence. Judging by their similar boot tread, however,

he bet the style boot was the same, like a uniform. They were probably working together, and they were probably working for a larger establishment.

Not good things.

He continued on, through some bushes and into the backdoor of a smaller cabin. The tread was lost in the hard wood, but the smell was not. He followed it in a beeline to one of two rooms, a large space with a deep purple bed made with precision. Each item on the shiny dresser top was straight and aligned, one space missing in between a comb and a bottle of fragrance.

He took the bottle down and smelled it. Spicy-sweet with a hint of peppermint. Delicious, and not like the flowery smell of the intruder. A hairbrush was on the other side of the comb, so either the place between the bottle had been bare on purpose, or something was missing he couldn't identify.

He checked the en suite bathroom. The garbage can had a few scrapes and an empty toilet roll, but no feminine products. After checking the cabinets, he saw that she was low on them as it was. She must not be at her time of the month, or she'd most likely be more worried about the dwindling supply.

Back in her room, he checked her drawers and poked through her clothes. Her drawers were a mess, shirts and pants pushed this way and that. Lacy silk items in her top drawer were pushed to one side, showing the wood of the bottom.

Her closet, small, was orderly and color-coded, more anal than even he. He bet she'd be able to identify what was taken from her drawers, if anything.

The room across the hall was a man's room, with a familiar bear musk. Tim.

Annoyed for reasons he couldn't identify, he did the same check, finding a much messier room, denoting a messier mind. Tim's bathroom needed a wipe-down and his closet was a sad state of affairs. If there was something missing off his dresser or out of his bathroom, Jameson couldn't tell. He doubt Tim would be able to, either.

“Can I help you with something?”

Jameson started, snatched a knife, turned and threw all in one movement.

CHAPTER TWO

Heart thumping, Addison struggled with a passive face as she straightened up, the blade having barely missed her shoulder. The large man had moved so fast, she'd barely had time to react. If it hadn't been for the two different smells of intruders, she wouldn't have been on guard at all, and would now be picking a knife out of her body.

The man faced her, his face a telling sort of handsome, and his breadth of shoulder and large stature an equally telling sort of strength and power. "Did Sasha send you?" she asked, memorizing his unique and exotic smell so she didn't confuse it with another intruder. Something deep in her core tingled with that smell, savory and delicious as it was.

"Yes. You are?" he asked.

She snatched his knife out of the wall and handed it back. "Addison Beckett. My friends call me Addy. I'm the beta of the pack."

He shook her hand and electricity bolted into her. She lost her breath for a moment, staring at his gorgeous face, confused as to why his lip was slightly curling into a grimace. "Jameson. Fill me in."

I hate my luck.

Jameson. That explained the distaste on his face. He wasn't a fan of shifters. He was the best for what they needed, so she should probably be ecstatic to have his help, but at the same time, he would view their needing help as another sign of shifter incompetence.

To say he had a reputation was putting it mildly.

Why were all the hot, strong, capable ones such dicks? Story of her life.

"Sure," she said, playing unaffected. "So far, it looks like they are only

targeting females—”

“Fill me in, starting at a higher level,” he interrupted, stoic as he stared down at her.

A kernel of anger boiled within her at his tone. “Sure,” she said again, leading him into her room. “In fact, why don’t you just trail me as I figure out why I got a visit today.”

“How often are your people being visited, and why aren’t you increasing your patrols?”

“Someone is getting in once every couple days at this point, and we aren’t increasing the patrols for a couple of reasons. One, because we are being cautious. That lab in the hills had something that lured shifters. That put them to sleep. We want our people in close, just in case. For now. Besides, it’s Christmas. Everyone is with their families, and from what we’ve gathered, this is the only place being targeted. We also don’t want them to know that we know they are coming in.”

“I found two separate human tracks, both male. Maybe it is less about being a shifter, and more about being a creep.” He waited in the doorway, his gaze tracking her every movement.

“Is that your expert opinion?” Addison asked dryly.

His jaw clenched, but he didn’t answer.

She ran her finger over the spot where her lotion usually was. “What would he want with lotion?”

“Possibly comparing it with lotions humans wear?” He didn’t sound certain.

Her bed seemed fine, but she pulled back the duvet anyway, making sure. All clear, she checked her closet, and then her bathroom. Nothing had been touched.

“Drawers,” Jameson said as she hesitated in the middle of her room, the word clipped and disapproving.

She rolled her shoulders and faced him, staring into his hard, brown eyes. “Look, all due respect, but it isn’t your room that some creep went through, okay? It isn’t your sex and species someone is getting extremely personal information about. Give me some space. This shit gives me the heebie-jeebies.”

He shifted and his eyes softened. His nod was small, but it was there.

She faced the drawers, hesitating again. “Did you look through them?”

“I looked into them.”

“Are all of them messy?”

“Yes. Including your underwear. You should identify what he took.”

“I bet I know what he was looking for,” she muttered, opening her underwear drawer and analyzing the contents. She went through the others and shook her head. “I won’t be able to figure out if he took a piece of my wardrobe until I want a piece of clothing and can’t find it. I don’t catalog all my stuff.”

“Then why did you say you knew what he was looking for?”

She walked slowly to her nightstand’s top drawer, opened it, and found the empty space. “Another girl got her birth control taken from her dresser. She doesn’t have a drawer in her nightstand.”

“And the others?”

“Use different methods.”

His brow furrowed. “Different methods...of birth control? How many different methods are there?”

She smirked. “Don’t know everything, do you?” Back at her dresser, she ripped the drawers out and dumped them on the ground. “In case you’re wondering, I’d rather just start over like it never happened, than put to rights the effects of someone violating my space. It might not make sense to you—”

“I understand. Take your time.”

A tightness in her middle at her personal space being violated by a stranger loosened. She exhaled, something like relief. “Thanks.”

All her stuff on the floor, she quickly changed into sweats and stepped toward him. “Let’s go.”

His gaze went to the heap of clothes. “You can put them back. I’ll wait.”

“I don’t need you watching me fold my nighties.”

“I’ll look away if it makes you feel more comfortable?”

His gaze was so serious. So comforting and understanding. The depth in his eyes, and the warmth, alluded to a different person than the hard, cold man she’d heard about.

A spark of intrigue unfurled within her. Unfortunately, now wasn’t the time for a soul-baring chat over coffee. The asshole that had been rifling through her things was getting away. “I’m good. Let’s get going.”

She pushed past him but left the door open. Let everyone see that her clothes were rifled through by an intruder. It would make them madder. Meaner. Ready for war.

“I can feel your anger,” Jameson said softly, keeping pace. “It is like a

palpable thing.”

“Do you blame me?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “What are your thoughts on this?”

“The same as yours. Someone is trying to figure out how you breed. Correct?”

“Something like that, yeah.” Her anger flared, tingling through her body.

“This is the preliminary research,” he went on. “Next, it will be an abduction, I have no doubt.”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

“At that point, I imagine they won’t stop at a female subject. They will want a constant source of sperm. They will take at least one male, and I wonder if they will also kidnap a human male. There’s no way of knowing at this point.”

Once outside, she followed the flowery fragrance while watching the ground, picking up his tracks right away. They led between two cabins and stopped, the toes digging into the ground. “He crouched here.” She pointed.

“Yes.” He shifted in impatience or annoyance. Maybe both.

“It amazes me that you can put so much derision and condescension into just one word,” she said as humor colored her tone. “Do you practice doing that, or is it natural?”

“Yes.”

She huffed out a laugh and threw a quick glance at him before continuing on. His brow furrow was more pronounced, but even more remarkable was the bud of a smile on his full lips. He had a sense of humor. Huh. She never would’ve guessed.

They jogged to the edge of the perimeter and slipped into the trees. She was just about to give him directions while undressing, needing to change into her animal form, when she felt his large, warm hand on her shoulder. Electricity sizzled through her body and fused with her magic, speeding up her heart and making her animal within growl, now thrashing to get out. Clenching, she clamped down as magic swirled around her, feeling his heat, ingesting his exotic smell. It took everything she had not to explode into a ball of fur and go chasing the kill. Equally as tough was not ripping his clothes off and riding him until she blacked out. The man was having an unsettling effect on her, to say the least.

“Wait,” he said, calmly looking at the ground. He hadn’t noticed the crazy effect his touch had had on her magic. That was probably a good thing.

“The newly exposed mud is already freezing. The tracks must be a few hours old.” He looked back at the compound. “A fragrance that sticks that long isn’t usual.”

“They always use it,” Addison said. “It clings for half a day.”

“Interesting. What do you usually find by following this tracks?”

“They park down the way. The tire tread is always the same, but that doesn’t necessarily mean the car is the same.”

Jameson still stared at the compound.

“Tell me your thoughts,” she said.

He shook his head. “I am not here to figure out who is doing this.” His cool, logical gaze found hers again. That furrow was back before his gaze roamed over her face and landed on her lips. “Tim was concerned about surveillance...” His words drifted away, almost as though he’d forgotten he was speaking.

The electricity was back, charging the air between them. Dangerous and exciting. Her hands tingled, wanting to touch him. The reason they were there drifted into the background as she stared at his shapely lips.

In all the rumors, no one had mentioned his raw magnetism. His irresistible, primal gravity that made her core roar with need. She didn’t even know him, and she wanted to strip him down right then and there and have her way with him.

This would be a very interesting mission, that was for sure. She just hoped she didn’t embarrass herself.

CHAPTER THREE

Mind having gone blank, Jameson stared at the plump lips of an extremely beautiful woman. Her natural scent, rich and slightly spicy, with hints of clove, intoxicated him unlike anyone ever had. He kept thinking that the perfume in her room would blend perfectly, creating something decadent and mouthwatering. He wanted to taste her. To spread her legs and make her wriggle in desire.

He tried to step back, to get his bearings, but suddenly he was so close to her, his body nearly touching hers. She was a tall woman, nearly the size of one of his people, and lithe. Graceful.

“I have to check,” he said in a thick voice, watching her eyelashes flutter as his breath hit her face. Her eyes dilated and her gaze drifted to his lips. A moist, pink tongue glided across her bottom lip, wetting it. His cock throbbed, desperate to be inside her at all costs.

But she is a shifter!

“I have to check in,” he said, forcefully, regaining control. He turned away and ripped out his phone, breathing quickly. Sweating despite the chill.

“You have no authority on your own, huh?” she said in her sexy, sultry hum. “I guess second in command means something different to your people as it does to mine.”

He closed his eyes and clutched his phone, wanting to answer her taunting with a show of dominance. Wanting to make her submit, and hoping she wouldn't at the same time.

What is happening to me?

“As I said earlier.” He paused and tapped the Boss's name. “I was given

the task of surveillance analysis. It's the holidays. I have other things to do than wandering around in the wilderness, chasing a man that has had free rein of your facilities." He clenched his teeth, not meaning to be so harsh. It was a wonder the males of this facility could let this go unchecked, however. If someone got into the mansion, for any reason, his people would be out for blood. If the intruders were also passive-aggressively attacking the females, there would be hell to pay.

"What else would a loner like you be doing, if not your job?" she retorted.

Wandering around the mansion, avoiding a giant family gathering at the Boss's house.

"Jameson," came the Boss's voice, relaxed and complacent, a tone only heard when he was knee-deep in family.

"I'm at the compound," Jameson said, not at all relaxed and complacent. "Their suspicions are most likely correct. In addition, an intruder was here not long ago. There is a lead that will undoubtedly end in nothing more than tire tracks." He paused, unsure how to go on. Was he asking for permission to go, or permission not to?

"Follow it and then write up your analysis for the compound," the Boss said, his tone quickly turning commanding. "Let me know if anything comes of it."

"Yes, sir," Jameson said, now not sure if he was relieved or irritated. He couldn't get his head on straight.

"And Jameson," the Boss said.

"Yes, sir."

"Be on time tomorrow, will ya? We'll be waiting on you to open presents, and the kids hate waiting."

Jameson sagged before he could stop himself. "Yes, sir."

"Based on the fallen expression, it looks like he's forcing you to my side," Addison said, squinting. Was it just him, or was there a little vulnerability lurking under the tough mask of kick-ass?

"Yes," he said, and before he could stop himself, continued, "But that wasn't the reason for the expression."

She jerked, as though taken aback.

Here came the questions.

He launched forward before she got the first syllable out, keeping a fast pace. She didn't move at first, making him wonder if she planned to go at all,

until he heard ripping, and then fast but light feet. A moment later, a bundle of clothes were shoved at him.

“Take this. Holy shit, it’s *freezing!*” she said.

He caught sight of her perfect form with muscle, curves, and round, perky breasts. His mouth started to salivate before a fog of green enveloped her. Fur, claws and teeth took the beautiful woman’s place, and then a golden coat of a huge lioness, bigger than would exist on the African plains.

She gave a distinct feline huff before loping away, following the lingering scent. He followed as quickly as he could with the pounding hardness in his pants, paying attention to the tracks, and noticing one more that was between the sizes of the other two. That made three people checking up on this compound.

His mind went over Tim’s room. Then the items that were taken from the women. Everything was something they would miss, including the hairbrush. But what else had gone missing that no one thought of? Something from the kitchen? A pair of boxer shorts? There was no telling. Maybe it wasn’t just the females.

Then again, that smell was a telling piece of evidence. They’d tracked which room the intruder went to, no problem. And because of the smell, they wouldn’t know what the intruder smelled like.

The intruders knew what they were dealing with.

He jogged through the trees and onto a plateau. Addison waited at a ledge before the hillside sloped down again. Her tail flicked as she looked downward, which probably meant something in the shifter body language. He hadn’t a clue.

Instead of admitting that, he followed the tread, seeing the deeper areas that meant the intruder was hurrying, probably worried an animal would descend on him at any moment.

Jameson wondered about various time frames. How had these guys not been caught by a group of people who should be able to smell an intruder? He needed to sit down with Addison and get more details so he could analyze the patterns.

Or just get their surveillance up and running. That would likely solve most of their problems.

Thinking on that, he hunched as another plateau below came into sight. A black Range Rover waited, no sound of a motor. Breathing even, he walked silently toward Addison, getting lower and lower until he was crawling

forward, not wanting to be seen. She looked at him with her large lion eyes, like she was waiting for something.

“You work around to the right, and I’ll go left,” Jameson whispered. “Let’s try to—”

The SUV’s engine roared to life. Jameson elevated and then moved so he was somewhat obstructed by a brittle bush. Addison made a weird sort of sound before stepping forward, probably trying to get him to follow the SUV like a simpleton.

He held up a hand to stop her distracting movements and waited, rewarded a moment later when the vehicle pulled forward. He took out his phone and copied the license plate number. Once done, and with Addison bristling, he stood and started walking briskly toward his SUV, probably about a mile to the east. Addison stayed where she was.

“I’m going to find out where that license plate is registered, and pay the owner a visit,” he called. “Work smarter, not harder.”

She loped up beside him, like he knew she would.

“I hope you have enough power to change a few times tonight,” he said, pulling up the directory in his phone. “Because I can’t speak animal.” A moment later the phone rang on the other end.

“Hello?” Paulie answered in his rough voice.

“It’s Jameson. I need a license plate pulled. Can you get me the info of someone that can handle that?”

“Since when don’t you just have me do it?”

“Aren’t you at Sasha’s?”

“Not yet. We’re still wrapping presents.”

“Fine, then. I’ll text you the info.”

“You got it, boss. Are you going to be there tomorrow?”

Jameson gritted his teeth and looked away from the phone for a moment. Why they all insisted on pressing the issue was beyond him. And extremely aggravating.

“Yes.” He hung up and texted the info, nearly catching a root with his foot. The last thing he needed was to look like a buffoon in front of a shifter. Especially an extremely attractive shifter with status and clout. Tim would love to have dirt on him, however trivial.

It didn’t take long before he was at his car, and the shimmer of green announced the return of a woman. Panting with fatigue from the change, she reached for her clothes. Then smirked. “Like what you see?”

He ripped his eyes away from her breasts, then again from her lower half, his cock hardening with the sight of that neatly trimmed playground. “I apologize,” he said while handing over her garments. “I was thinking about other things.”

“Sure.” She shook her head and slipped on her outerwear. “Nice ride. It looks like I work with the wrong group of people.”

He clicked his key fob to unlock the vehicle before holding the door for her and making sure she was in before shutting it. He took down the undisturbed camo sheet and threw the branches away—clearly no one was patrolling at the moment—hoping Paulie got through to one of his men in a hurry. Jameson wanted to get this guy when he was still shaky from going in and out of a camp of shifters.

“I didn’t expect you to be a gentleman to a shifter,” Addison said when he was in the vehicle.

He started the motor and quickly headed down the hillside, leaving his lights off. Seeing in the dark had its benefits.

“You’re a woman. It doesn’t matter that you also turn into a lioness,” he said offhandedly as he handed her his phone. “Paulie will either text an address, or he’ll call with it.”

“You guys have some good hookups.” She glanced at the screen.

“How have you not caught these guys before now?” Jameson asked, nearing the road. He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel, feeling the urgency press on him.

“Like I said, we didn’t beef up our patrols. We also pulled people out of the compound, just in case. They have that strange fragrance, which is chemically engineered, so we’re wondering what else they have. We wanted to see what their intentions were. Now that we probably know, we’re taking the next step. That’s where you come in—to help identify.”

“In the past, how long have you waited to follow the scent?” Jameson stopped at the mouth of the road and glanced at the phone. “C’mon, Paulie. Call the guy that doesn’t celebrate Christmas. There must be one.”

“Longer than this, usually. I was in town the last time my room was invaded. When I came back I noticed something amiss, but he was long gone. The others—they went through everything before they went to Tim. Tim then held me back even longer before he’d let me lead a team down. I’ve never seen him so wary. It’s enough to make everyone nervous.”

Jameson sat back and let his hands rest in his lap, willing calm. There was

no point in flexing in impatience. That burned energy for no reason.

Silence settled through the cab. Crickets sang around them.

“I hear you nearly died trying to save the shifters from that lab,” Addison said softly.

Jameson took a deep breath, sucking in her delicious elixir, then wishing he hadn’t. He threw his gaze out the side window, away from her. “Yes.”

“Strange. A man who doesn’t like shifters, risked his life for them.”

“For Anne. For Charles. There is a difference.”

“I heard the story of why you hate us so much.” The phone lit up with a text message. It rang a moment later.

“Tap that address and pull up some directions,” Jameson said. “Let’s get on the road before we chat with him.”

She did as instructed, working quickly. “Take a right here,” she said.

“Great. Call him back.” Jameson stepped on the gas, the SUV lurching forward and picking up speed quickly.

The call crackled into the car speakers before solidifying.

“Hey,” Paulie answered.

“You’re on speaker,” Jameson said.

“So? Oh, you got someone in the car. Cool. Anyway, that address is of some facility. Really small scale, I think, but on large grounds. Be wary, man. Don’t be stupid. If you need help, call it off until after Christmas, yeah? Anne said you don’t need that thing solved right now. Even snoopers take Christmas off.”

“It’s Christmas Eve. Clearly they don’t.”

“Technically, it’s the night *before* Christmas Eve. I’m pretty sure someone explained this to you, so I’ll let you root around in your memory to explain that. All right, gotta go. Stay safe, man. Don’t be a fool. Oh, and Jameson?”

“Yeah?”

“Make sure you’re on time tomorrow. The kids get frantic when they have to wait to open presents.”

Jameson jabbed the button to end the call.

“Left up here,” Addison said, looking down at the screen. She cleared her throat. “Now I know why you had that fallen expression. Why don’t you want to go open presents?”

CHAPTER FOUR

Adison squinted through the darkness, watching Jameson's handsome face in the glow of the dash. His expression fell again, clearly an unconscious reaction. He shook his head and looked out the side mirror, obviously trying to get away from the conversation.

"How are you a beta?" he asked.

"No way. If you want an answer, you have to give an answer. What, an ex of yours married your best friend or something?" She laughed.

His lips tightened, giving her a flutter in her stomach. It was a dick move to call out someone's pain, and then laugh at them for it.

"Sorry," she amended quickly. "You're not the only one, trust me. I'm only in this pack because I got cheated on and dumped, and decided to move away. At least you stuck around. You're a better person than I."

"It wasn't an ex." He shrugged as the phone instructed them to take a left in a quarter mile. He shook his head and huffed a little, like he was debating continuing. A moment later, he must've lost the battle with himself, because he said, "It's never fun to feel like the third wheel, right?"

"Totally. Sucks, actually."

"Exactly, and this would be the ninth wheel on a bus full of kids. Utterly useless. I'm not even good with kids. I've never really been around them."

"I'm shit with kids, too. Who cares? Just be the creepy uncle."

"My people are all about the next generation. *Everyone* is good with kids, whether you have them or not. It's expected. It never used to be a problem because my people don't procreate easily. Now, with all the humans, there are hordes of children, it seems like. Yet, I'm terrified to hold a baby for fear

of hurting it. I make toddlers cry. I don't know how to speak to the older kids." He licked his lips, drawing her eyes. Then raising the heat in her body. He really was a handsome man.

She wiped her forehead and looked away quickly. If anyone was off limits, it was that guy.

"Exactly," he said softly.

"No, that's not why I was looking away. Sorry—it was a bug. No, dude, relax. There is always *that* guy, trust me. *I'm* that guy, but it is so much worse for me because I'm a woman. Everyone assumes that a vagina automatically makes you good with kids. I'm here to tell you that it doesn't. Does not. At all. Experience makes you good with kids, and I don't have any. Afraid to hold a baby? Um, yes! They are so tiny. And floppy. One wrong move and I feel like I'll break it. Awkward with older children? Try teens. I've rolled so many eyes, I should be in the record books. Your problem isn't unique."

"I should bring you so I don't have to look awkward by myself," he muttered.

"So that's it, then?" she asked, cracking a smile. She pointed left as the phone piped up. "Quarter mile."

"What's it?"

"The only reason you don't want to go to a holiday party with all your people is because you feel awkward being the only single one, and are nervous around kids?"

"That's plenty reason."

"I mean, if it isn't about exes, or lovers who are married to your brother, or some other travesty, it's not a huge deal." She pointed again to make sure he turned on the small road down a poorly lit lane off the highway. "I don't like the look of this."

"The kid issue is bigger than you're making it out to be."

"No, the kid issue is a *smaller* deal than *you're* making it out to be. Clearly no one cares or they wouldn't remind you to go. They want you there. Just own up to your lack of experience, and the mothers will laugh and take the baby, or the guys will snicker and make you suffer through it. Trust me. I know you don't like embarrassing yourself, but when it comes to kids, everything is endearing." She held up her finger. "Except dropping them on their heads. That is frowned upon, though not wholly unexpected."

A lopsided grin bent his lips. He licked them again, drawing her eyes and

starting a hum deep in her core. She blew out a breath and returned her focus to the phone. “Not long now. Not many bars, either. This place is a bad kind of remote.”

“Yes. It reminds me of that lab. We’ll proceed with extreme caution. Their lures don’t work on my kind. I’ll ensure your protection.”

A thrill of fear coursed through her, quickly morphing into anger. Most emotions quickly morphed into anger with her. She scratched her leg, a nervous habit. Without meaning to, she opened her mouth and a truth bomb tumbled out.

“I’m beta because I’m ruthless in a fight. I lost a brother to a rogue shifter—a bear. We saw it coming up the street, a bear in the middle of the suburbs. I was too young to know what I was, so I was scared and fascinated at the same time. My brother had already had his first change, though. He knew what was coming. He tried to hide us in the bushes, but the bear caught our scent. He was out for blood, and we were it.” She watched the bars flicker on the phone as the truth bomb exploded. “My brother sacrificed himself so I could run, but I didn’t go right away. I was afraid for him. I watched as my brother turned into a wolf, and then got ripped apart, bit by bloody bit.”

The hot sting of tears pricked her eyes as she remembered that day. “I vowed it would never happen to me. I learned to fight as a human before I changed, and learned to fight as an animal after. I don’t hold back. I go hard. It also helps that my animal is a pack hunter, used to having a leader, and a protector. I’m the leader, and I organize our pack—whatever pack I’m in—accordingly, looking to the alpha for the overall protection aspect.”

“Like a pride of lions.”

“Obviously. So when I got to this neck of the woods, I figured out the hierarchy, how they do things, and worked my way up. Quickly. Brutally.”

“Why this area?”

“Because my past was haunted by a bear. I didn’t want my future to be. I’m a big believer in facing one’s fears, overcoming them, and moving on to the next challenge.”

“Poetic.”

“A necessity. I bring it up because you should try it.”

The furrow was back, accompanied by seething anger. She’d just hit a hot button.

Good. He needed to hear it. Hiding from his past made him weak. She’d heard the Boss had gotten over it. Even the surly bodyguard of Sasha had.

Jameson needed to follow suit. He seemed like a deep sort of man that had a rock hard outer crust. Get past that, and she bet he was a loving, caring person.

Then again, she always did like to take in strays. It was never any fun when one scratched her face.

“A right up here, and the help will come a lot slower soon, because the map is not updating.” She lowered the phone to her lap, a sleek little number that was the top of the line, and stared out through the windshield. Darkness covered the way, no streetlights lending help. Above them, a few stars peeked out of the clouds.

The SUV slowed, Jameson looking out to the right.

“What?” she asked.

“I see a lit facility.” He pointed, drawing her attention to it. “I’m going to get a little closer, then ditch the car. Humans don’t notice me very easily, and hopefully you’re as good as stalking and blending in as your animal is supposed to be.”

“Excellent, yes. I come highly recommended.”

“Prove it.”

“It’s a bit hard under the circumstances, being that I’m in a car right now.” They passed another moment in silence until she couldn’t help her curiosity. “Tomorrow is Christmas Eve. Do you guys celebrate differently or something?”

Jameson stopped before changing into four-wheel drive. A moment later, he turned off the road. “Since our schedules are opposite that of humans, as far as day and night, we could’ve started our celebration on Christmas Day at the end of the day, when the humans were finishing up their celebrations, or do it the night before, so we get a jump on the human celebrations.”

“Better to be first than right?”

That smile was back, twitching as though he were trying to stop it. “Yes.”

“So tonight is the Christmas Eve dinner, and you are choosing to work instead of go?”

“You needed assistance, and I am the only one in a leadership position without family.”

“Can’t find a girl you like, huh?” Addison climbed out of the SUV, feeling a weird pang in her heart at the thought that he was incredibly choosy. She ignored it. “Do you have a bag you’ll be carrying? I’d rather not leave behind my clothes, just in case.”

If he heard the first question, he didn't show it as he stepped up to her side and reached out his hand. "I can tuck your garments into my jacket. They'll be warm when you need them."

And smell like you.

Like the weird pang, she tried to ignore the pleasant shivers. She didn't know what was coming over her. The guy was incredibly handsome, yes, with a stellar body and pleasing gentlemanly qualities, but he also had a reputation for being a closed-off prick who hated shifters despite the number of times the two peoples had worked together cohesively. Having a crush—while on a mission, for cripes' sake!—was ridiculous.

That's what it was. Ridiculous.

"Thanks," she said stiffly, trying to get back on track. His brow furrowed, and for once she understood why.

"Right, okay—put your hand down, I'm not getting naked right yet." She shoved his arm away. "What's the plan?"

He looked out toward the distant lights and surveyed the area. "We'll get in close and see what's there. If it is in any way similar to that lab, we get out. That is no place for shifters. If it is something different, we'll play it by ear."

"Well, *I* can play it by ear, but you can't read my body language when I'm in animal form, so..."

"Yes. That is going to be a problem. Stay close to me. If something is wrong, resort to bold measures."

"Like biting you? Or would rubbing against your leg be enough?"

His gaze turned intense as he looked into her eyes. Her stupid stomach flipped again, clearly not remembering the logical thoughts she'd had a moment before.

"You can start with rubbing and go from there," he said in a lower register.

And there went the shivers.

A confused look came over his face. He shook his head and turned away. "Let's head out. I'll set the pace, since in animal form you are bound to be ten times faster."

"What happens if we get separated?"

His movements turned coarse before he froze. His glance back was suspicious and accusatory. "Leave your phone here." He dug in his jacket and extracted the keys, holding them up for her to see. "I'll leave these here as well. If you leave me behind, do me a favor and call someone who'll come

back for me.”

“Wow.” She cocked a hip and let the annoyed shock cover her expression. “That it, huh? You assume I’ll run at the first sign of trouble. Please enlighten me, since I’m new to this neck, but how many times in *your* working with our pack has that happened?” She hardened her gaze, like she was dealing with a young, headstrong male who didn’t know his dick from his head. “None, right? Not with the demon, not with the Council... We even helped free your leader, right? Yet still you think we turn tail and run at the first sign of trouble?”

He pushed the keys up a little higher, a silent comment, and made a show of leaving them on the top of the wheel, out of direct sight. He was calling her, and her people, cowards.

The rage she always kept on a tight leash blasted out, fueling her. She launched forward before she knew what she was doing. Her fist smashed against his jaw, knocking him sideways. He recovered gracefully, but instead of barreling into her like she expected, he took a step further away and dropped his hands to his sides. Watching her. Analyzing.

His cool demeanor was enough to douse the fire burning inside her. Mostly.

“Shall we go?” he asked, his voice even, like her outburst had never happened.

“Yeah.” Without another word, she ripped off her clothes and tossed them at him before changing shape. Many men got under her skin. Most people in general, in fact. She didn’t have great coping mechanisms since watching the fate of her brother. But no one had ever so effectively calmed the rage. No one she’d ever known could douse the fire so quickly once she’d let it take over.

Off balance, she ran off ahead, needing to get her bearings before joining him again.

CHAPTER FIVE

*H*eavy breath came from Jameson as they neared the collection of buildings. Addison stayed within his general area, but she didn't keep too close. He wasn't sure if it was because she was afraid she'd try to maul him, or that was just her way.

He slowed, getting the lay of the land in front of him. The road in was barely big enough for two cars to fit side by side, and didn't have any traffic markings of any kind. No signs had adorned the turnoff, and no lights dotted the way. The place looked desolate, except for the largest of the four buildings, where three windows glowed a pale orange.

Trying to ignore his throbbing jaw from a powerful, well-placed punch, he analyzed the ground as Addison stalked closer, one of the most effective predators in the world. She was a sight to see, graceful and lithe in her cat form, and, he suspected, utterly fearless. She would've taken him on without another thought. Tried, in fact. And judging by the punch, she would've given him a run for his money.

Her as a beta now made perfect sense.

"There aren't any tracks out here indicating a patrol." He checked his phone, found no coverage, and glanced up at the sparse trees. "I haven't seen any technology. So far, this doesn't set off any of my alarm bells."

Addison stared at him, her large golden eyes practically glowing in the dark. It was an illusion, he was sure, but lions of any form were intimidating. Especially ones her size.

"Let's work our way closer. If you feel strange in any way, pull in close. Agreed?"

She huffed.

He took that as a yes.

Jogging once again, he cut the distance to the closest building, keeping his eye on Addison as well as the surroundings. Nothing moved out there. At the darkened building now, he moved along the side and to the edge, where he could get a look at the lit windows of the main building. No curtains obscured his vision, but he couldn't see anything move from his vantage point.

"I'm going to go in closer," he whispered. "How do you feel?"

She rubbed her neck against his hip.

"Is that alarm, or okay?" he asked, preventing himself from reaching down and petting her like a dog.

She padded ahead, answering the question.

"Wait," he said, holding up his hand. She kept going until she was against the main building and looking back, keeping to the shadow. He motioned toward the darkened building he was standing against. "Let me make sure this is clear."

She continued to stare. Working with shifters was trying, at best.

He took out his sword and walked to the door, a tiny building that might be used for a bedroom, or a bungalow. He turned the handle. A soft click announced that it was locked. He could break in, but that would cause a racket. Chances were, if someone was in there, they were sleeping.

A moment later he was beside Addison again, motioning toward the rear of the main building. With each window he looked in and found shades to obscure his view. At the back were three SUVs, all black Range Rovers. One had the license plate Jameson had written down. Next to those were two mundane cars, both worn in, probably belonging to middle-class or lesser workers.

"The company cars are quality, so the company has money, but the workers aren't seeing any of it. Then again, it's the middle of the night. The high-dollar employees could be at home."

Addison stared.

Thinning his lips, he peered around the corner and found a camera perched above the back door, which had an electronic entry. Light shone down the way. He had no idea if those were offices or not.

"Let's check around the front before we decide if we are breaking in." He met her golden eyes. "Do you feel any different? I know the shifters that were

caught at that lab smelled something and then felt drunk.”

She huffed.

“Huff again for yes, you feel fine.”

She huffed. Then growled.

“I’ll take that last as a comment to our mode of communication.” He went back to the front, checking the technology and not seeing anything even mildly eyebrow-raising. Finally, taking a last notice of the desolate setup, he straightened. “There is no way this is the same crowd. It’s rinky-dinky. I’ll pay them a visit.”

He felt the hard bite of teeth in his calf. Addison yanked on him, trying to drag him away.

“They don’t have something to contain me,” he said, shaking her off. “I’ve dealt with humans all my life. Trust me.”

Fire raged in her eyes, he could see it. Could see her bristle and her hair stand up on end. He knew, without having to hear it, that she wanted the fight. She wanted to be the one storming in and claiming vengeance. She wasn’t stupid, though, and didn’t push the issue. He respected that about her.

Filling himself with magic, he felt the shadows cling to his body as he moved toward the front door. He knew his tattoos swirled the deep orange of his magic, engaging the runes that helped him stay hidden even in broad daylight. The light showered him, and the camera’s black eye trained on his body. Even for that, the human eye would likely slip past him.

He tried the double doors. They jiggled, locked. Thankfully they weren’t glass. It was so much more satisfying when he could kick in wooden doors.

Stepping back, feeling the prickle of danger from Addison’s gaze tracking him from the corner of the building, he kicked with all his weight. Wood screamed. The doors cracked. One bowed inward before crashing to the ground. The other wobbled in the frame.

He stalked into the faintly lit entryway smelling slightly of mildew. Not business hours, obviously, yet people were in the building. The small room off to the side, which was fashioned after a poor man’s waiting room, lay dark. On the other side was a bathroom. He continued on past the reception desk as someone peeked from around the corner up ahead.

“Hello?” a man called in a quivering voice.

Jameson didn’t change his speed, the man not noticing him though he was out in clear view. A desk sat off to one side, with a second waiting area to the other, housing a nicer couch, table, and even a plant. Two magazines lay on

the table surface, one askew.

“Hello?” the man called again, stepping out.

Jameson reached him a moment after the human finally spotted him. The human’s eyes went wide, then even bigger as Jameson’s large hand wrapped around his throat.

“Who else is here?” Jameson asked.

The man gargled.

Jameson dropped him, stepping forward to maintain his intimidating presence, before bending down closer to his face. “Who else is here?”

“Wh-what are you?” the man asked through a tight throat.

“Who else is here?” Jameson repeated.

The man stuck up a shaking hand, pointing off to the left.

Jameson bent and grabbed the man by the hair, yanking him up roughly. When humans were scared, they spilled their secrets more easily. He forced the man down the hall. “Where?”

“J-just in there. What d-do you want? We don’t have any money.”

The mildew smell was back, teamed with a faint odor of stale piss. A light flickered as they made their way through the dirty hall until the man pointed again to a room on the left.

Jameson pushed him at it. “Open the door.”

“Do you have a gun?” the man asked, huddling in front of the door.

“No. I have a sword. Open the door.”

“A s-sword?” The man’s gaze sought Jameson’s middle.

Jameson increased his draw of magic. “Open. The. Door.”

Starting, the man turned and did as instructed, pushing into a well-lit room housing gleaming metal. A darker man at the back wearing a white lab coat glanced up from a table. He caught sight of his coworker and his brow creased. “What’s up?”

The man’s shaking finger drifted back toward Jameson, who was taking a moment looking over the items in the lab. Large, somewhat corroded cells lined the walls, déjà vu from the lab in the hills, only these were run-down and in bad shape. A bench with stirrups attached to the end was pushed over to the corner, not in use, probably, but a dead giveaway that they planned to do gynecological exams in the future. Exam tables with dirty surfaces, or various lab kits with dust, all mismatched, implied this was all getting underway.

“What?” The lab tech’s gaze drifted past Jameson.

“You looking for me?” Jameson asked in a rough voice, stalking forward. He hooked his hand under a table and ripped it away. Items flew off it and smashed against the wall.

“No shit,” the lab tech said, finally seeing Jameson. A smile curved his lips. “No shit! First shifters, and now vampires. I do not fucking believe it. How do you guys keep it all under wraps?”

Jameson grabbed the underside of another table and flung it, sending it careening across the floor. More lab supplies smashed against the far wall. “What is this place?”

The tech moved quickly, for a human. He snatched a gun hidden beneath a table and pointed it at Jameson. “I don’t scare easily.”

“Good. Sniveling annoys me. What is this place?”

“What do you think?” The man smiled and gestured around him. “Do you know how much money the government will pay for an army of shifters? We tried to get into the contract back in the day, but were beat out. That company went up in a ball of flame.” The man extracted another gun and handed it off to his shaking coworker. “People think I’m crazy for believing shifters exist. That, or they think I’m crazy for trying to get in the game after what happened to the other place. But I got a backer. And I got firearms. How crazy am I, really?”

“You’re not crazy.” Jameson flipped another table, disgusted with those cells. Disgusted that the last lab was almost the death of him. “You’re just stupid.”

The man smiled brighter. “And you’re about to be dead.”

The gun went off, but Jameson was already moving. He banged into a table as the tech realized he’d missed, and altered his aim. Another gunshot, from the shaking man, his aim wild. The tech sighted and shot. Jameson had already veered. In another three steps he was there, snatching the man up by his neck and giving a hard jerk. A snap rang out through the room. Jameson dropped the lifeless body and focused in on the other man, easier to intimidate.

“Who else is working with you?” he asked, stalking closer.

The man held the gun at chest level with both hands. The end waved wildly.

“You shoot that, and I’ll kill you. Who else are you working with?”

“We have a guy from the government that gave us grant money. Just one contact. He believes there is something to the shifter thing, but doesn’t want

his name on it. That's it, I swear."

"C'mon." Jameson dashed in. The man pulled the trigger, but his shot went wide. Jameson slapped the gun out of his hand and grabbed him by the scruff of the neck. "Let's go."

The man whimpered as Jameson navigated him through the room, eyeing the various chemicals and other items he passed. Once in the hallway, he backtracked and then kept on. "Where's your office?"

Barely able to walk now as his body shut down from fear, the man led Jameson to a large room set up like a king. Leather couch against the wall, leather chair, two huge monitors, a sleek laptop—this man had spared no expense on his setup.

"You guys are both stupid. You spent the money on the wrong things." Jameson shoved the man at his chair. "I want the information of your contact, and I want a list of your employees."

"But—"

"Now!"

As the man got to work, looking in a file, Jameson belatedly felt a presence fill the door. He spun around, half expecting to find Addison. Instead, a sniper rifle with a laser sight was aimed at him, the red dot covering his heart. Before Jameson could even react, the knuckles turned white as the finger curled around the trigger.

He didn't have the time. His negligence would kill him.

The gun went off. He flinched. The man fell toward as another man screamed. Jameson fell backward as something hard struck his chest. He hit off the desk and tumbled to the ground, his heart ramming against his ribs.

A ferocious snarl preceded another scream.

Jameson patted his chest and brought his hand away, looking for red. For blood. His hand was dry.

He hopped up, ready to grapple, but slowed. Addison tore the throat out of the man, who still smelled floral. He gurgled his death before she threw her head up and roared. The windows shook, and Jameson's bones vibrated, his cock stiffening. Panting hard, he watched the great predator as she roared again, raw and wild, staking her claim as the most dominant in the room. Suddenly he knew exactly why Charles was always so keyed up when Anne took to animal form. The magic, the natural brutality, and equally as natural grace were a rush.

Coming back to his senses, he glanced at his feet to where the rifle lay.

Touching his chest again, he realized that the end had hit him when the man fell. Jameson had no pain, though. The bullet had missed. Addison had saved his life.

Turning, he realized why the shaky man had screamed. The bullet had struck him, and he was now draped across his keyboard.

“That solves that problem,” Jameson muttered, pulling him out of the seat and shoving the chair away. He went through the records, found the information he was looking for, then got to work downloading everything else. When done, he motioned Addison out of the room. “I have to burn this place to the ground. You best head out of here.”

A low growl sounded from her throat as her gaze tracked him, intense and daunting. She backed up into the doorway, but didn’t go any further.

He stared down at her. “I have all the info. I’ll make your pack a copy. You can ask Tim about our trustworthiness in these issues. We catalog the information, though. We can’t have people knowing about you, just as you can’t have people knowing about me. Move, please, you are wasting time.”

Still she held her ground, staring. Waiting.

Suddenly it dawned on him as to what she wanted. He sighed and looked at the dead gunman. Meeting her eyes, he said, “You saved my life. Thank you.”

CHAPTER SIX

Addison waited by Jameson's SUV in animal form, not able to change back until he gave her clothes back. He was putting a few things he'd taken from the office into the back, and going over everything he'd recovered. The man was more organized than even she was. She liked that about him.

Clothes weren't the only reason she didn't want to change back, of course. He'd put himself in jeopardy for her and her people. He'd taken the lead in a dangerous situation that really shouldn't have concerned him, proving that, despite his hang-ups, he really was a good guy. He didn't hate shifters, as he might think—he hated the part they had played in his past. She could understand that.

Hell, she'd hated bear shifters for the part one played in her past, but she'd gotten over it. She hoped Jameson would, too. Because the man was crazy hot. Watching him work, feeling the magic roll off him, seeing his graceful sort of power—oh, man. As soon as she changed back into a warm-blooded female, things would be a little uncomfortable downstairs. He might be picky in the girlfriend department, but Addison really hoped he was like his people, and didn't mind a little pump and grind among friends. She wanted him in a way that wasn't natural.

"We're good. Let's get on the road before I trigger the bomb." Jameson headed toward his side of the car. She gave him a roar, as deep and throaty as she could. She'd seen his face in the office. His excitement. She bet her magic called to him like his did to hers. They weren't the same, but their magic originated from the same place at the beginning of time. That

commonality felt good. Felt explosive.

Oh man, she wanted him so bad. It would be a fairly awkward ride home, what with her hands wanting to roam.

“I don’t know what that roar— Oh, clothes. I apologize.” Jameson shook his head, his brow furrowed again and his eyes downcast. He pulled out her garments and hesitated. “Possibly their position was a bad idea. I didn’t expect to have so much exertion. Possibly you should stay in animal—”

She changed, the draw sapping her energy in a major way. As the pain washed away, cold greeted her, her teeth chattering immediately. She stepped toward him to take her clothing, but her foot caught, making her stagger.

“Here we go.” He steadied her, in close, his smell wrapping around her deliciously. “Let’s get you covered up.”

With his help, she threaded her hands into her sleeves and bunched the fabric close to her chest, shivering. The material was moist from his sweat, and while that should’ve been really gross, all she could do was breathe in his scent. It calmed her and turned her on at the same time. She wanted to be wrapped in it before tussling on the bed and accepting him inside of her.

“Addison?” His tone, so smooth and even, would lend perfectly to singing. “We need to get pants on you.”

She held on to his shoulders and lifted a foot, not nearly this helpless, but going with it for all she was worth. He bent to the other side, his face gliding by hers. When he came back up, he surveyed her middle, where the shirt had draped open. She didn’t feel the cold with their bodies heating the air between them.

His gaze reached hers before roaming over her cheeks, her nose, and then settling on her mouth. “Are you okay?” he asked softly.

She didn’t know who started it, if she was leading or eagerly following, but suddenly his lips were on hers, so hot they singed. He didn’t nibble, and he wasn’t playful and relaxed. He devoured her, hungry and needy. His tongue plunged into her mouth, twisting with hers before he backed off and sucked on her bottom lip. Her toes curled and her eyes fluttered; she was so turned on her body was aflame. Her breath came fast and her desire boiled as she roamed her hands over his delicious muscles before swooping low to cup a massive cock.

She moaned, thinking of what that would feel like pumping inside of her. Knowing that if he was this good with his mouth, he would be even better with his body.

Hands on his cheeks now, she kissed him for all she was worth. Large hands cupped her butt and pulled her in tighter, pushing a knee between hers so they each had a leg between their thighs. She moved against him as he did her, the feeling so exquisite, something warm and soft unfurling deep in her middle.

Time slipped away, lost as she was in the kiss. The world lightened around them, dawn encroaching on their deeds. Panicked that they'd have to stop, she reached down between them to his pants. A yank and his button fly gaped open. She reached down to capture the prize, but felt two restraining hands on her arms.

“We’ve stayed too long, Addison. We must go.”

Breathing hard and with lips tingling from his kisses, she let his cool logic tame her wild desire. She didn’t back away yet, though. Instead, she removed her hands and clung on to him for a moment, feeling his solid body against hers, and his sweet breath dusting her cheek.

Finally, when her heart was slowing and her core was still throbbing, she took a step back and blinked into the quickly lightening day. “You don’t turn to dust in the sun, then?”

He was studying her with his fly open and a giant erection tenting his boxers. Her lady bits pounded harder, and she felt a little faint. It was clear she had absolutely no blood in her brain. Hearing her words, he unleashed a full smile, something that also unleashed the full potential of his handsomeness. The man was stunning. So fucking handsome it should be illegal.

She staggered, still not right after four changes in so short a time.

“Here.” He rushed forward and secured her buttons before shrugging out of his jacket and draping it over her. “It’s cold.”

“Sorry, I’m tired. Let’s get out of here.”

Jameson gave a last look at the buildings crouching in the distance before grabbing something off the hood and climbing into the driver’s side. He turned the car around and stepped on it.

“I thought you were going to blow the place up,” Addison said, looking back.

“I am. I have a bit more distance to play with. Given that it is light out, I want to get as far away as possible.”

“It should make me nervous that you’re so knowledgeable about making bombs.”

“Not any more nervous than my other lethal attributes.”

He had a point there.

“So, what are you—” She cut off as an explosion concussed the air behind them. Flame took over the small collection of buildings, releasing thick clouds of black smoke into the air. Addison let out a breath. “Are you sure that’s everyone?”

“As far as the people working on the project, yes. They had a contact that we obviously missed with the first sweep. I have his information. Getting to him should be no problem.”

“You’re sure it was only the three?”

“I’ll go through all the files, but I’m fairly certain. I think they were at the facility because of the one we followed. They had a rinky-dink outfit, to say the least. They didn’t have the resources to process the information they’d collected, they didn’t seem like they had a proper plan for the future, they didn’t even have their equipment clean and organized...” He shook his head. “They were doomed to fail. Anyway, what were you saying?”

She couldn’t help blinking for a moment, trying to process. The man was wicked smart. Some of those things she could infer, sure, but she could tell he was speaking from knowledge. Had he wanted to run the operation, she bet it would prosper. “And that’s why your people drive really nice cars,” she said, following her thought through.

“There’s no reason why yours can’t. I could...” He hesitated as he turned onto the highway. It took him a moment before he finished his sentence. “I could help, if you wanted. I don’t mean to say you can’t figure it—”

“Yes, please,” she said quickly, sounding eager and not caring. “That would be great.”

“It’s the least I can do for you saving my life.”

“You went into a building to protect mine—it was the least *I* could do. The least I *would* do.”

After a quiet moment, he said, “I know.”

A tingly ball of goodness settled in her chest. It wasn’t his words, which were telling enough—it was his resolute tone. The resignation with the tinge of hopefulness. She knew that tone. Had used it when she agreed to work for Tim, a Kodiak. If she wasn’t mistaken, Jameson was ready to move on from his past. And maybe, just maybe, he would be open to moving on with her.

“Yowza,” she said to herself. Talk about jumping the gun. She’d known the guy for less than twelve hours. It was a little soon to plan a future with

him.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing. I’m just losing my mind, is all. No biggie.”

“I know what you mean,” he muttered. The brow furrow was back.

“Anyway, what are you going to wear to your shindig? A baby-proof smock, perhaps?”

He smiled. It dwindled quickly, his expression falling. He shook his head. “Something nice so I look the part.”

“Listen.” She shifted in her seat before punching the seat warmer. “Since you are going to help me with the managing stuff, I can help you with the holiday party stuff.”

He turned off the highway and stopped at a light. The turn signal flared in the silence. “How?” he finally said, guardedly.

The uncomfortable feeling of putting herself out there and getting rejected had her shifting in her seat again. “I can go with you, purely as friends—don’t get any ideas—and take the heat off you. Once they see me making a fool of myself with children, being a woman and all, they won’t be as worried about you. Plus, added bonus, all the women will be shooing their kids away while gossiping about you bringing a girl. They won’t believe we’re just friends. And the guys will gossip as well, but trying to hide it by making it sexual in some way, like throwing in my nice rack or butt or something. They’ll try to play it cool around you to see if you’re hitting that. They’ll all be more concerned with watching us together than watching us with the kids. See? My diabolical plan is perfect.”

He turned up the road as silence fell. Her cheeks burned and she scratched her leg. His expression had hardened. Bad sign.

She shouldn’t have said anything. Clearly she’d read too much into his tones and things.

“Just throwing it out there to even the score,” she threw in, then laughed good-naturedly, like the embarrassment of his non-answer wasn’t a horrible load weighing down her shoulders.

“Don’t you have family?” he asked, still guarded.

Stop with the tone reading, Addison! Clearly you suck at it.

“Not around here, no. I’m too new here to take holiday time away, especially with the intruder. So I’m just hanging around for the holidays. Thanksgiving was boring, let me tell you. With horrible food. All the single shifters can’t cook, me included. Anyway.” She vaguely pointed at Tim’s

truck as they pulled into the driveway of the compound. “Just anywhere here is fine.”

The SUV came to a stop and Jameson sat back, staring out in front of him. A vein in his temple throbbed and his jaw repeatedly clenched. Those were danger signs.

“Okay,” she said, shrugging off his sweatshirt. “So I’ll...see you around. Thanks again.”

When she opened the door, he jerked, like he might reach toward her. His furrow was back, though, and his eyes were cool as he watched her get out. He slowly put his hands back on the wheel, silent.

The heated ache she felt in her core withered and a grimace covered her face. She threw up a hand in salute and shut the door behind her. No friendly fucking, she took that to mean. Mr. Control was back in the driver’s seat, and that kiss had been a crazy, awesome thing that he didn’t want to dive further into, which may or may not have been because she’d basically asked to be invited along to a family affair.

Hell, why not ask if he wanted a wife, how many kids he wanted, and where he wanted to live? All would be with her, of course. Don’t worry—just as friends!

Groaning to herself, she trudged the rest of the way up the driveway, going over the conversation. *Obsessing* was probably a better term for it. She didn’t know if she wanted *forever* with anybody, but a date might’ve been nice.

A date! Not an intimate family gathering with his closest friends!

She took a deep breath and let herself into her cabin.

“Why not just leave it at him helping you, Addison? You had it in the bag. He was being open and helpful. That would’ve been fine. Maybe work toward a date. How about dinner? *Dinner!* Instead, what do you do? Ask if you can go with him to his family-style holiday party, something men don’t ask women to until it’s serious. Don’t worry, though, just *as friends!* You’ve only known him for a few hours, but somehow you suddenly think you’re BFFs.”

She rolled her eyes, threw her phone on the bed, and placed her clothes delicately on her chair in the corner instead of in the hamper. She wasn’t ready to get rid of his delicious, exotic smell.

And, to be honest, she wasn’t ready to get rid of the man. The way he calmed her rage comforted her. His intelligence and the analytical way he

saw the world jibed with hers. Then there was the look, and the *feel* of him. Raw and powerful. Electric.

She blew out a breath and headed for the shower, not seeing her screen light up with a text message agreeing to her proposal.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Jameson sat in the driveway of the shifter compound clutching the wheel. Full night had fallen not long ago, and he knew everyone would be arriving at the Boss and Sasha's house relatively soon so the kids could tear into the presents. He had already been warned several times that they'd be waiting for him.

He clenched his jaw and stared straight ahead, no idea what he was doing. There was no logic in this. He barely knew this girl. Her own pack barely knew her. Yet here he was, consenting to bring her into a personal setting in which he felt extremely vulnerable and uncomfortable.

He dropped his head and shook it a little.

When she'd thrown the idea out there, solely trying to help him, he'd frozen up. Everything in him wanted to blurt out *yes* immediately. Wanted to hug and thank her for trying to help bail him out. Then let that bodily contact continue on until his mouth was on hers, and her hands were ripping at his fly again.

Jameson squeezed his eyes shut as the memory resurfaced. The woman was scorching hot. So raw and passionate. She had a fire inside her that burned so brightly it made him feel alive. Like he could do anything. The edge on his desperate need for logic and self-control smoothed out, making him feel looser. More relaxed. No other woman had had that effect on him.

How had she gotten her hooks in so deeply in so short a time?

He blew out a breath.

One thing was for certain. He trusted her. Despite his past, and despite his general misgivings with shifters, he'd go into battle with her any day. Any

day. She could take direction, and had courage in spades. She'd be an alpha someday. Despite being a woman, and despite any handicap with strength or size, she'd dominate. It was in her nature. He could learn something from her.

He opened the car door and stepped out, the cold air accosting him. He hated winter, and he hated the holidays. He needed to move to Hawaii or somewhere, without humans or religious people, so he wouldn't have to deal with either.

Nearly at Addison's bungalow, he saw a male shifter walking his way, short and compact. The shifter saw Jameson and started, before bristling. He stepped in the way. "What do you want?"

"You to fuck off. Why don't you do that now?" Jameson stared the other down, happy to take out his frustration physically if the shifter wanted to push his weight around.

"Thanks for helping us out 'n all, but you're no longer needed. Why don't you fuck off?"

Jameson analyzed the other, cataloging his movements that surely pointed to his weaknesses. "Does your alpha know that that's how you talk to my people?"

"Your people? No. You?" The shifter smirked. "Ain't no one wanting you around. We don't need your kind."

"Nice English." Jameson took two steps, getting into combat-ready position. He flexed and leaned forward, intimidating the much smaller man with his size. "By *my kind*, do you mean...lethal?"

The attempted smirk didn't come so easily this time around. The shifter tensed, shifting his weight to the middle. His shoulders pushed up closer to his ears, and his hands jerked in and up. He was reacting to fright, zeroing in on the danger and trying to protect itself. The shifter was scared. He must've been low on the totem pole and knew what taking on someone like Jameson meant. He wasn't running, though. He wasn't abandoning the fight.

Maybe Addison was right. Jameson needed to get over it. The shifters of his past weren't the same shifters Tim was leading. They'd proven that. Addison had proved that. Even this small idiot was proving it.

Jameson was about to take a step back, letting the male off, when a whip crack of a sultry voice rang out. "Ross, stand down."

Ross, the shifter, jumped and then hunched. If he was in animal form, his tail would be between his legs.

Down the walkway of her cabin, her spiky high heels crunching on

gravel, strode a vision. Her beauty was absolute, capturing his eye and holding on. A tight black dress showed off her curves, plunging down her chest to reveal part of her perky breasts. That wasn't what made him want her with everything in him, though. She walked with confidence and dominance, her power radiating out from her like a birthright. She would give the Boss a run for his money with how she owned her supreme authority at that moment. If the Boss and Sasha ever decided to join the Council, and left Jameson in charge of the mansion and their people, this woman would be able to help him lead. She'd keep people in line as a part of her day, and defend them with her dying breath, as she did him.

His breath came hard as something hot and tight wound through his chest. He couldn't take his eyes off her. Didn't want to.

"He would rip your head off, Ross, pick up your body, and play baseball with your various parts," she said as she reached Ross and stopped, staring down at him with eyes on fire. He shrivelled in her commanding stare. "He took time out of his holiday to help us. He took my place going first into a building to secure it, for us. He put his life on the line, for us. And he is a guest here. All that, and you think the right protocol is acting like an asshole?"

"No, beta," he said in a weak voice.

"No is right. He is welcome in this compound at any time. *Any* time. He is welcome in our various city residences at any time. Further, I'll be suggesting his name to Tim as a contender for Pack Friend status. Do I make myself clear?"

Ross's eyes widened and he looked at her. "Pack Friend? But he *hates* shifters."

"Out of all the things I just described to you, which of those proves he hates shifters?" she demanded, the air around her crackling with anger. It seemed Ross had just pushed her rage button by trying to put down Jameson.

That warm, tight thing in Jameson's chest got a little bit bigger.

"I'm...I'm not sure I follow, alpha—I mean, beta," Ross stammered.

"Out of the things I mentioned..." She ticked off a finger. "Taking time out of his busy holiday." She ticked off another. "Trying to protect the beta of this pack by proceeding her into a dangerous building." Another. "Risking his life." One more. "Visiting this compound of his own free will. Which of those do you suppose indicates that he hates us?"

"But I've heard—"

“Exactly,” she barked. “You *heard*. You lot are worse gossipers than a sewing circle on crack, with even bigger tall tales. Use your head for once.”

Defeated, Ross hunched again. “Yes, beta.”

Addison stepped around him and met Jameson’s eyes, the wildness there calming slightly. She still crackled with fire and electricity, but the dial was turned down just a bit.

She exhaled—in relief?—before joining him. “Sorry about that. Sometimes this lot is so excited to swing their dicks around, they forget there is another part of their body actually used for thinking.”

“I didn’t help the situation,” he said as he held out his arm.

Surprise flitted across her face, and then a gorgeous smile. She threaded her arm through his as they walked to his SUV. “I wouldn’t expect you to back down,” she said, the purring tone settling deep in his gut. His cock stiffened.

“You look beautiful,” he said, leading her around to the passenger side and taking his arm back so he could run his hand down her back. She had offered to come as friends, he knew, but he couldn’t help himself. He wanted to touch her. To hold her.

To fuck her until neither of them knew what day it was.

“Thank you. You okay?” she asked as he fumbled the keys. His hands were shaking and he was sweating.

“Yes.” He managed to get the door open and her seated before taking his time walking around the back of the vehicle so he could regain control. That all went out the window as soon as he sat in his seat, however, getting intimate with her delicious smell. “You put on your perfume.”

Her fingertips barely glanced across her chest, drawing his eyes. All it would take was a swipe of his hand to push her fabric to the side so he could then take her nipple into his mouth.

“Jameson?” she asked, her voice a little deeper. He belatedly realized she’d said something.

He ripped his eyes away from her chest and started the car, staring out in front. “I apologize. I lost my train of thought. What were you saying?”

“I called you a snoop, actually.”

He drove out of the driveway. “When I followed the scent of the intruder, I noticed the space between your comb and perfume, wondering if something had been there. I smelled your perfume then.”

“I was kidding.” She folded her hands in her lap. “Why do you think they

took the whole hairbrush instead of just a piece of hair? Or, hell, the other stuff they took would've had DNA."

"They were a long way from processing DNA. They surely didn't think so, I wager. As for taking the items, they probably wanted to snatch what they could as quickly as they could. They were hurrying. They knew what they were up against."

"They were just too stupid to think it would catch up with them?"

"That, and they probably thought they were invincible. Two of them did, at any rate. The one with the sniper rifle was definitely special ops in the past. He should've known better."

"Unless battle twisted his brain. That happens."

"Could be."

She crossed an ankle over the other and tapped her fingers, almost like she was feeling vulnerable. Or uncomfortable.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Yes, of course. Just trying to unwind. I haven't been on a social engagement in a while. All work and no play, as they say."

"Thanks for doing this. It shouldn't make me so wound up, but..." He shrugged as he headed into town.

"Is it at the mansion?"

"No. The Boss lives on the other side of town. On the outskirts. It's a huge house. Not as big as the mansion, but not too far from it. I thought Sasha wanted it that big for vanity, but with all the parties they throw, and the people randomly staying over, it makes sense."

"Vanity is fine, too. I've always wanted a big house."

"Really? I didn't peg you for a material person."

"You pegged me as something after a few hours of knowing me?"

"I just...analyze those I come into contact with. I didn't mean that—" The hand on his arm stopped him up short. He flexed his arm unconsciously.

She took it away. "I was kidding."

He glanced over and caught her smile, and then matched it with his own. "Right." He shook his head, feeling like the humorless oaf he always did in these situations.

"I'm material about some things, and not about others. I don't care about jewelry, but I grew up in a tiny house. Four of us, until my brother passed, had to share two rooms."

"You have siblings? Other siblings, I mean, besides..."

“My brother who died, yes. Another brother, who is the oldest, then my sister, who is the second youngest.”

“And you’re the baby, then?”

“Yes. I was a pleasant surprise, my mom says.” She laughed. “That really means an *oops*. I’m five years younger than my sister. They are both married with kids, living near my parents. I’m the black sheep.”

“So then you have experience with children.”

“Just enough to realize I don’t know what I’m doing, and then run away. You’ll see. I’ll make a fool of myself.”

Jameson turned, closer to the house now. The nervousness he always felt about this time was turning his stomach. “Sasha and her friends aren’t like most human women. They’ll understand. My kind, however...”

He felt her hand again, comforting and energizing at the same time. “We got this. Don’t worry about it. If all else fails, we’ll get drunk.”

“I don’t drink much.”

“That’s because no one has surgically removed the stick from your ass. Dr. Beckett, at your service.” She made like she was tipping a hat.

“I don’t think doctors go around in their scrubs wearing top hats,” he said, feeling laughter bubble up.

“Any doctors *you* know, maybe.” She huffed and started giggling, clasping her hands in her lap again. He wanted to reach over and take one, curling his fingers in between hers.

“Almost there,” he said, gripping the steering wheel tighter than was necessary.

“So what’s our plan of action?” she asked, looking out the passenger window.

“The kids will be opening presents first, then running around like lunatics. I’m sure they catered in food, so after that it’ll be nothing but eating, drinking, and merriment.”

“I don’t think you’re supposed to sound like you’re headed to the gas chamber when you say ‘merriment.’”

Jameson turned on the street and nearly parked where he always did, about a block away. He used the walk to calm himself. With a glance at her shoes, though, and the amount of exposed skin, he’d be doing Addison a disservice. Instead, he found the closest spot possible.

“Holy hell, this is their house?” She was leaning closer to the window to get it all in.

“No.” He pointed across the street at the house glowing, every light on. “That one.”

She switched her gaze, and her face closed down in confusion. “Huh. Are you sure anyone is home?”

He paused with his hand on the door handle, looking at the largest, stateliest house on the block, every window lit and Christmas lights twinkling merrily. “Either that, or they love wasting electricity.”

“That house?” She pointed at it. “The two-story with the old Cadillac out front? I don’t see any lights on.”

It dawned on him what was happening. He smiled, drawing her focus. “You’ll see.”

Jameson walked around to her side of the car as she was opening the door. He helped her out and she tightened her wrap around her shoulders.

“Do you want my jacket?” he asked.

“It’s not that far.”

He put out his arm for her to take, wanting to stall. To just hang out with her in the darkness, away from all the people. “I don’t think it is just the children,” he admitted as they crossed the street. “I’ve never been great with crowds. They wear me down.”

“It must be tough in the mansion, then.”

“Not really. People clear out of the way for me, usually. I can talk to a group of people to give commands, but it’s socializing amongst them that make me...”

“Nervous? Uncomfortable?” She laughed and squeezed his arm. “You can admit it. I won’t judge.”

He tightened his lips. “I haven’t told anyone that before. It might be seen as a bad trait for a leader. Even second in charge. I thought you should know, since you’re my partner in crime tonight. Oh, shit.” He stopped as they reached the sidewalk and looked back at the SUV. “I forgot the presents.” He glanced at her, seeing the goosebumps. “I’ll come back from them later.”

“You really do get jittery. I’ve never seen you this scattered.”

“In all twelve hours of knowing me?” He grinned down at her, her face so close.

Her gaze hit his lips. “I think twelve hours is generous, don’t you?”

He led her up the sidewalk and onto the front walk. As they stepped into the spell Sasha had made, Addison blinked in confusion and looked away from him. She stopped walking and her mouth dropped open. “What the

hell?”

Chuckling, Jameson tugged her, getting her to the front porch. “They’d look like drug dealers if their lights were always on at night, and no one around in the daytime.”

“Or vampires.”

“Yes, exactly. Sasha did a sort of concealing spell to make this house seem like the houses around it.”

“Only smaller when it is really a *lot* bigger.”

“They’ve done a few add-ons.” Jameson reached for the doorbell.

“Did it start out smaller?”

“It started out about the same.”

“Then wouldn’t someone notice if it was suddenly smaller?”

Jameson looked down at his feet, waiting for the door to open and the rush of people to suck him in. “You don’t know much about us, do you?” Her brow creased. “We can alter humans’ memories. We can increase their desire, too, make them do whatever we want.” Her brow lowered still. He held up his hands. “We don’t anymore, thanks to Sasha. It’s a long story. She can relay it to you. But it’s a simple process to make humans forget what they had previously known.”

“Could you do that to me?” she asked, the fire burning through her voice.

He took a step closer, wanting to feel the burn. “It doesn’t work on shifters. And some humans can withstand it, or work through it. Sasha was one of those humans. That’s how she found us in the first place. Simple-minded humans are no match for my powers of persuasion, however.”

The heat was in her eyes now, but not anger. If he wasn’t mistaken, desire. He looked at her lips, plump and pouty, remembering how they’d felt. Remembering the feel of her body rubbing against his. Her breasts in his hands.

He bent to her, needing to taste her again. To feel her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Addison ran her hands up Jameson's hard chest as he leaned in to her.

The door swung open. Light blasted them, making Jameson throw up a hand to block it. Strangely, he wrapped his other arm around her and pushed her to his back, clearly trying to protect her from the onslaught of cheer.

"Dude, what are you trying to sneak in to the party?"

Addison pushed Jameson's arm away and stepped up beside him, vaguely recognizing the dirty blond man in the doorway holding a wriggling baby.

"Charles, right?" she said, sticking out her hand.

"Yup. You know my wife, Anne." He set the kid down, braced as she wobbled, and then stuck his foot in the doorway so she didn't toddle out into the cold. Instead, the kid gave a scream-laugh and baby-ran into the house. Charles watched her for a moment before returning his focus outside, then taking her hand and shaking.

"Addy," she said.

"Addy the beta, yeah. Anne!" Charles yelled over his shoulder. "You will never believe who Jameson brought. *Never* believe."

"You didn't tell them I was coming?" she asked Jameson softly.

"No. One more won't make a difference."

At least they had surprise on their side. "Okay, then." She marched forward, shoving Charles out of the way. "It's cold. Let us in."

Charles pounded Jameson on the shoulder. "I'm in awe, dude. Turning up with a girl isn't like you. And she fits in already, though why everyone shoves *me* is anyone's guess."

“Addison and I are friends.” Jameson stepped away from the patting, his eyes taking on a hard edge. Charles didn’t seem to notice. Or maybe he just didn’t care, being the same sort of size and build and, she’d heard, having equal prowess on the battlefield. She had every belief she’d be meeting the best of the best in this house, women as well as men, in magic as well as in fighting. Part of her was really excited. The other part worried that some stupid little thing would make her rage blast out unexpectedly. She didn’t want to embarrass herself here with these people. Especially in front of those she had authority over, or would work with in the future.

“He helped me out today,” she said, playing it cool. “Was that yours?” she pointed in the direction the child had gone.

“Uncle Jameson is here!” a kid shouted from somewhere inside. “Can we open presents?”

“Yeah. I’m trying to get another one going, but Anne isn’t having it,” Charles said.

“It sucks on the body,” Addison said, stepping back next to Jameson.

“So friends, huh?” A sparkle came to Charles’ eyes. “Jameson’s first friend.”

Jameson shifted, his hands flexing.

“Quit fucking around, child.” Another man stepped up, one that had Addison centering her weight and loosening her posture. Fierce eyes in a striking face, he had an air of aggression around him. His gaze hit Jameson. They both nodded stiffly. Then to Addison. He stuck out a hand. “Jonas.”

Ah. That explained it. She’d heard stories about him being as hard to work with as Jameson. She could see why. She doubted he dealt with bullshit. Her kinda man.

“Hi. Addy.” She gave him a solid shake.

“And now you’ve met the Christmas Grinch.” Charles glanced at Jonas, who returned the look. “Yes, I was talking about you,” Charles badgered. “You can ruin anyone’s good time.”

“Are you done?” Jonas asked.

“Why don’t you guys help Jameson get the presents out of the car?” Addison said, stepping further into the house. “I would, but I’m trying to balance on stilts.”

“Presents?” A pair of young twins came running. Addison was terrible with kid ages. “I’ll help!” they said at the same time.

“You’ll catch the death of cold,” Charles said, shaking one off his leg.

“Then you know what’ll happen? Your mommy will throw a nasty spell at me and burn off all my hair.”

“Get back,” Jonas barked. They didn’t listen, rushing for the door.

Jameson had stepped back, closer to the wall. His face had closed down into a stone mask, obviously hiding how uncomfortable he was. He needed spiked eggnog immediately.

“Okay,” she said, stepping to him and running her hand down his arm. “I’m going to get us a drink. Meet me inside?”

His hand settled on her hip and he turned toward her, his soft brown eyes meeting hers. Tingles ran through her body.

“I’ll be right back. Stay somewhere easy for me to steal back. I don’t want to have to wade through women to get to you. They’re…”

“Crazy, I know.” She smiled up at him, angling for a kiss before stopping herself. She slapped his chest a couple times, trying to keep within the friendly vibe. “Got it.”

His hand slid up her side and he leaned just a little. Was he going to kiss her?

Her heart started to thump. She wanted it so bad. Wanted him to keep going.

Instead, he backed off, that furrow back. She’d never seen someone randomly frown so much.

“Indecision keeps you single, bro,” Charles said, watching with a smirk as he leaned against the front door.

Jameson stiffened and squeezed her hand before he stepped away.

“Interfering keeps you in fat lips, bro,” Jameson retorted before heading out of the door.

“*Oooh*. Promises, promises.” Charles winked at Addison before following Jameson out. Before the door drifted closed, she heard, “Santa’s cheeky wife, I’m going to freeze my balls off out here.”

“He doesn’t have two IQ points to rub together,” Jonas said, grabbing a jacket. “Head on in. The others are in the kitchen or living room. You’ll hear them before you see them.”

Without Jameson’s uncertainty to bolster her courage, Addison hesitated in the grand entranceway. Taking her time, she took off her wrap and hung it on the coatrack. A moment later, she continued on until the house opened up into a large living room with a huge tree in the corner laden with presents. Kids, large and small, gathered around, picking them up and shaking them,

before putting them back. Two women she didn't recognize sat on the couch, chatting.

Wow. This was awkward.

She walked in further and one of them looked up. Confusion crossed her face. "Hello. Are...you looking for someone?"

"I came with Jameson." Addison randomly pointed behind her. "He's just getting the presents. I was told to head in."

"With Jameson?" She leaned forward, a lovely woman heavily pregnant.

"Yes. It was last minute. I guess he didn't tell Sasha I was coming..."

"Oh. My God." The woman pushed herself to her feet. Shock coated her face. "I'll take you!"

She was a little too ecstatic.

"I'm Selene," she said.

"Addison, but my friends call me Addy."

"Hi. Welcome. Are you...are you a shifter?" She paused for a kid to amble by.

"Yes. I'm the new beta."

She stopped and put a hand to her chest, her eyes wide and a smile curving her lips. "I've heard a lot about you. The shifters are terrified. Does Anne know you're coming?"

"It doesn't seem like it, unless she heard Charles yell it in a moment ago."

Selene rolled her eyes. "No one hears Charles randomly yelling things. You'll learn to ignore him, trust me." Her tone was light and joking, which was good, because Addison already liked Charles. He seemed quirky and fun.

"So how long have you known Jameson?" Selene asked as they were underway again, albeit slowly.

"I just met him last night, actually. He was sent to help us out with a few intruders."

"I heard about that. We wondered if someone was trying to breed shifters again."

"Short answer is yes, they were. They apparently weren't the caliber of the last group of people who did, though."

"Good. Did Jameson take care of it?"

"Most of it, yes. We still have to go over more information."

"Hmm. And he invited you here, then?"

The archway leading into the kitchen was so close, but still so far away. "Yes. In a way."

“Cryptic. Just like he is.” Selene smiled knowingly.

“We’re just friends,” Addison said. She probably should’ve led with that.

“Well, sure. After only knowing him a short time, what else would you be?”

Addison tilted her head and her smile-grimaced, because she wasn’t sure what that question was implying.

They entered the kitchen, where a few people were gathered, chatting amicably. One she recognized right off. Large and lethal, dominant and commanding, he moved with grace and precision, making even leaning up against the kitchen sink with a mimosa look deadly. The Boss. She’d met him when she first took the position, told that he was an ally.

“Everyone, this is—”

“Oh shit.” Anne jerked straight, the mimosa in her hand slopping over the rim of her glass. “Beta. Hi. Is there a problem? Why are you dressed up? Is everything okay?”

“—Addy,” Selene continued. “She is Jameson’s date.”

“His friend,” Addison supplied as the room came to a grinding halt. Everyone stared for a moment, raising Addison’s hackles.

“My wife says I’m terrible at entertaining, but this silent staring thing seems rude,” someone she recognized said. The man nodded to her. “I’m Paulie.”

“Right. Thanks for the help last night.” Addison shifted. “Anne, I’m here as a guest.”

“Of course, beta.” Anne slowly backed up until bumping against the countertop.

A woman about Anne’s height stepped forward. “I’m Sasha. Hi. We were supposed to meet when you first signed on, but there were a bunch of witches that ran amok.”

“Right. Yes of course.”

“Can I get you a mimosa?” She smiled pleasantly.

“That would be great, thanks.”

“Hello again,” Stefan said, stepping forward with his hand outstretched. “Please help yourself to anything you like.”

She shook his hand for the second time, feeling tiny in comparison. The man had a similar stature to Jameson and the rest of the guys, but for some reason, his aura dwarfed everyone around him.

She needed to shake that kind of thing off if she ever wanted to advance

to alpha.

“You just met Jameson for the snooping gig, right?” Paulie asked, nonchalantly leaning against the counter.

All eyes were on her, the room silent. She really hoped Sasha hurried up with that mimosa. “The intruder issue, yes.” She cleared her throat. “Is this the whole party?”

“Yup.” Sasha looked around at everyone. “Oh. Emmy is out in the other room watching the kids while the child sitter changes diapers. But yeah, just family for the presents. More people will show up later for a big dinner.”

Just a small bit of family. She stuck out like a sore thumb. Possibly this wasn't a great idea.

Selene gave that knowing smile again, making Addison feel a little insecure, which then immediately burned toward anger.

Addison took a step back, trying to get back under control. The guys in the room shifted a little, more centered, looking wary. Danger radiated through the room. The smile dripped off Selene's face.

The guys on edge weren't helping Addison's rage issue.

Actually, coming here might've been a terrible idea.

CHAPTER NINE

“Look at all this.” Charles shook his head, reaching in for a few presents. “Too much, bro. You always go way overboard.”

“I only got things that would make the most racket,” Jameson said, waiting for Charles to get out of the way so he could get a bunch. He wanted to hurry. To get back to Addison. Something about her made him want to stick around and bask in her smiles. Or her flashing eyes. Or her smell.

“You into her, then?” Jonas asked, looking up at the windows of the neighbor’s house. “Those damn neighbors got a staring problem. I’ve half a mind to go put them to bed.”

“Leave it, bro.” Charles hopped from foot to foot. “They’ve stopped calling the cops. Leave it alone.”

“We made them stop calling the cops,” Jonas growled, making a pile of gifts. “This better not be a drum set.”

“Guilty,” Jameson said, laughing. “It’s a child’s version. Way more irritating.”

Charles stopped hopping, and Jonas’s head jerked around.

“Well look who just needed to get laid in order to find his sense of humor.” Charles went back to hopping back and forth. “No, Jonas, I wasn’t talking about you. You wouldn’t laugh at a joke if a clown fucked you with it.”

“Because that shit wouldn’t be funny,” Jonas growled.

“See?” Charles said.

“Quit dancing around like an idiot.” Jonas stepped back with a pile of presents.

“I’m cold.”

“She’s here to keep you off my back with holding your kids.” Jameson pushed down the hatch and bent for his share of gifts. “As a friend,” he added. “I haven’t known her long.”

“I’ve heard about her from Anne,” Charles said. “All the guys are trying to get some and she isn’t having it. She’s kind of a loner. She has some really strong magic, though. Anne thinks she could take Tim.”

“She’s intense, but she’s not nearly as big or strong as Tim,” Jameson said, crossing the street.

“No, but she’s not as big or strong as three other guys she beat into the ground to get to beta. I heard she is something fierce. Crazy style. Anne doesn’t feel totally comfortable around her, which I would expect out of an alpha. That’s how I feel around the Boss.”

Jameson did, too. Everyone did, except Sasha. Charles was right: that was what a good alpha did—exude dominance and force, so no one would think of trying to rise above and take the post, thereby upsetting the balance of the people. Tim was good at what he did, but he didn’t inspire that kind of spine bowing. Jameson hadn’t realized it until this conversation.

“Have you taken blood from her?” Charles asked, bouncing by the door.

“I haven’t touched her,” Jameson lied. His voice came out rough and vicious.

“Hey, bro, that’s cool. Simmer down. I wasn’t implying anything. Just wondering if your magical power raises like mine does with Anne.”

When one of his kind ingested magic of someone with a higher power level, the person’s power who ingested would raise as well, boosting their effectiveness. Their people didn’t share blood with each other very often for that reason. Charles discovered that shifters, their blood having magic, could also raise power.

Emmy stuck her head out the door. “Guys, you need to get in here. Jameson’s woman is making things...dicey.”

Fear washed through Jameson. He loved Addison’s fire, but the others might see it as a threat, and act out without thinking.

He pushed into the door and dropped the presents to the side. The Boss and Sasha’s twins were there immediately, having been told to go back inside, and now gleefully carrying the packages toward the tree. He ran past, Charles and Jonas right behind him.

“It’s fine,” Sasha was saying, standing in between the Boss and Addison.

Selene had backed away to the side with Paulie next to her, and Anne stood near Addison, clearly uncomfortable but pulled toward her pack authority. “Let’s all calm down. Nothing was meant by...whatever happened to make this happen.”

“Hey,” Jameson said, slowing down as he got close and putting his hand on Addison’s back. He felt her shaking.

She turned to him, the wildness crouching in her eyes. Just as clear was the fear. The desperation to be anywhere but where she stood. “Hey,” she said, her voice quivering. She released her breath, looking into his eyes. “Hi. I was just terrorizing a room full of killers. How are you?”

Sasha and Charles laughed. Jonas leaned nonchalantly against the doorframe.

“Oh good, she’s crazy like me. Well, at least I have a partner in crime.” Sasha patted Addison on the arm, making her jump. “I’ll get that mimosa.”

The Boss warily looked at Jameson with a silent question. Was Addison dangerous? Because if so, she couldn’t be allowed around pregnant females.

Jameson had no idea. But without even thinking about it, he knew that if she had to leave, he’d leave with her. When she’d left his SUV earlier that day, without an answer or so much as a goodbye from him, something had tugged at his middle painfully. He’d wanted to get out and go with her. After, he couldn’t stop thinking about her. Couldn’t wait until he could see her again. Whatever it was he felt for her, it was strong. He didn’t want to deny it.

“Want to take a walk?” Jameson asked quietly.

“No.” She threaded her hand around his middle and sighed when he put his arm around her back. “No. I’m fine. I’ll just hang near you, if that’s okay, and awkwardly avoid holding children.”

“You’re one of those!” Sasha pointed at her and laughed. She handed over a mimosa. “Who am I going to palm my kids off on?”

“Not me.” Selene put up her hands, edging forward with a smile. “I have my own.” The Boss shifted, still wary. Paulie shadowed his mate. The males weren’t letting the females defuse the tension.

Addison tightened up again, clutching Jameson and trying to step back. Trying to get out of the scene.

“Sorry about that.” Sasha hooked a thumb at the males around Selene. “These guys go crazy when a pregnant female is around. Bonkers, seriously. Charles and Jonas used to try and carry me places.”

“Until you shocked me,” Charles said.

“If you’d stopped touching me, I would’ve stopped shocking you, now wouldn’t I? Remember that? Cause and effect. We went through it often enough.”

“Moody,” Charles muttered.

“Blockhead,” Sasha retorted. “Anyway, those guys can’t see that their behavior is making things worse. But I get it.” She started pushing Jameson and Addison out of the kitchen. “If I was a crazy predator like you, Addy, instead of a crazy magical person, I would be *very* nervous around huge guys with a killer’s edge. It’s only natural. Which is, of course, why they are stressing out. You give off a sort of...vibe. Like...unlit dynamite. It’s exciting. I’d love to have you by my side in battle. But for now, let’s go open presents. When the pregnant woman is out of the picture, things will be fine. You can be as absolutely violent as you want to be, and everyone will think that’s just great. Especially if you pick a fight with Charles. He wallows in it when he bleeds.”

“I couldn’t. That would be a direct affront to Anne,” Addison said, letting Sasha direct her to a place on the couch facing the tree.

“Oh. Well, Jonas, then. He is enraged by bleeding. If he smiles at you directly after, be on your guard, because he knows something you don’t. It’s definitely not because he has a sense of humor.”

Addison laughed.

“Mom! Mom! Can we open presents now?” “Where’s my dad? Can we open presents?” “Presents!” the kids clamored at once.

“Yes, fine, go, fine.” Sasha waved them all away. “Pass them out first!” she yelled as the kids swarmed. “Watch the baby! She is only just walking.” Focused back on Jameson and Addison, she said, “Do not rush into having kids. Seriously. Anyway, chill out for a moment, make sure no one kills anyone else over the presents, and I’ll make sure all the parents have liquor. Jameson, that includes you. Your...friend is drinking, so you will be drinking. It’ll loosen you up some.”

Sasha winked before walking away.

Addison shook her head and leaned into Jameson. “I’m sorry. I’m supposed to be covering you, and here I am getting everyone ready for battle.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing. Selene just smiled in a way that threw me off-kilter. I was

trying to get it under control when all the guys tensed, which set off alarm bells. I should have told you. This is why I don't go to functions. I'm good with people, until I'm not. I just... I haven't been totally right since my brother. It was so long ago, and that's not an excuse, it just is the way it is."

"Hey, *shhh*." He ran his finger under her jaw, tilting her head up. Not thinking, just going with it, he touched his lips to hers, feeling the zing of electricity. "I completely understand. As you clearly know, I lost a parent to a demon when I was younger. The shifters that were supposed to help fled. The Boss lost both his parents. Jonas one. Me one. We blamed it on the shifters, on ourselves..."

She nodded knowingly. Tim had taken great pains to show they could be trustworthy. He'd surely passed down that knowledge to her so she would keep up the practice.

"I know that shifters—your pack of shifters—are good in battle," Jameson went on. "I *know* that they are trustworthy, but the past dies hard. I'm proof. You're proof. But look, here I am, lost in a shifter I just met. In you." Her eyes widened, making him smile. "We both feel it. This is one thing that doesn't make sense any way I look at it, but I don't care. I want you, Addison. I want you around. I want your smiles directed at me. I want you here, with people I consider my family. And that might change, and we might hate each other in a week, but for now, I don't want you out of my sight, and I'll kill anyone that puts their hands on you."

Heat filled her eyes and a smile crossed her face. "Wow. That went from sweet to insane really quickly." She pulled his face close and nibbled his lips, making him painfully hard. "I agree with everything you just said, including the crazy jealousy. But also"—her voice lowered to a whisper, for his ears alone—"I want to fuck you so hard you forget your name."

"Let's open presents, kids," Jameson said, his cock throbbing.

"We can?" someone asked.

"Yup. Go for it. All at once. As fast as you can." Jameson covered Addison's lips with his, not caring that the others were coming into the room. He stroked her tongue with his before backing off and licking her bottom lip. He deepened the kiss again, losing himself like he had after dealing with the intruders, and as he did when he looked into her eyes.

"Children, presents," Sasha hollered.

"They're not even paying attention," Charles said, settling on a seat across the room.

“I was talking about you,” Sasha said.

Jameson backed off, looking down into her intelligent, fiery eyes, full of longing. “We’ll resume after presents.”

“I’m curious to see if I can power up your blood to higher levels than Anne can Charles.”

Jameson groaned and put his arm around her, pulling her into him. “Only one way to find out.”

CHAPTER TEN

“Thank you, Mama and Dada,” a little boy—Paulie’s, Addison thought—said as he clutched his new game console.

“That’s from Santa,” Selene said.

“No, that was from us. The other one that you said *you’re welcome* for was from Santa.” Paulie patted her thigh.

“Oh.” Selene shrugged. Clearly she wasn’t hellbent on keeping the magic alive. Though, not really living in human society, Addison doubted it really mattered.

The bigger kids ran off as Charles walked closer with his kid. “Okay, which one of you wants to hold her? She’s got a shitty diaper, so she smells great.”

“That...sounds horrible,” Addison said, waving him away. “Don’t you have a daycare person wandering around? I just saw her.” Addison pointed to the rest of the house.

“Oh yeah, she’s around, but she’s changing Jonas’s kid’s diaper. For *some* reason.” Charles raised his voice. “Our fearless leaders only thought to ask *one* child minder to come.”

“Having one is a luxury, Charles,” Sasha yelled as she came out of the kitchen. “Watch your kid. It’s not that big of a deal. Especially because she is the tamest thing I’ve ever seen. How that is, with her parents, I don’t know.”

“It’s a really big deal when she craps herself like a trucker, Sasha,” Charles said, still standing in front of Addison and Jameson. “So anyway, what are you guys going to do? Jameson has a serious case of the blue-ball sweats.”

“Do you have a death wish, man?” Jonas asked, passing by.

“Why? I can take Jameson.”

“I wasn’t talking about Jameson. I was talking about his woman. She’d leave claw marks on your back.”

“Are you seriously standing here, having a chat, when your daughter is sitting in her filthy diaper?” Anne demanded, descending on them. She only had eyes for Charles, though. “Change her diaper!”

“Clearly she doesn’t mind sitting in her own smell,” Charles said, getting on his way. “She’s not crying.”

“She takes after you, clearly,” Anne said, giving Addison a stiff nod. She hurried away.

“She doesn’t stick around you for long,” Jameson said, standing.

Addison let him help her up while she watched Anne disappear into the kitchen. “I told her I was off duty here. I’m not sure what the problem is.”

“Where are you guys going?” Sasha asked with a grin. She waggled her eyebrows.

“I have to go change a shitty diaper,” Addison said. Sasha burst out laughing.

“When there was that...misunderstanding in the kitchen,” Jameson said when they were out of earshot, leading her toward a staircase. Excited tingles spread through her body. “Anne chose you. She drifted closer to you when the others were going toward Selene. By the look on her face, she wasn’t one hundred percent sure if that was the right move. That she should pick her pack leader—”

“Beta,” Addison corrected.

“—over her mate’s chosen family. Yet she stayed there. By you.”

“So?”

Jameson chuckled. “That’s how the Boss would answer. And while I’d lay down my life for that male, and I would woo a beautiful female in his home, and hang out with him in the off time, he’s always my leader. He’s always the boss. Anne hasn’t come to grips with that yet. She’ll need time, it looks like.”

Addison shrugged, because her brain was getting slippery with the loud hum in her body. His heat seared her side and her core pounded, wanting fulfillment. Breathing heavily, she let him direct her into a spare room at the end of the hall. A random toy was lying in the middle of the floor and the queen-sized bed had wrinkles in the duvet.

“The kids terrorize the whole house,” Jameson said with a smile. He picked up the toy and put it into the hall. “In case someone comes looking for it.”

“By this point, they have probably forgotten they even own it.”

“True.” He closed the door, and Addison’s stomach twisted. After locking it, he glanced at the light, and then her face. His small smile made her heart flutter. “Let me run down the hall really quick. I want a little light, but this is too bright.”

Heart hammering and palms sweaty, Addison made herself busy by messing with the shades. They were already down, but she made sure they were hanging *just right*. The door closed again and a match was struck before the room plunged into darkness.

The flicker of a candle made shadows dance along the walls. “Better.”

“You can see in the dark, right?” she asked, still facing the shade. Butterflies swarmed her belly, she was so nervous. She had no idea why.

“Yes,” he said softly right before his arms came around her waist. “You can, too, it seems.”

“A little bit. My animal is nocturnal, and that affects my human side.”

“Which is good, since my kind are nocturnal.”

She sighed as his lips trailed across her shoulder. Her zipper whizzed, loosening her top. A moment later, helped by his warm palms, the fabric of the dress slid down her skin.

“How are you feeling?” he asked softly, his lips against her ear.

“Nervous,” she admitted.

He spun her around until she was facing him, looking up into his eyes. Soft, brown, and so deep; she fell into his gaze, weightless. His lips brushed hers, spreading warmth through her body.

“Why nervous?” he whispered, his lips slowly applying pressure to hers.

She opened her mouth and sucked his tongue in, hearing his moan. Her fingers worked down his shirt front, pulling buttons free and parting the fabric.

“I don’t know,” she said, tugging his shirt out of his pants.

“We’ll only go as far as you want to go.”

“So if I want a house, and a ring, and kids, you’re all in, huh?” She laughed.

“Yes.”

Shock and something else ran through her body. Something deep. She

opened her mouth to make light of his comment, but nothing would come. She had no witty reply or snarky comeback. Instead, everything in her stilled. Calmed. Felt right.

Suddenly, she had to have him with a need she'd never felt the equal of.

She pushed the fabric of his shirt over his shoulders, and then yanked his undershirt over his head. A glorious torso of cut muscle and rune tattoos claimed her focus, broad-shouldered and magnificent. His hands covered her breasts and kneaded while she yanked at his trousers, ripping the fly open. This time, when she reached in to claim his sizable erection, he moaned as she slid her palm over his velvety-smooth skin.

He bent and took a nipple in his mouth, sucking. She let her head fall back, soaking in that delicious sensation. His fingers trailed down her abdomen and over her mound, dipping in to trail across her panty-covered sex. He pulled the fabric to the side and worked her clit as his tongue flicked her nipple.

"Oh, Jameson," she said, waves of heat washing over her.

He pulled her panties down to the floor, kneeling in front of her. Coming back up, he kissed up her inner thigh, spreading her legs with his hands as he did so. One knee he hooked over his shoulder, and he ran his tongue up her slit. At the top, he sucked in her nub, massaging it with his tongue.

"Oh...wow," she said. Stars of light burst behind her closed eyes. "Wow."

A finger worked into her, quickly followed by another as his mouth and tongue worked together in a way she didn't think was possible. Not even her vibrator could get her so high so fast, her whole body burning up, her core tightening.

"Harder," she begged, pumping her hips in time to his fingers. "Oh yes, harder. Oh God." She clutched his hair and soaked in the unbelievable sensations. "Hmm."

She couldn't get enough breath. Heat pulsed. Her core tightened. Pleasure slammed into her, ripping a cry of delight from her throat. An orgasm so intense she lost the strength in her legs rolled through her. Suddenly weightless, she wrapped her arms around Jameson's neck as she vibrated with the glow of aftershocks.

"On top of the covers or in them?" Jameson asked, carrying her to the bed.

"In. Kids might play on top."

“Good point.” Jameson ripped back the duvet and settled her in before shedding his pants and climbing in beside her.

Knowing it was her turn, she took a moment to feel his heat against her skin before kissing down his neck and onto his chest.

“Not yet,” he said, hands on her shoulders. “I’m not done exploring your body.”

“Okay, but check it out. You’ll need a second to come back from the orgasm I’m about to give you, so you can explore my body then.”

“Efficient. But I don’t need a second. You’ll have me hard immediately after, I have no doubt.”

She rose and looked him in the eye. “I want to suck your cock.”

His breath hitched. He grabbed her cheeks and yanked her closer for a bruising kiss, deep and consuming. She returned it, passionate, losing herself in the feel of his lips. Her leg found its way over his body of its own accord. Likewise did her body set itself up, lying on top of him with her sex just over his.

She rubbed her wetness along his shaft, bursts of pleasure taking over her from the contact. She really should pay him back for the great oral sex, but as she slid on top of him, she couldn’t think about anything else but him inside of her.

Reaching back, she grabbed his shaft and put it in position, his tip kissing her opening. His breath hitched again and his arms tightened on her shoulders. They paused in their kissing, both feeling what was about to happen. For some reason, the moment was filled with gravity.

She sat down. A moan burst from her throat as he filled her. Pleasantly stretched her. Ruined her for all other men. She knew, without knowing how, that he would be her last. That this one was it.

This was the last penis she’d ever fuck. And she was truly happy about that fact.

“I love you,” he said.

She blinked, holding him inside of her, taking a moment to realize he’d said that, not her.

“I love you, too,” she said, her lips on his. “And I look forward to getting to know you so saying that doesn’t sound so crazy.”

He laughed and kissed her again. “I agree. But it feels right. All of this feels right. The fact that I would mate a shifter, after taking the longest to forgive them, feels right.”

“How does that feel right?”

“I have shit luck.”

She laughed and pushed back so she was sitting up, and gyrated slowly on top of him. His gaze was everywhere, meeting her eyes, watching her lips part in ecstasy, onto her breasts. He couldn't seem to make up his mind what he wanted to gawk at.

She was the same, soaking in his lost look, then noticing his fabulous chest, so damn hot she couldn't stand it.

“I want to fuck you hard,” she said, speeding up her pace. His cock slid out of her and she sat down hard again, feeling him plunge deeply. “And then I want you to throw me under you, and hammer me as you take my blood.”

He gripped her hips and a lustful sparkle came to his eyes. He lifted her, and pulled down as he thrust upward, piercing her with pleasure.

“Oh!” She let her head fall back as he did it again, crashing into her. “Hmm, Jameson. *Oh.*”

As she gyrated, panted, and moaned, the pleasure battered her, so intense. So gloriously intense. She bounced on top of him and massaged her clit as he used his strength to give her what she asked for, a hard lay.

“Yes, Jameson,” she said, working herself faster. Grinding on top of him. Her core tightened. “Yes. Almost.” Her lip hurt from biting it. Her moans went up in pitch. “Oh, yes, Oh!”

She blasted apart, her body fragmenting in pleasure. The pieces flew all over as her body hummed for the second time, shaking over him. He quaked beneath her, groaning and clutching her hips.

Before she could collapse onto him, though, pleasantly sated, he threw her to the side and then flipped her over, moving so quickly, and with such strength, that she struggled to get out of his grip. He was on her then, taking her from behind and trapping her to his body.

“Like this or on your back?” he asked, and then licked her earlobe.

Her ardor rose with the struggle and she reached back and scratched his skin. “Back. I want to see your face.”

“As my lady commands.”

He flipped her again, roughly, trapping her to the mattress with his well-built body. She smiled in excitement, dragging him down lower so she could crash her lips to his.

His girth pushed into her again, just as rock hard as it had been a moment before. No, he did not need time to recoup.

“Oh, wow,” she said, truly meaning it. She squeezed her eyes shut and arched, giving his shoulders resistance so he’d go slowly for a second. Thankfully he could switch speeds at a moment’s notice.

She soaked in the new areas he was hitting, rubbing just right. He ran his hands up her chest, cupping her breasts as she tossed her arms over his shoulders. She squeezed him with her thighs and pushed up into him.

“Hmm, Addison,” he said, kissing her, plunging his tongue into her mouth as he plunged his cock into her body. “You feel so good.”

She arched, swinging her hips upward to meet his thrust. With each crash, pleasure coursed into her. Her grip tightened around his neck and her hips swung up harder, faster; she needed more from him. Needed it all.

Obviously feeling it, he labored, pumping into her with strength and power, forcing cries of delight. Breathing hard, trying to kiss him despite wanting to scream in pleasure, she moved against him, their bodies getting slick with sex and sweat.

She took two fistfuls of his hair and dragged his mouth down to her neck. “I’ve heard your kind can claim your females. I want that with you.”

“That is forever, Addison. It is beyond mating. Beyond bearing my children. If we do this, it is a mark through the rest of time. None of my people will touch you unless they want to answer to me.”

“I know. I want it. You. Forever.”

A shock of pain announced him going for it. After less than a day, they were choosing each other for life.

It was insane.

It felt righter than anything had in her whole life.

Pleasure unlike she’d ever known swept her breath away. She couldn’t cry out. Or even moan. Her mouth fell open and her eyes fluttered closed as wave after intense wave rolled through her. An orgasm vibrated her core, followed by another. And another. She almost wanted him to stop, it was so intense.

The draw on her neck ended and the last orgasm shook her body.

“There are two parts. The first we can complete after dinner. It is another blood exchange to cement a link between us. You have time to back out on that one.”

She shook her head. He smiled, still moving inside her. Slow and sensual.

“The other is the mark. Staking my claim. Sasha put a magical mark on the Boss, but as far as I know, Anne hasn’t figured out how to mark Charles,

so that will have to be one-sided.”

“I will openly claim you as mine. My mark is my word. If anyone touches you, I’ll end them. Then you, if you allowed it.”

His smile made her heart thump, he was so handsome.

“Fair enough.”

He started moving again, faster. Harder. Aggression, power, and strength fueled his thrusts. He took a fistful of her hair and yanked, thrusting into her. Dominating her.

Her core wound up, taking the glorious beating of his cock and begging for more. She rose to meet his downward thrusts, swiveling just a little to hit new areas.

“Mine,” he growled, riding low over her. His hard chest rubbed against her sensitive nipples, the sensation decadent. “You’re mine,” he said again, pounding into her.

“Yes, Jameson,” she said, not able to take it. Right at the edge again. Hanging out there.

“Take my blood,” he commanded.

“Yes.” She grabbed his head like prey, angled his head, and ripped into his skin, her animal rising to the surface and taking over. His blood flowed over her tongue, spicy and exotic, like him, filled to the brim with magic, the current making her latch on and suck it down.

He moaned and convulsed, emptying into her. Still she sucked, wanting more of him. Some part of her knowing it wasn’t time to let up.

He came again, groaning. And another, his balls probably bone dry by that point. One more time and she finally let up as an orgasm hit her out of nowhere. She convulsed against him, feeling him shake above her, each of them clutching each other in desperation, the pleasure so intense it was almost painful.

Aftershocks rolled through, making her tremble as her arms fell away and smacked the bed. She went completely limp, unable to move.

“I’ve never experienced that before,” he said in a low hum, draped over her. “Am I crushing you?”

“It feels good.”

“Good. I don’t want to move.”

“This is probably a little late in asking, but you haven’t done this blood thing with anyone else, right?”

“That would be an awful surprise for them if I did, since you’d

undoubtedly kill them.”

“That’s a no, then?”

“Correct. You are the only one. But I have taken blood before, and people have taken blood from me, a few men and women both. It has never felt like that.”

“Maybe because I’m a shifter.”

“I don’t know, but I’ve never come that much at one time. I’m probably dehydrated.”

She huffed out a laugh, and then sucked in a breath as she felt a strange sort of pulse deep inside her. Like satisfaction and a deep, consuming love.

He rose and braced his elbows on the side of her head, his brow furrowed.

“Are you in awe right now?”

“Yes. You really do love me.”

His eyes softened. “I see no point in lying.”

“Sure, but men often think they are in love when they are having sex.”

He laughed. “True, I suppose. You can feel my truth.”

“I thought we had to finish after dinner.”

“We should have had to, yes. We shouldn’t be able to link that quickly. I’ve never heard of that happening, and that is something people would discuss.”

“They’d discuss something that intimate?”

“Couples have been known to exchange blood at the same time. Then they give it a long time before exchanging again. If a link happened after just the one time, it would be a large issue.” He paused. “What’s wrong?”

She took a deep breath. “I’ll be missing pills because that clown stole my birth control. We might not be protected. Sorry. With everything else—”

“You have nothing to feel guilty about. It was my responsibility as well, and I...didn’t think of it, honestly. Did you...want kids?”

It was her turn to hesitate. “I never really thought about it, honestly. I didn’t think I’d be able to find a guy I’d stick with. But...I wouldn’t mind having one or two of my own. I know I’m not great with them, but my sister says it’s different when they’re yours.” She looked into his eyes, deeply serious. “But if it doesn’t come of this, I’m fine not having them, too, if that’s what you’d prefer. I wouldn’t feel like I’m missing out on anything.”

“When Sasha got pregnant, and then with the others, I always hoped someday I could. But if...”

He stalled. She kissed him. “Well, we’ll see what happens. At least it

wouldn't be a terrible oops."

"It would be a lovely surprise, like you were to your parents."

She laughed. "True."

He rolled over and pulled her next to him, putting his arm around her. She settled her head in the hollow of his shoulder and draped as much of her body across him as possible.

"Whatever happens, we'll deal with it together." His voice rumbled through his chest. "I should probably mention that I have the big house you crave. It's not as big as this one, but it is much too big for just me."

"You do strike me as the kind of guy to be materialistic."

"Yes."

She laughed softly and cuddled a little closer. "How much time do we have?"

"I set my alarm. A couple hours, or until Charles comes and beats on the door."

"Are they going to think you are crazy?"

"Not as crazy as they'll think you are. Do you care?"

"No. But they're not my friends."

"They will be." He kissed her forehead, then the tip of her nose, then her lips. "Sweet dreams."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Loud banging on the door had both Jameson and Addison standing in the middle of the room in alarm with bleary eyes and dragging limbs.

“Let’s go, you two,” Charles shouted through the door. “There is fun and merriment to be had out here.”

Jameson released his breath, then started as he looked at his glowing tattoos. Burnished gold with edges of white. He’d gotten a serious power boost from Addison.

“Why are you proud?” she asked sleepily, falling back onto the bed. Then she shouted, “Go away.”

“Fine. But I’m coming back. Hurry up!” Charles said.

“You have a helluva lot of power,” Jameson said.

“Hmm.” Her chest rose and fell, drawing his attention to her perfect breasts.

Unable to resist, he lowered himself over her and licked a budded nipple. He sucked lightly as she softly moaned, moving so he could slip a finger into her wetness while massaging her clit with his thumb.

“My God, you’re good at sex.” She arched lethargically, like the cat she was, and spread her legs. “If it was an Olympic sport, you’d win, hands down.”

“I don’t have nearly the practice Charles has,” Jameson said, moving up her body.

“I’d rather not a man-whore.” She smiled, and then sucked in a breath when he rubbed his tip along her slit.

“I’ve never been this reckless in my life,” he said, resting his chest on

hers. He thrust, burying his shaft to the hilt, then took a moment just to feel her tightness.

“It’s definitely crazy.”

Her legs worked further up his sides, allowing him to push just a bit deeper. He was rewarded with a feminine mew. Her lips grazed against his as he pulled out slowly, savoring the feeling, then thrust back in, hard and fast.

“Wow,” she said breathily. She sucked in his bottom lip.

He withdrew again, before plunging.

“Oh hmmm.” Her eyes fluttered and she dropped her head back. “So good at sex. So, so good.”

“This is pretty basic,” he said with a smile, relishing the warm feeling of devotion pulsing through their link.

“Usually basic is mostly unimpressive.”

“Maybe for shifters.”

She smiled and swung her hips upward. “Shifters don’t drink blood like you do.”

“Anne does. You do.”

“Bad influence.” She moaned as he drove forward, angling her jaw to the side.

Without further prompting, he bent to her neck and bit, immediately rewarded with her sweet taste of potent magic rolling over his tongue. His senses went on high alert. The raw wildness of her taste revved up his heart and sang through his blood.

Soaking in the feeling, he pumped harder, smelling the hot grasses of a plain. Feeling the thrill of the hunt. The joy in stalking prey, then the glory of the final kill. He groaned with the sweet ecstasy of it, a taste and feeling unlike anything one of his kind had ever offered.

“Yes, Jameson,” she said, clinging to him. “Yes. Oh God! Oh!”

She shook with climax. He took another pull, knowing he couldn’t take much more or he’d drain her dry. She shouted again, shaking with another climax. And another, the act of taking blood a continuous barrage of pleasure, like it had been for him earlier.

He released her neck and rolled, pulling her on top of him. Wasting no time, she rose and sat, their bodies smacking together, the sensation overwhelming. Without needing to be prompted, she bent to his neck and ripped into him, gloriously painful, and then unreal pleasure. Cries muffled, she gyrated wildly as his first orgasm took him. He pumped his seed into her

as the sensation tugged on his stomach. Immediately the pleasure built again, so high all he could do was hold on to her as she worked, shaking the bed and making the headboard ram against the wall.

Another climax robbed him of breath. His fingers dug into her back. The pleasure didn't dissipate, though. His cock didn't lose steam. She sucked again, and he nearly blacked out with the waves of intense sensation.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, much too loudly for where they were, and arched backward. Her nails raked down his front as her body shook. He sat up and trapped her in his arms, releasing the certain blend of pheromones that his kind used to mark their mates. He'd done it last night, but he couldn't resist doing it again. If any male so much as looked her way too strongly, rage would overcome him. He knew this.

"You are mine," he said, his voice thick with his primal need.

"Yes," she whispered, her fingers digging into his back now.

They shook against each other, their final climax almost too much to bear. He fell backward, out of steam. She landed on top of him, completely spent.

"I've never come so much," she said, out of breath. "It's exhausting."

"Yes, it is. But I'll rise to the occasion whenever you're ready."

"After food, and in a place with no kids. I don't want to control my volume next time."

"That was you controlling your volume?"

"Yes. When I enjoy sex, I'm not shy about showing it."

He stroked her hair. "I don't know what you're talking about. You were a virgin before you met me."

"Rage is my forte. You're supposed to be the calm one."

"Not where it concerns you."

"Sweet and insane—my kinda man." She kissed him on the forehead. "We better go down. I get the feeling Charles will be back, and this time, he'll barge his way in."

"You already have his number, I'll give you that. That's exactly what he'd do. If it wasn't for Anne, he'd then offer to join in."

She laughed and rolled off him, staggering once she was up. "I'm going to walk bowlegged for a while."

He followed her up, equally shaky, and put on his clothes. As she smoothed her hair, he wrapped his arms around her middle and hugged her close, just breathing her in.

“I feel calmer now than I have...since I can remember.” She leaned back against him, putting her cheek to his. “I feel human.”

“Do shifters lose themselves to their animals?”

“The ones that go rogue do. Actually, rogue shifters take the worst parts of being human, and mix them with the worst parts of their animals. Nature doesn’t torture. Nature doesn’t glory-kill. Animals kill out of necessity. For survival. To eat, or to protect themselves, their mates, or their young. Rogue shifters strip away nature’s checks and balances and put in the underbelly of human nature. It’s the worst kind of thing.”

“What are you saying?”

“That I fight with being rogue every day of my life. The rage, and the violence, and the pain and scars of my past, threaten to take over constantly.”

“So my making you feel human...”

“You’re saving me from myself. You’re protecting me. I don’t have to battle, I just have to look into your logical, calm gaze and find my way back. It’s the best gift anyone could give me.” She turned, tears leaking down her cheeks, and burrowed into him. “So no, this isn’t really crazy for me. This makes sense. I’m lucky to have found you.”

He squeezed her tight. “We all have demons to fight, it’s better to fight them together.”

She nodded into his chest.

Another series of bangs hit their door. “Okay, seriously, you guys, this is getting ridiculous. Poke and go. We’ve got stuff to do.”

Jameson ripped the door open, still shirtless.

Charles stood there with a half-drunk mimosa in hand. “Holy shit, dude. What’s... You got a sort of... Something’s wrong with you, bro. Also, your hair is stupid looking. Almost as stupid looking as your face.”

Jameson stepped forward and punched Charles in the shoulder.

“Ah.” Charles looked at his mimosa, in the opposite hand. “Good call on which shoulder to punch. That was thinking. You smell weird.” Charles’ gaze darted past Jameson, then widened. “Oh. It’s like that. Okay, then.” He stepped back.

“Like what?” Addison asked, stepping around Jameson to lead him out of the door.

Jameson shrugged into his undershirt before putting on his button-up. “He sees that I marked you.”

“I would ask if he told you the full meaning of a mark like that,” Charles

said, “but it’s Jameson. He probably gave you a graph to go with the explanation.”

“Do you ever shut up?” Jameson asked, finally following them out into the hall.

“That’s hurtful,” Charles said, putting his hand to his chest.

“You need to lay off the mimosas.” Jameson pushed Charles out of the way and caught up to Addison. He slipped his arm around her waist.

“No. You need to catch up, son.”

“I need to use the restroom,” Addison said before bending toward him and kissing his jaw. She smiled and ducked away into the bathroom.

“She needs to wipe the makeup off her face,” Charles said, filling in her place. “Made her sweat, huh? Good work, bro. When she sweats, you know she is really into it. Not sweating, and she is faking. Take that to the *bank!*” Charles slapped Jameson’s back.

“Fuck off.”

“Oh, great. You get a woman and suddenly you turn into Jonas. Next thing I know, you’ll be declaring how much you like being spanked.”

“Declaring? What are you, educated?”

“Dude. Go back to no sense of humor. It fits you better.”

Jameson couldn’t help smiling as he entered the kitchen. No one else had joined the party yet, and the early crew all had drinks except for Selene.

“Finally!” Sasha hurried over with a mimosa. “Chug it, then I’ll get you another. We called in more kid help. We’re going to drink to the occasion. Wait.” Sasha stepped back and closed an eye. “What the hell?”

Jameson reached forward and took the mimosa as Anne came forward, sniffing. “I smell the beta on you,” Anne said.

“Anne, don’t be naive. They bumped uglies. Of *course* you smell Addy on him.” Charles finished his mimosa and nudged Sasha with his empty glass.

“Get your own, ingrate,” Jonas said as he leaned against the counter.

“I am a guest, and guests get waited on.” Charles rolled his eyes at Jonas, then offered his glass that way. “Why don’t you do it? Get yourself another while you’re at it. Your personality needs more alcohol.”

Jonas took the glass and headed toward the bar.

“That went better than I expected,” Charles said.

The Boss stepped toward Jameson, assessing. “Anne is right. This isn’t a superficial smell. He has her magical smell.”

“How’d the beta do it?” Anne asked.

“Do what?” Addison asked as she strolled into the room, beautiful and relaxed. Jameson held out his arm, and she filled space between that and his body.

“Oh. Wow. Going all the way, huh?” Paulie said from the far end of the kitchen.

“That makes everyone else *except* for us,” Selene said, crossing her arms and staring at Paulie.

“You marked him with your essence,” Anne said as Paulie stepped forward for a sniff, ignoring Selene’s accusatory stare.

He crinkled his nose. “You smell a little like shifter. Poetic justice for hatin’ on them so hard.” He laughed and handed Addison a drink. “Drink up, you two. Otherwise Charles will be annoying instead of funny.”

“Not even then,” the Boss said.

“I’m hilarious. He knows it.” Charles hooked a thumb the Boss’s way.

“This is not how I imagined the fiercer of your people,” Addison said with a lopsided grin.

“Anne and I have rubbed off on them.” Sasha attempted to wink, but both eyes closed. “C’mon, Addison, I’ll give you a tour of the house. Maybe if you feel comfortable here, Jameson won’t always be in such a hurry to leave.”

Selene and Anne followed them out, with Emmy sneaking after them as well. Leaving all the guys in the kitchen.

Jameson took a sip of his mimosa and waited as everyone shifted and looked at nothing.

Finally it was Charles that broke the ice. “You proposed on the first date, then?”

“I haven’t proposed yet. Just said I’d kill anyone that touched her.”

“Oh, right.” Charles nodded. “So you went the insane jealousy route with it. Gotcha.”

Jonas shrugged. “He wants what he wants.”

“Made me look bad with Selene,” Paulie muttered. “Now she’ll be peppering me to do that claiming thing.”

The Boss pushed away from the counter and passed by, and as he did, he laid a big pat on Jameson’s shoulder. It was his blessing, basically. His approval. It meant a lot.

“Let’s get down to the nitty-gritty.” Charles put out one of his arms. His

tattoos glowed to life, burnished gold—the highest power before white.

Jameson grinned, letting the magic flow through him. The streaks of white showed clearly.

“Shit.” Charles let his magic fade. “And you don’t even have Sasha’s influence to push you higher like I do. That girl is pow-er-ful, yo. I wonder what Tim’s power looks like.”

“It’s a rush, though,” Jameson said softly, glancing the way the women went to make sure he wasn’t overheard. He walked across the kitchen to be closer to the other guys, leaning against the counter. The Boss wandered back as well. “Their magic is intense. More primal than I’ve ever felt, which is saying something.”

“Way more brutal, bro,” Charles said. “Did you let her take yours?”

“Yeah.” Jameson took another sip, hoping he wasn’t defying her trust saying these things. It wasn’t wholly intimate to talk about this subject for his people, but then, his people fucked their way through the mansion in the course of their normal day.

“Did she rip into you like her animal?” Charles asked.

“Yeah.” Jameson rubbed his neck, the marks already healing. His cock twitched.

Charles’ grin said it all.

“So now what?” Jonas asked. “You gotta change your life around for this. It seems too quick.”

Jameson shrugged. “What changes? She moves in with me, we each go to work at about the same time, we come home, the end.”

Everyone looked around, nothing more to offer. Because really, the only thing that would really change in his life was adding someone he couldn’t live without. Giving up other women, or random hookups, was nothing. He didn’t find much pleasure in those, and never really had. They were a release, nothing more.

As far as his house, having someone come through and redecorate, or move things around, or whatever women did, was fine by him. She was a clean, organized sort of person—as long as he could find things, he didn’t care where they were. Bottom line: he now realized he’d been waiting for the right person to share his life. And now he’d found one. An exceptional one, at that. This felt right.

“You guys, come in here!” Anne yelled.

They filed out, each giving Jameson a pat or nudge as they moved along.

In the living room all the larger kids were lying on the ground near the Christmas tree, toys tucked under their arms, sleeping soundly. One of the child minders was holding Charles' baby, also asleep, rocking her gently.

Everyone there broke off into their pairs, the parents looking down on their sleeping children as Christmas music drifted in softly. Addison found Jameson, putting her arms around his middle and smiling up at him. For once, he wasn't the odd man out. And for once, he felt included in the tender family setting in which he found himself.

EPILOGUE

“Where are you?” Jonas asked over the phone.

Jameson stepped out of his SUV at the wooded shifter compound. “Just picking up Addison.”

“Hurry up. Emmy is stressing that the pork will dry out. And grab some ice on your way.”

“Yep.” Jameson clicked off the phone and continued up the driveway. It was New Year’s Eve, and they were expected at Jonas’s house for the evening.

A shifter crossed his path, glancing his way. His eyes met Jameson’s, then widened. Instead of puffing up and getting in his way, like before, this shifter hunched and carried on, nothing to say.

It had been like that since his first night with Addison a week ago. Whenever he was in the vicinity of shifters, they took one look, or a sniff, and hurried on their way. Addison had definitely marked him, and it made his life with the furry critters much easier.

He stood outside the cabin, feeling anxiety coming from his link with Addison. Something was up that hadn’t been a problem yesterday evening when he dropped her off.

He knocked, and got a thrill when she opened the door, looking beautiful, as always. A huge smile crossed her face. “Hey,” she said.

“Ready?” He held out his arm.

“Definitely.” She took it, but the anxiety intensified.

Once in the vehicle and on the way, he said, “What’s up?”

She blew out a breath. “I got my period.”

A tinge of regret ran through him. He'd be terrified if she was pregnant, since he didn't know anything about kids, but on the other hand, he wanted to learn. He wanted that experience with one of his own.

He covered her knee with his hand. "Are you okay?"

"Are *you* okay?" she asked, her eyes on him, the anxiety turning up a notch. "There's the brow furrow. You're disappointed, aren't you?"

"No." He shook off his confusion.

"Truth," she said. "I can feel that you're lying. Which is both a blessing and a curse with this link."

He blew out a breath. "I would've been fine if it was never an issue, but since it was a possibility, I did get attached to the idea. I do want to have kids, but no, I'm not upset that we're not having them right this minute."

"Good. Because I'm up for kids. As soon as I figure them out, I think I could handle it. I mean, why not, right? Your people are all over helping out at a moment's notice. But right now... It's just, I'm new here, and I want to get everything organized before I have to battle an alien inside of me."

He laughed. "Okay. But one thing I won't wait on is you moving in. What's the status?"

She clasped her hands together and sat up straight, ready to give a report. He rolled his eyes, knowing she was making fun of him. "The intruders have not been back, so your assurance that we got them all seems legit. With the new system you helped me put into place, I think that compound is protected, as well as the primary shifter houses in the city. So, after the holiday, I should be all set to find my own permanent residence."

Joy bubbled through him. "And that residence will be...?"

"Yours, yes. And being that your house is a freaking mansion, I won't make you buy a bigger one. I will, however, make you pay for the deep cleaning. Because I'm not doing that. I'm not cooking, either, so hopefully you like takeout."

"I cook. Whoever eats with me cleans up."

She laughed and put her hand on his thigh.

He entwined his fingers with hers. "It's been a week and we don't hate each other. That's a good sign."

"Very good, since as far as our people are concerned, we're mated."

"I love you," he said sincerely, squeezing her hand.

"I love you, too. Thank you for the best Christmas and New Year's gifts I could ever have gotten."

“Is that a sarcastic hint to get you something?”

“I meant you, dummy.”

He waited until they hit a stop sign, and pulled her in for a deep kiss. The honk behind them made her lips curl into a smile. “We better get going or we’re going to be late.”

He kissed her once more and continued on, the happiest he’d ever been.

I have a new paranormal coming out soon, as well as a futuristic thriller.

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The End

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~~

Shanti has grown up under the constant threat of war. Since she helped her people defeat a raiding party by using a special power, she's been a hunted woman. Carrying rare abilities and an uncanny fighting aptitude, Shanti is the only hope of salvation for her people. The problem is, she doesn't believe in her own divinity, and when she flounders, she nearly fails in the duty hanging so heavy on her shoulders.

It seems like any other day when Sanders and his band of misfit boys find a foreign woman clinging to life in the wastelands. Oblivious to the weapon they now have in their possession, they are content to harbor the mysterious woman until she is well enough to continue her journey.

But when the war spreads its arms and lands on her borrowed doorstep, Shanti has no choice but to reveal her secrets, plunging her saviors into danger. If they band with her, they will face certain death. But to trade her to Xandre, the warlord desperate to add her to his war machine, would be to give up their entire way of life.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K.F. Breene is a USA TODAY BESTSELLING author of the Darkness Series and Warrior Chronicles. She lives in wine country where over every rolling hill, or behind every cow, an evil sorcerer might be plotting his next villainous deed while holding a bottle of wine and brick of cheese. Her husband thinks she's cracked for wandering around, muttering about magic and swords. Her kids are on board with her fantastical imagination, except when the description of the monsters becomes too real.

She'll wait until they're older to tell them that monsters are real, and so is the magic to fight them. She wants them to sleep through the night, after all...

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