

# Wicked Stranger



Magic  
and  
Mayhem



Teresa Gabelman

New York Times & USA Today Bestselling Author

# WICKED STRANGER



TERESA GABELMAN

# CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

Foreword

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Afterword

About the Author

Copyright © 2023 by Teresa Gabelman

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is coincidental.

*This book contains content that may not be suitable for young readers 17 and under.*

The Author of this Book has been granted permission by Robyn Peterman to use the copyrighted characters and/or worlds created by Robyn Peterman in this book. All copyright protection to the original characters and/or worlds of the Magic and Mayhem series is retained by Robyn Peterman.

 Created with Vellum

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Once again, thank you so much, Robyn, for allowing me and my characters to come into your wonderful universe. You ROCK!  
To all the readers, thank you so much. Without you, there is no story. Hugs!

## FOREWORD

*Blast Off with us into the Magic and Mayhem Universe!*

I'm Robyn Peterman, the creator of the Magic and Mayhem Series and I'd like to invite you to my Magic and Mayhem Universe.

What is the Magic and Mayhem Universe, you may ask?

Well, let me explain...

It's basically authorized fan fiction written by some amazing authors that I stalked and blackmailed! KIDDING! I was lucky and blessed to have some brilliant authors say yes! They have written brand new stories using my world and some of my characters. And let me tell you...the results are hilarious!

So here it is! Blast off with us into the hilarious Magic and Mayhem Universe. Side splitting books by fantabulous authors! Check out each and every one. You will laugh your way to a magical HEA!

For all the stories, go to <https://magicandmayhemuniverse.com/>. Grab your copy today!

And if you would like to read the book that started all the madness, Switching Hour is FREE!

<https://robynpeterman.com/switching-hour/>



## CHAPTER 1



*R*ania rushed through the forest, her eyes searching for an escape from what hunted her. Her worst nightmare was coming true. She didn't know what it was, but it was huge with teeth. That was all she needed to know to keep her legs pumping. Her high school days of track were coming in handy, and yet she knew she was being toyed with. Whatever was behind her could easily pounce at any time, which made her situation even more terrifying, but Rania's stubbornness and will to live kept her moving.

Feeling her chest tighten to the point she couldn't breathe, she knew she needed a minute before she passed out. Sliding down a small, muddied slope, she crawled toward a fallen log. Scrambling she concealed herself. As quietly as possible, she dragged in much-needed oxygen into her lungs. Cocking her head, she listened for the sounds of her nightmare.

When her car broke down, it had been close to dusk, which made the thick wooded forest dark as night. Pushing her hair from her eyes, she noticed blood on her fingers and cursed silently. Fear that whatever was chasing her would pick up on the scent, she frantically tried to wipe it away, but she didn't know where she was bleeding from.

The cracking of a stick nearby had her freeze to the spot. Holding her breath as her eyes searched the darkness. Out of all the ways she thought she would die, this was definitely not on her list of ways to meet her maker.

A squeal escaped her throat as her phone rang and vibrated in her back pocket. Clumsily, she grabbed it just as she heard the beast pounding through

the thicket toward her hiding place. Jumping up, she took off again as she miraculously answered her phone.

“Please help me!” She wheezed into the phone just as a large branch whacked her in the face, knocking the phone out of her hand. Fighting her way through the thick trees, she knew she was losing the battle. The pounding behind her was getting closer and closer.

Knowing this was her end, she decided that her death would be faced head-on with courage. Swallowing the debilitating fear that almost paralyzed her, she stopped and then turned with such force she stumbled sideways before righting herself.

“Alright, you...you...whatever you are,” Raina screamed in anger, her arms outstretched. “Here I am.” Thoughts of what she still hadn’t accomplished in her twenty-five years flashed through her mind as she waited for her killer to make an appearance. Knowing that she would never have the family...the kids that she had always dreamed of having sent tears of regret rolling down her cheeks, which made her more angry than afraid.

When nothing happened, her eyes scanned the darkness, only seeing the lightning bugs busily flickering through the trees. Everything was silent other than her shuttered breathing. One thing Raina was not was patient. She hated waiting. If it was going to happen, then dammit, let it happen now and get it over with. Despair, fear, and rage overtook her as she began to shake.

Grabbing a stick, she threw it toward the darkness. “Come on, you mangy nasty hunk of fur...butt-licker!” She screamed at the top of her lungs. “You think I’m scared of you? If you’re going to eat me, then fucking do it, and then choke asshole!”

“I’m not that hungry.” A voice to her right had her screaming and jumping away.

“Bruce!” Raina’s eyes popped open wide.

“Raina!” Bruce’s eyes did the same. “What are you doing in the woods, and who are you calling a butt-licker?”

Never had Raina been happier to see anyone in her life. “Something is chasing me.” She said quickly, looking back in that direction but still seeing

nothing. “What are you doing in the woods?”

“Hunting,” Bruce replied, looking up at her, and it still amazed Raina that having a conversation with a cat was now normal to her. “But don’t worry, you’re safe. I don’t eat humans; they leave an aftertaste. No offense.”

“None taken,” Raina replied, looking back toward the darkness hearing movement. She had hoped that maybe Bruce scared the thing off, but then, glancing at Bruce, she realized that he wasn’t the type to put fear into anyone. “But I think we need to get the hell out of here.”

“Seriously, why in the hell didn’t you drive? I know Wicked didn’t give you directions to the house that goes through the damn woods.” Bruce also looked in the same direction cocking his furry head.

“Car broke down,” Raina whispered, squinting at movement she thought she saw in the shadows.

“There’s this device called a phone.” Bruce snorted, taking another step, still searching the darkness.

“Yeah, but without a signal, it’s worthless.” Raina snorted back in a whisper, wondering why they were still standing there waiting to be attacked by whatever in the hell was out there. “Why Wicked decided to move from the city to this desolate place, I will never understand.”

A low rumble sounded through the darkness, making both Bruce and Raina take a step back.

“Did you hear that?” Bruce sidestepped closer to Raina.

“Just keep backing up slowly,” Raina said, not really knowing what to do. The last time she ran, it chased her. “Whatever it is, it likes the hunt.”

“Two or four legs?” Bruce asked, peeking up at her. When she gave him a sideways glance, he rolled his eyes. “What the fuck is it?”

“Four legs like a dog.” Raina frowned down at him.

“A dog?” Bruce shook his head. “We are frozen in fear because of a damn dog. I’ll kick its ass. I’ll claw its eyes out and slice its balls off. I’ve rumbled with more than one dog in my day, and let me tell you, word gets around

about my badassness.”

“It’s bigger than a dog. I was just explaining what it looked like.” Raina’s hair on the back of her neck prickled, and she knew they were being watched.

“Listen, city girl.” Bruce snickered with a catlike smirk. “We don’t raise no little pussy ass ankle biters around here. The ones I’ve tangled with would make your blood run cold.”

“Then why don’t you waddle your badassness into those trees to see if whatever was chasing me is gone?” Raina tossed out, pointing toward the trees.

Bruce snorted, then snorted again as if trying to think of a good comeback. Before he could say a word, a bone-chilling growl came from the trees she was pointing at. They both watched as a huge beast came out of the darkness, its glowing eyes going between the two of them, its head hung low as its golden glare narrowed on Raina.

Raina screamed in terror as Bruce leaped onto her leg, wrapping his four paws around her. His nails bit painfully into her skin through her jeans. Knowing she didn’t stand a chance of escaping, she wondered why in the hell she had just stood there shooting the shit with Bruce instead of demanding he show her the way out of the woods. There were times she would readily admit she made bad choices, and this was definitely one of them.

Trying to back up quickly while a cat has a death grip on your leg was impossible, but she tried. The beast kept watching them with evil eyes, taking one slow step toward them.

“Run, dammit,” Bruce ordered in a harsh whisper.

“Get off my damn leg so I can,” Raina ordered back, but it was too late. Just as she took another step backward, the beast charged toward them, and both Raina and Bruce screamed in terror.

Something rushed past them, knocking Raina sideways, sending her to the ground and out of harm's way. Just as she hit, she watched in complete shock as a man wrapped the beast into his massive arms, taking it to the ground.

## CHAPTER 2



Zane jogged through the forest, letting his mind relax as he worked his body. Running was his outlet and allowed him time to process his day. Coming to Assjacket to help his friend Thorne had been an easy decision. He hadn't seen Thorne in a few years, only communicated through text or a few phone calls. He was happy for his friend, who had found his true mate, had two beautiful children, and an amazing home. Though he was happy for Thorne, it was just a reminder of what Zane would never have in his life, and on very rare occasions, that was a hard pill to swallow. Running helped him cope. At least, that's what he told himself.

His panther was restless, wanting to be let loose to run the forest, but Zane refused, knowing the man needed it more. Thorne and Zane were some of the last panther shifters; mating was important for them, and Zane felt that failure deep in his soul. He would never mate; it wasn't in the cards for him. He had come to terms with it, yet here he was, running, trying to escape the failure he thought he had accepted. He hadn't accepted shit. The man knew it, and so did his panther.

Zane slowed cocking his head to the side as he listened to the sounds around him. Was that a scream he heard? So lost in his own thoughts, he tried to stay alert to the possible dangers around him, but then again, there were times he hoped to run into trouble just to let his rage and frustrations loose.

Coming to a complete stop, he stood still, listening, his keen eyesight searching the area around him. Only being here for close to a month, Zane knew the woods like the back of his hand. It was in his nature, as well as his

panthers, to know the terrain.

A woman's scream mixed with what sounded like a terrified screech had his head snapping toward the direction, and without thought, he took off. His body was rigid and ready for what was to come. His panther raged to be set free, but Zane ignored it, knowing that whatever lay ahead was something he, the man, would settle no matter what it was. The man needed it for release.

Slowing, he came to a stop, knowing he was close, yet he didn't exactly know which direction to go. Hearing the snapping underbrush of the forest floor, his eyes narrowed toward the sound. Silently he crept forward toward the thickness of the trees, letting the eyesight of his panther take over so he could see in the darkness.

He caught sight of movement. A woman stood with her back to him with Bruce, that fucking talking cat, hanging to her left leg like a second skin. She took a step back, and he could see the shaking of her body. She was terrified, but of what, he wasn't sure. His panther began to vibrate inside him, its roar of rage screaming inside his head. Looking past her, Zane saw the larger-than-normal wolf staring at the woman as if she were his next tasty meal. Its head hung low, swinging slowly back and forth as its golden eyes stayed on the woman. Zane knew exactly what that meant. The wolf was toying with its prey before the attack. Not on his fucking watch. Zane prepared himself to counter the wolf's move, his focus solely on the wolf until the woman's head turned, giving him a profile of her face. The intense feeling of protectiveness hit so hard that his legs buckled, and a low snarl escaped his throat.

Zane was so taken aback by what just happened he almost missed the sudden movement of the wolf. Knowing he didn't have time to shift, Zane took off, knocking the woman out of danger's way. Barely making it in time, Zane leaped, grabbing the beast and taking it to the ground.

The wolf was strong, but Zane easily overpowered him, even in human form. He quickly glanced to ensure the woman was a safe distance away, and that small moment of distraction was all the wolf needed to clasp onto his forearm with its massive teeth.

"Shit!" Zane cursed, knowing he couldn't just rip his arm out of the bastard's mouth without tearing his arm to shreds. Before he could use his other arm to

knock the wolf out, a loud scream filled the air just as a huge log smashed it upside the head, sending pieces of wood flying everywhere.

“Oh my God!” The woman gasped as he pried the wolf’s mouth open to release his arm. “Here.” She knelt beside him, and the knocked-out wolf ripping a strip of her shirt. Gently taking his arm, she examined it before quickly applying pressure to stop the bleeding. Zane kept one eye on her and the other on the wolf, making sure he wasn’t waking up.

Her touch sent vibrations through his body, making him jerk his arm away. “What in the hell are you doing in the middle of the woods?”

“You’re still bleeding.” She replied, ignoring his question. She tried to grab his arm again, but he moved it further back, avoiding her touch. Her light blue eyes rose to his, and a frown formed on her full lips. “I’m trying to help you.”

“I don’t need your help.” His voice was harsh, but he didn’t care. Her touch unnerved him like nothing ever had, and his panther was clawing to be set free. This woman was dangerous in so many ways that the best thing he could do was to get up and walk away. Instead, he stood glaring down at her.

“Ah, you’re welcome.” She shot back, also standing, the top of her head barely reaching his chin. “I was just trying to keep you from bleeding to death.”

“I’m good.” He tried to lighten his voice, not make it so harsh, and then he noticed the scratches on her face, becoming instantly concerned. “Did the wolf scratch you?”

“What?” She frowned, looking confused.

“Your face.” He ordered, grasping her chin against his better judgment to turn her face more toward him so he could observe the scratches better. “Did it scratch you?” Once again, his voice turned harsh to the point of anger.

Smacking his hand away, she glowered at him. “No, it did not.”

“Okay, kids.” Bruce stepped in, giving them both sideways glances. “Let’s play nice.”

“Shut up, Bruce.” They both said at the same time as they glared at each other.

“You know him?” They asked each other at the same time.

“Everyone knows me because I’m the shit,” Bruce answered for them both.  
“Raina, Zane. Zane, Raina.”

Neither of them acknowledged each other with a greeting but continued to glare at each other.

“With that out of the way, can we please decide what to do with the waking beast that tried to eat Raina and me?” Bruce snorted in disgust.

Zane quickly glanced away from those blue eyes to see the wolf moving. Without thought, he fisted his hand, knocking the beast out again. “Problem solved,” Zane mumbled, then took out his phone and texted something before putting it back in his pocket. He then glanced back at Raina with a smirk.

“You’re welcome.” He said just as sarcastically as she had just done.



## CHAPTER 3



Raina sat on a log, quietly watching the strange man who had just saved her and Bruce's life. He was handsome in an outdoorsy kind of way, but his manners were absolutely horrid. His black hair hung past his shoulders; the cut of his hair was wildly uneven, hanging in his face, and if she was being honest, it worked. She had noticed the left side of his square jawline was terribly scarred, with one jagged deep groove going up to the corner of his silver-colored eye. And his eyes, she had to admit, were mesmerizing. Raina had never seen eyes that color, and his lashes were something most women paid for, long and black. Holy crap, this rude ass man was sinfully handsome.

"What in the hell are you doing out in the middle of the woods alone?" He growled, snatching her attention away from his good looks and back to his bad manners.

"My car broke down, and I couldn't get a signal on my phone, so I started walking." Raina started to explain, then frowned. "Wait a minute. I don't have to explain myself to you."

"That ain't nothing," Bruce said with a roll of his eyes, then pointed his paw at her. "She was daring that huge furball with teeth to eat her. Then hoped it would choke and—"

"Bruce," Raina warned, but knew Bruce would ignore her.

"Called it a mangy nasty hunk of fur butt-licker." Bruce finished with a cat-like grin.

Raina looked at him, surprised. “You heard that?”

“Yeah, and I was impressed.” Bruce gave her a nod of approval.

Rolling her eyes, Raina caught what she thought was a grin on the man’s face as he stared at her.

“You got a death wish?” The man Bruce introduced as Zane snarled at her. Okay, she had thought wrong. No way that there had been a smile on the man’s face. She doubted he even knew how to smile.

“I live in New York. Every day is like having a death wish though the evil there isn’t as...furry.” Raina glanced down at the still knocked-out wolf, then back at Zane where, once again, she thought she saw a hint of a grin.

“Did you text Thorne?” Bruce asked, poking the wolf with his paw.

“Yeah,” Zane replied, finally glancing away from Raina to look down at the wolf. “He look familiar?”

“Nope.” Bruce walked around the wolf, staring down at him but staying far enough away just in case it woke up. “Definitely a Shifter though.”

Raina also looked down at the wolf. She knew all about the paranormal world. Having a friend like Wicked, she learned a lot of things and was relieved to learn that the Boogie Man was still just a way for parents to scare their kids, which seemed a tad bit morbid.

Zane’s eyes shot to hers. “Bruce.” He warned.

“Ah, Raina knows all about us,” Bruce said, then snorted. “I think if she didn’t, she’d be freaking the hell out by a talking cat, don’t ya think? She’s a friend of Wicked.”

“You’re a witch?” Zane glanced at her, looking her up and down, which weirdly sent goosebumps up and down her body. Those eyes of his were very dangerous.

“Some would say that.” Raina snorted, then shook her head. “No, I’m just a plain boring human.”

This time Bruce was the one snorting. “Boring is not a word I would use to

describe you, and some could definitely say she has a little...*witch* in her.”

Raina started to disagree with Bruce but grinned. “True.” She agreed with a chuckle. Hearing the distant ringing of a phone made Raina gasp. “My phone.” Raina's eyes widened as she headed toward the sound but was stopped by Zane’s strong grip on her arm.

“I will get your phone as soon as Thorne gets here,” Zane grumbled as if that was the last thing he wanted to do. One thing about Raina was she didn’t like to be a burden to anyone, especially grumpy ass men who didn’t know how to appreciate someone trying to help them.

“Don’t do me any favors,” Raina grumbled back, snapping her arm away from his grasp. “I am capable enough to get it myself.”

Zane stepped in front of her. “I said wait.”

“And I said—”

Bruce once again stepped between them. “I’ll get the damn thing.” He started to walk toward the phone that was still ringing in the distance. “Oh, wait. I don’t have opposable thumbs. Sorry.” He held up his paws as if proving his point.

Raina rolled her eyes at Bruce’s antics. “And here I thought I missed you.”

“You love me.” Bruce countered back with a cheeky grin.

“Don’t press your luck, Bruce.” Raina snorted as she turned back to the direction of her phone but was once again stopped by Zane, who was glaring down at her. “Excuse me.” At least she was polite, though she did add a sneer to her words.

Zane didn’t respond; he just stood there blocking her path with his tall, muscular body wrapped in light ripped blue jeans and a tight black t-shirt that hugged his body like a second skin. Wow, she thought, trying not to drool as she glared at him. Too damn bad his personality didn’t match his handsome looks. He may be candy to the eyes, but his sour disposition certainly didn’t wow her.

“Listen, mister.” Raina felt her anger boil to the surface. She definitely hated

being told what to do, but a ringing phone...her phone...drove her absolutely crazy. "Obviously, someone is trying to get in touch with me, so I need to get to my phone."

Zane was staring at her like she had lost her mind, which wasn't far from the truth; she had lost her mind years ago. "Did you happen to forget while you were tromping through the woods, you almost got yourself killed?"

"And did you happen to forget I live in New York and tromp through that jungle every day?" Raina snorted at her own joke, then looked down at the wolf, who was beginning to move, and frowned. "Is there more of those out there?"

"Possibly." Was all Zane replied. His hair had fallen over the scarred side of his face, making him look even more handsome, if that was at all possible.

"Fine." She sighed and then glanced at Bruce. "Come on."

"Huh?" Bruce stopped licking his paw, looking up at her.

"Come with me so I can get my damn phone." Raina frowned at Zane before looking back at Bruce.

"And you think a cat is going to protect you from a wolf? Wasn't Bruce clinging to your leg in terror when I came up on you two?" Zane asked with an unbelieving smirk.

"Hey!" Bruce looked offended, then shrugged. "Actually, he's right. I almost shit myself. I don't think I can control it again, and cleaning shit out of my fur is not on my list of things to do tonight."

"Cleaning shit out of your fur is on your list of things to do?" Zane cocked his visible eyebrow at Bruce.

"Ask your panther how hard that is." Bruce gave Zane a narrowed glance. "It's definitely on the list."

Raina watched a genuine smile light Zane's face, and the transformation was unreal and very unnerving. Her heart pounded in her chest as the rest of her body throbbed with a need she hadn't felt in a very long time. Yeah, this visit was going to have to be shorter than she had intended. Glancing once again at

his smile, straight white teeth encased by full lips had her itching to taste his mouth. Damn, she was in deep trouble.

## CHAPTER 4



Zane was doing his best to ignore Raina, but she was hard to ignore. As the breeze picked up, strands of her light blonde hair landed on her face. His hand itched to brush it away from the perfection of her cheek. He wanted to see if her skin felt as soft as it looked. Women like her were the type he usually stayed clear of. They found him handsome until they caught sight of his scars. He was used to his disfigurement by now, as well as the rejection it brought, and yet, this woman didn't seem fazed by his scars. She saw them, he knew, but instead of looking uncomfortably away, making excuses to get away from him as quickly as possible, she just stood toe to toe with him, looking him straight in the eyes. He was good at spotting disgust, but he saw none staring back at him.

"What the hell is going on?" Thorne's voice broke through his thoughts.

"Raina?" Wicked squealed, rushing past him and hugging Raina. "What in the world happened? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Raina laughed with a huge smile. "Man, it's so good to see you. I've missed you all so much."

"What's not to miss?" Bruce puffed his chest out, looking proud.

"Shifter?" Thorne was asking, gaining their attention. Zane glanced at them before looking back at Thorne. "Yeah. No wolves around here grow that big."

"True," Thorne said, then cursed. "Why don't you take your friend to the

house, Wicked? I need to call Mac, and then we will be there.”

“So, you’re Thorne,” Raina said cocking her eyebrow, looking Thorne up and down, which irritated Zane more than he cared to admit. What the actual hell was wrong with him?

“And you’re the infamous Raina Rayne.” Thorne chuckled with a nod.

“The one and only.” She laughed, then gave Thorne a hug. “It’s finally nice to meet the man who swept Wicked off her feet. I always told her you were out there somewhere.”

“You’ve got it all wrong. It was her that swept me off my feet.” Thorne pulled away, giving Wicked a wink before looking down at Raina. “And it’s finally nice to meet you. I’ve heard a lot of things...” He smirked without finishing his sentence.

“Oh, I bet you have.” Raina finished for him and then grinned. “But I bet Wicked left out some very interesting stories.”

“Enough of that.” Wicked cut her off quickly. “How about telling us how in the hell you ended up in the woods? And where is your car?”

“It’s broken down out there somewhere, and I was trying to get service, so I started walking,” Raina explained with a frown. “Cell service here sucks.”

Just as she said that, her phone began to ring once again in the distance. Wicked cocked her eyebrow. “I take it that’s your phone ringing?”

“Yeah, smartass, it is.” Raina turned to go after it, but Wicked stopped her.

“Here.” Wicked held her phone out to her.

“Oh, yeah.” Raina laughed, shaking her head. “I forgot you’re a witch with tricks.”

Zane was still a little confused about who this woman was, but before he could think more about it, the wolf began to wake. “Why don’t you guys go ahead and leave before it wakes all the way up.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Bruce said as he walked toward Raina and Wicked.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” Zane growled, glaring at Bruce.

“Don’t care,” Bruce said, stopping by Wicked. “My list is almost complete for the day, and I’m not adding shit to it...and I do mean that literally.”

Before Zane could say anything else, Wicked, Raina, and Bruce vanished. “You get used to it.” Thorne chuckled at the look on Zane’s face.

“What? Bruce or people appearing and disappearing in front of my eyes?” Zane grumbled and looked away from the empty space Raina had been to look at Thorne, who was watching him closely, too closely. “Can you ever get used to a talking cat?” Zane asked, his eyes narrowed slightly, waiting for that answer.

“Good point.” Thorne chuckled and then nudged the wolf, who was making whimpering noises. “What the fuck did you do to him?”

“What I didn’t do is kill him.” Zane countered with a shrug. “Figured you and Mac needed to question him on why he is terrorizing humans, female humans at that.”

“You figured right,” Mac said as he and Zelda appeared suddenly.

Not much startled Zane, but people appearing and disappearing in front of his eyes took some getting used to. Yeah, he was a Shifter, but this witch stuff was sometimes a little too much. Mac was King of the Shifters and a fair man. His mate/wife Zelda was the Shifter Whisperer or Shifter Wanker as she liked to be called. She was beautiful and very sweet unless you pissed her off or messed with her Shifters.

“Hi, Zane.” Zelda greeted him and then looked down at the wolf with a frown. “He’s definitely a Shifter.”

“What happened?” Mac asked, looking first at Thorne, then back to Zane.

“I was doing a run, heard a scream.” Zane began to explain. “I found Raina —”

“Raina?” Zelda frowned, glancing at Thorne. “Wicked’s friend?”

“She was coming for a visit and had car trouble,” Thorne explained, then nodded for Zane to continue.

“I found Raina and Bruce here.” Zane then glanced toward where the wolf



had been. “Just as I was registering what was happening, the wolf made his move, and I made mine. He lost.”

“Obviously.” Zelda glanced down at the wolf. “Does he look familiar?” She asked, looking up at Mac.

“No.” Mac frowned, nudging the wolf again. “Transport us. I’ll question him and find out who he is and what he is doing here. I’ll keep you guys posted.”

“You need help?” Thorne asked as Mac put his foot on the wolf’s side so Zelda could transport them.

“I’ve got it,” Mac assured him with a nod. “I’ll come by later and let you know what I found out.”

“Sounds good,” Thorne replied just as Mac and the wolf disappeared.

“Is Raina okay?” Zelda asked with a concerned frown.

“A few scratches, but that’s it,” Zane answered, not looking directly at Zelda. She always stared at his scars when they showed, but not in a disgusted way. It was just uncomfortable for him, though he knew she didn’t mean anything by it. Honestly, he couldn’t fault anyone looking at the mess that was his face. She had asked him once if he wanted her to try to use her magic to fade the scars. He had refused the offer.

“The wolf didn’t scratch her, did it?” Zelda looked instantly concerned as their eyes met. “A wolf scratch or bite can be deadly, especially to a human.”

He shook his head, causing his hair to hide more of his face. “No. Most likely from her running through the thick brush.”

“Okay, good.” Zelda nodded, then looked at Zane’s arm, which was still oozing blood. Lifting her hand, she muttered a few words as a colorful fog enveloped his arm. Right before his eyes, the wound was gone. “Wolf bites, even for Shifters, is a dangerous thing.”

“Thank you,” Zane said with an appreciative smile.

“You’re welcome.” Zelda patted his arm, then turned toward Thorne. “Tell Wicked I’ll be over to meet this Raina. Heard some crazy stories about that one.”

Before Thorne could say anything, Zelda was gone in a flash of colorful glitter. Zane just shook his head at the display. In the past, witches that Zane had run-ins with weren't as nice or as beautiful as Zelda and Wicked.

"I still can't believe you mated with a witch," Zane muttered his thoughts out loud.

Thorne just laughed, then checked his watch. "Come on, let's go find Raina's car," Thorne said, ignoring Zane's comment. "Did she say where it was?"

"No," Zane said as he started toward the thick forest.

"Well, do you have the keys?" Thorne followed, sounding irritated.

"No," Zane began retracing Raina's route through the woods. He and his panther were excellent trackers.

"Well, shit," Thorne grumbled, also studying the ground. Both men were alert to their surroundings. "You still good at hotwiring cars?"

Zane grinned, but before he could answer, something caught his eye. Reaching down, he picked up a set of keys and held them up. "Guess we won't be finding out."

"Now that's luck," Thorne said with a nod. "Wonder if she even knows she lost them. She must have been terrified."

Just the thought of Raina being afraid of something set him off; a growl that was a mixture of panther and male rumbled in his throat. Seriously, what in the hell was happening to him? Thorne's laughter clued Zane in that he had heard his reaction.

"So, what do you think of Raina?" Thorne asked, trying to sound innocent, but failed miserably.

"Fuck you, Thorne," Zane growled, his stride quickening. The faster he found the car, the faster he could be alone to figure out his thoughts. Alone was when he was at his best.

## CHAPTER 5



*R*aina stumbled once they were transported to Wicked's home. "Man, I hate when you do that."

"Beats walking." Wicked chuckled, leading Raina into the kitchen. "Come on and help me get dinner started."

"Is this how you greet all your guests?" Raina snorted as she followed, her eyes scanning how beautiful Wicked's home was. "Making them cook their own dinner. Why not twirl that finger of yours and conjure up something like you've always done?"

Wicked turned to look at Raina. "I've missed you." Wicked reached out, hugging her. "It's been too long."

Raina hugged her back, feeling tears burning the back of her eyes. "Yeah, it has been."

"Oh, you're back." A woman's voice broke them apart. She looked first at Wicked and then at Raina. "You must be Raina. Wicked has been so excited and has told me so much about you."

"All good, I hope." Raina teased, smiling back at the older woman who reminded her of a cool younger grandma type.

"Of course." She chuckled. "I'm Linda."

"Linda watches the twins for me." Wicked informed her with a huge grin. "She is amazing, and I don't know what I would do without her."

“Oh, where are they?” Raina asked excitedly. She couldn’t wait to meet Jamison and Rose. To this point, she had only seen pictures and a few videos that Wicked had sent her.

Linda frowned. “I’ve already put them to bed. I wasn’t sure when you’d be back, and well, they were getting cranky.”

Wicked glanced at the disappointment on Raina’s face. “Don’t worry, you’ll see them bright and early in the morning.”

“Fine.” Raina sighed, then cocked her eyebrow. “Can’t I just go wake them up for a little while?”

“No!” Both Wicked and Linda said at the same time.

Raina laughed, shaking her head. “Just kidding.”

“Those two are precious but a handful, and when they go down for the night, you don’t wake them,” Linda said as Wicked nodded in agreement. “You two enjoy your night. I’m late for Bingo.”

Raina smiled as Linda made a quick exit. “She seems nice.”

“She is an angel.” Wicked agreed, then sighed, looking around the kitchen. “Maybe I will twirl my finger when the guys get back. I’m tired and want to catch up with you. Come on, let me get us a beer, and we’ll go out back and catch up.”

“Sounds great, but I guess I need to find a way to get my car here.” Raina frowned, taking out her phone. “What’s the closest towing company around here? You do have a towing service in this place, don’t you?” Raina frowned, glancing at Wicked.

“This may not be New York, but yes, we have a towing company.” Wicked snorted, handing her a beer, then headed toward the back of the house with Raina following. “And don’t worry about it. Thorne and Zane will take care of getting your car here.”

Raina was relieved to hear that because, honestly, she didn’t have enough money to have it fixed, let alone towed. Raina sat in a wicker chair, sinking into the softness of the cushion. Her eyes roamed the house from the outside,

and she sighed. “You have a beautiful home, Wicked. I’m so happy for you.” Raina said, her gaze meeting Wicked’s. “You deserve this and more.”

“I’m happy. Really happy.” Wicked admitted. Raina had never seen Wicked at such peace.

Even though a week didn’t go by that they didn’t speak on the phone or text, Raina had missed Wicked. They had started out as enemies, but after learning the man they were both seeing was playing them, they became fast friends and made the asshole pay for using them. It wasn’t a loss for either of them because Jacob was a total loser. His only attributes were how handsome he was, and he was damn good in bed. Seemed like those types of men that weren’t losers were few and far between.

Wicked was very lucky to have found her forever guy. She, on the other hand, was still looking but was seriously about to give up because she had shit luck when it came to men. Her last experience taught her some very hard lessons. Maybe she was destined to be alone for the rest of her life.

“So, what are you running from, Raina?” Wicked’s question surprised Raina so much that she was at a loss for words, which never happened.

“Ah, what do you mean?” Raina tried not to stutter; her eyes shifted away from Wicked’s knowing stare.

“I have been trying to get you down here ever since I left New York, even tried to bribe you or zap you here myself,” Wicked said, taking a drink of her beer, then sat up, leaning toward her. “Then, out of the blue, you text me asking for directions. That was a day ago, which means you left New York way before you sent me that text.”

Damn, Raina frowned, trying to think of something. The less Wicked knew, the better. She wasn’t going to be here long, couldn’t be here long, and didn’t want to involve her friend in her mess. “Well.” Raina started trying to think fast. “I wanted to surprise you and then realized I didn’t know your address, only the town.”

Wicked stared at her way too long before glancing behind Raina. Turning, Raina saw Thorne and Zane heading their way. Relief was swift, thinking that she had been saved. Turning back around, her gaze met Wicked’s

narrowed one.

“Bullshit.” Wicked pointed at her, then stood up but continued to glare at her. “We will finish this after dinner.”

Thankfully, Thorne took Wicked’s attention away from herself. Raina slowly stood, turning her gaze to meet Zane. Their eyes met, and she was the first to look away just as her phone rang. Glancing at it, she quickly swiped, ending the call abruptly. Feeling eyes on her, she looked back up to see Zane staring first at her phone and then to her with a frown.

“Spam call.” She replied, not really knowing why she said anything at all. Maybe because she made such a big deal about getting her ringing phone in the woods and she was now ignoring calls which looked a little suspicious. Her phone began to ring again, this time gaining everyone’s attention. Glancing at it, she didn’t recognize the number but had a feeling she knew exactly who it was. Again, she ignored the call with a swipe. “Persistent.” She said with a shrug, then turned toward Wicked, who was watching her closely.

“We found your car.” Thorne broke the uncomfortable silence. “We are having it towed here. Looks like you are going to need a new transmission.”

Raina’s stomach rose to her throat at the news. “How long will that take and how much do you think that’s going to be?” She needed her car, though if she was being honest, she was surprised it made it this far. It was a piece of crap.

“I’ll know more tomorrow after I call for the parts. Zane said he can fix it so he can give you a price and a timeframe.” Thorne replied, nodding toward Zane. “And the tow is free. The guy owes me one.”

“Oh.” Raina glanced at Zane, who was staring at her. “Okay. I appreciate it. Thank you.” Maybe coming here had been a bad idea, but she had wanted to see Wicked before she disappeared.

“You in a hurry?” Wicked asked, and Raina knew by her look that she knew something was definitely wrong. Raina never did anything without a plan, and leaving her business was something she would never do without a very good reason.

“Actually, I am,” Raina answered honestly. She hated to lie, and maybe she

should just come clean with Wicked. Maybe they could give her some advice. Then again, the less they knew, the safer everyone would be.

## CHAPTER 6



Zane could read people, and Raina was an open book. He knew nothing at all about her, but her ignoring calls after throwing a fit about her phone earlier sent red flags flying. He also noticed her hand shaking as she looked to see who was calling. She was afraid and trying her best to hide it but was failing miserably.

“Listen,” Thorne said, turning to Wicked. “I don’t want you or the twins outside alone until we hear from Mac. We don’t know if this was just a lone wolf or if there is a pack. I also don’t want Linda walking here. If she needs a ride, I will make sure she gets here.”

“Okay.” Wicked nodded with a frown. “Did Mac recognize it?”

“No,” Thorne replied, glancing at his phone. “He’s supposed to call or show up. He probably doesn’t know anything yet.”

“I bet he’s a loner,” Bruce said, walking up and joining into the conversation.

“What makes you say that?” Zane spoke for the first time.

“Because most packs know better than to mess with Zelda’s area,” Bruce said with a knowing look. “Assjacket is Zelda’s town, and anyone who messes with Zelda messes with Mac. Big mistake.”

“True.” Wicked frowned, then sighed. “It’s always something. Trouble seems to always show up here.”

Zane watched Raina look away from Wicked as she spoke those words. Her



eyes looked down at her phone before she put it in her back pocket. If she was trying to hide the worried look on her face, she wasn't doing a very good job. There was something not quite right with this woman. He glanced at Wicked to see her also watching Raina's reaction. He wasn't the only one thinking the same thing.

"Okay, let's get something to eat." Wicked said, leading them to the kitchen. "I slaved over a hot stove all day preparing this meal."

Both Raina and Bruce snorted at the same time. "Yeah, I bet you're so worn out from twirling that finger." Raina chuckled, shaking her head.

"I forgot how much I missed you." Bruce chuckled, walking beside her. Zane followed, his eyes not missing the sway of Raina's hips as she climbed the few steps into the house.

"Like what you see?" Thorne mumbled up to him with a huge, toothy grin.

"It's been a while since I punched you in the mouth," Zane mumbled back with a growl.

Thorne cocked his eyebrow, then laughed. "Been a while since I beat your sorry ass."

Zane stopped, hearing Raina's phone go off again. He watched as she quickly checked, swiped, and then put it back in her pocket before entering the house.

"What do you make of that?" Thorne asked, watching Zane closely.

"Not sure, but she was very anxious to get her phone back and now ignoring the calls seems strange to me," Zane responded with thought. He had a gut feeling, and usually, those feelings were dead on. "How well do you know her?"

"I don't," Thorne replied with a frown. "Only what Wicked has told me, but that was usually just things they had done. She and Wicked opened up a tattoo place together years ago before Wicked came here. They have been close friends for a long time. I do know that Wicked was shocked when Raina texted her asking for our address and that she was going to make a visit."

“A visit, huh?” Zane glanced his way after staring at the ground in deep thought. “It looks like she has been living in her car.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Thorne agreed, then sighed. “I don’t think the wolf is tied to anything with her other than the wrong place at the wrong time. I’ll talk to Wicked and see if she knows anything. Should be hearing from Mac soon.”

Zane nodded, following Thorne inside his eyes automatically finding Raina sitting at the table listening to Wicked. That overwhelming feeling of wanting to protect this woman hit him hard as he watched her play with her food. Her phone sat next to her, lying face down, but he could see it light up, meaning she was getting either a call or a text. He realized she had switched it to silent, and yet her eyes flickered to the phone every time it lit up.

“Get yourself something to eat, Zane.” Wicked drew his attention away from Raina.

“I’ll get me a plate soon,” Zane said with a nod to Wicked before his eyes went back to Raina. Their gazes met and held. “How long did it take you to drive here from New York?” Zane surprised himself by asking, but something wasn’t right, and not only was not knowing driving him crazy, but his panther was more restless than he’d ever been. Something wasn’t adding up, and he was determined to find out what it was. Why he needed to know so badly was a mystery to him.

Raina just stared at him, and he could see that behind those beautiful eyes, she was trying to figure out how to answer because as surprised as he was at asking that question, she seemed just as surprised to be asked.

“Oh, ah, I don’t know. I took my time and stopped a few places.” Raina avoided directly answering the question.

“When did you leave?” Thorne continued the questioning.

Raina shifted in her chair, putting her fork down before glancing at Wicked and then back to Thorne. “What does that matter?”

“When did you leave?” Thorne asked her again, but in a harder tone, ignoring her question.

“Thorne. What is wrong with you?” Wicked warned with a frown, then glared at Zane. “Both of you are being extremely rude?”

“Don’t care,” Thorne said, then glanced at Raina and sighed. “A wolf Shifter running around loose threatening women—”

“And handsome cats,” Bruce added with a nod.

“is something I don’t take lightly.” Thorne finished looking from Wicked to Raina. “I apologize if my questioning you is rude, but I need to know if you are connected in some way with this new threat.”

The look on Raina’s face said it all, and Zane’s body vibrated with rage as he stared at the defeat as well as fear on Raina’s face. His rage was in no way directed toward her but on who or what threatened her.

## CHAPTER 7



Raina wanted to throw up what little food she was able to swallow. This had been a huge mistake. “I shouldn’t have come,” Raina whispered, but everyone heard her. She then looked at Thorne. “And there is no connection with me and that wolf thing.”

“Shifter,” Bruce informed her, then shrugged his shoulder when Wicked glared at him. “Well, if she is going to be around, she needs to know Shifters are not things.”

“Bruce, believe me when I say I get Shifters.” Raina narrowed her eyes at him. “What I don’t get is mouthy shit-talking cats.”

“Touché,” Bruce snorted with raised eyebrows, then stretched himself out on the floor with a huge yawn as if bored with the conversation.

“Raina, I know you as well as I know myself. You would not leave New York, let alone the business, if you weren’t running from something.” Wicked ignored Bruce as she continued to watch Raina closely.

Raina sighed and felt her body slump in defeat. “I lost the business.”

“Excuse me?” Wicked frowned, looking a little shocked. “Raina. No.”

“Yeah, it’s gone. Everything I own is in my car.” Raina said, then noticed Thorne and Zane glance at each other. “As I’m sure you both saw.”

“Yes, we figured.” Thorne nodded, his frown hard and serious. “What I need to know is if my family is in danger?”

When Raina didn't answer right away, Thorne cursed, causing Raina to cringe. "I don't think so," Raina stood slowly, realizing what a huge mistake she had made coming here.

"That isn't good enough," Thorne growled loudly, making Raina jump.

"Damn, Thorne." Bruce glared at Thorne. "Chill out. Raina isn't the enemy here. If she's in trouble, we are all she has."

Glancing at Wicked, her eyes filled with tears. "I'm so sorry, Wicked. I shouldn't have come." Not wanting to lose her shit in front of everyone, Raina dashed past Thorne and Zane out the closest door.

Raina heard the raised voices as she jogged away from the house. She needed to get herself together, but the tears fell angrily down her face. What in the hell had she been thinking? Thorne was right. She was putting not only Wicked and Thorne in danger but their beautiful children.

Slowing, she looked toward the woods, then toward the road, trying to decide where to go. That was the problem. She had nowhere to go and no way to get there. Her life had become a mess; she had lost everything, and now she had lost the only person on earth who cared about her.

Coming to a complete stop, she glanced at the woods again, swiping angrily at the tears that wouldn't stop. Damn it, she hated to cry.

"With your recent history of the woods, I wouldn't go that way." Zane's voice came from behind her.

"Maybe that's exactly the way I should go." Raina snorted, then sniffed with a shrug. "Save everyone the trouble."

A strong hand gripped her arm, turning her around. Zane stared down at her; his eyes narrowed. "You don't seem like the kind of woman who pities herself or circumstances."

Raina sighed not proud of having a moment of weakness in front of this man. "I'm not." She replied, blowing a strand of hair out of her eyes. "Haven't you ever just been so tired that nothing seems worth it anymore?"

Zane stared into her eyes for a long time as if searching for something. He

remained silent, which had her looking away from him.

“Just me?” Raina said with a sarcastic edge. “Okay.”

“Every day.” Zane’s deep voice vibrated through her body as her gaze snapped back to his.

Her eyes searched his, then dropped to his scars, understanding his words completely. “Scars don’t make a man, Zane.”

“And trouble doesn’t make you a runner when you have people who will help you.” He countered back, raising one eyebrow.

A small smile tipped her lips as she looked away from him. “Point taken.” She said, then glanced at the woods again. “But sometimes running may be the only avenue a person has. I don’t really know what or who I am dealing with, only that I have been given to someone.”

“Given to someone?” Zane growled, his eyes darkened, making him look even more handsome, if that was possible. “What do you mean, given to someone?”

“It’s complicated.” Raina sighed, wanting to tell him more than anything, and yet, didn’t want to bring anyone into her fucked up reality.

“Don’t care,” Zane answered with a growing frown. “Either you tell me, or I answer whoever is calling you and find out myself. The choice is yours.”

“Why?” Raina asked, confused as to why this complete stranger would want to know anything about her.

“Why what?” Zane replied to her question with a question.

“Do you care?” Raina felt tears burn the back of her eyes again. It had been a very long time since anyone gave a shit about her, and well, damn, she was liking the feeling. Then again, she had most definitely read people wrong, thinking they cared when, in fact, they did not.

“Because if any of my friends are in danger, I take that very seriously,” Zane answered without hesitation.

“Oh.” She whispered, feeling a deep disappointment that surprised her. Of

course, he was worried about Thorne and Wicked, as well as the kids. What did she expect him to say to her, a stranger who possibly brought the trouble in the first place? That he was concerned about her welfare? Man, she was a fool. “As you should. Which is why I need to leave. That will solve the issue.”

“No, it will not,” Zane answered, his voice hard. “You will still be in danger, and that issue I will personally see taken care of.”

Never in her life had Raina felt like running into someone’s arms to take refuge, and here she was fighting herself not to do just that with this beautiful, scarred man. Tears burst through as her body began to shake, and she totally lost her shit in front of the one person she didn’t want to lose her shit in front of. All the fear, confusion, and total helplessness at her situation all came screaming out of her, and she was at a loss on how to stop it. All she wanted to do was crawl into the safety of this stranger’s arms and escape it all.

## CHAPTER 8



Usually, Zane was at a loss when women fell apart in front of him. The very first thing that would cross his mind was to get the hell out and let someone else take care of whatever issue the woman had, but Raina was different. The moment he saw her profile, the instant feeling of protecting this woman hit him like a force he had never felt before and was only getting stronger every minute.

Instead of running like he usually did, he reached out and took her in his arms. He held her against him as she cried, her body shaking against his. Zane's rage at whoever put her in this state had him and his panther foaming at the mouth to find them and make them pay. He knew exactly what this meant, had seen it so many times, and never thought he would find it himself. She was his mate.

Her being human was only one of the many complicating factors of her being his mate. His scars and past were also contributing to his dread of realizing this was his one and true person. It happens that fast for Shifters. Pushing those thoughts aside for now, he let her release everything while in his arms.

"I'm sorry." She sniffed, pulling away, looking embarrassed. "I'm just really tired. I don't usually...you know..."

Zane let her pull away but remained silent, letting her get her bearings. Her red, puffy eyes stared up at him. She looked so lost that all he wanted to do was pull her back to him, but he refrained.

"I think we got off on the wrong foot," Raina said, clearing the tears from her



throat. Her words surprised him enough that his eyes widened slightly. “Thank you for everything you’ve done for me. Saving me from a wolf, getting Bruce off my leg, and letting me have a long overdue breakdown on your shirt.”

“You’re welcome,” Zane said. As his smile grew, a chuckle escaped his throat. “And thank you for smashing a log on the wolfs head and tending to my arm.”

“You’re welcome.” Raina gave him a shaky smile and then looked at his arm. With a gasp, she reached out, grabbing it to see better. “It’s healed already?”

“Zelda is an amazing healer,” Zane replied, enjoying her touch.

“Most witches are,” Raina said, then sighed. “I always wanted to be a witch. Even as a little girl. Every Halloween since I was old enough to dress up, I’ve been a witch.”

“And then you met Wicked.” Zane cocked his eyebrow, enjoying this side of Raina. Free from fear and, well, anger toward him. That thought made him grin. She was definitely feisty, and he liked that a lot.

“And then I met Wicked...and Bruce,” Raina said as the shadows came back into her beautiful eyes and a frown formed across her lips. “I guess I need to go back in there and explain to all of you.”

“Yes,” Zane answered truthfully. “Just know you aren’t alone. Whatever it is, you are not alone.”

“Thank you, Zane.” Raina reached out and touched his arm with a sad smile. “You will never know what those words mean to me.”

“They aren’t just words,” Zane promised her as they walked back toward the house.

Raina nodded as they walked back inside. Thorne and Wicked sat at the table talking but stopped when they walked in. Wicked stood and came to Raina, giving her a tight hug.

“Whatever it is we are here for you, Raina,” Wicked said, giving her another tight squeeze before pulling away.

Zane watched her closely and knew she was close to breaking again. He gave her a confident nod of encouragement as he leaned against the wall close enough if she needed his comfort again. Fuck, he was in deep shit with this beautiful woman.

“After you left the tattoo business, things were doing well. Most of your customers stayed loyal. Actually, it got so busy that I needed to hire more help.” Raina started not looking at anyone but instead stared at the table in front of her. She had remained standing, her hands twisting nervously together. “None of them really worked out because you, Wicked, are a hard act to follow. Many of your customers that I couldn’t fit in between my own patrons left.”

“I’m so sorry.” Wicked whispered, but Raina shook her head.

“Don’t you dare apologize.” Raina frowned, shaking her head. “What you did for me I could never repay. You gave me my start and left me a booming business that I failed.”

Zane seriously doubted Raina failed anything but kept his mouth closed, letting her continue. Whoever made her feel this way would pay and pay dearly.

“I hired a guy, Brad Kinney, who was an amazing artist. He brought in new clients, was a dream to work with, and soon, business was booming again.” Raina said with a hard edge to his voice. “Because things were going so well, my job on the business end and trying to keep up with my own clients became too hard, so I made him a partner.”

“Oh, no.” Wicked sighed as if already knowing the issue.

“Yeah, he took over more of the business end.” Raina finally looked up at Wicked. “You know I sucked at that part anyway and was more than happy to hand it over. I trusted him. He gave me no reason not to trust him. He became a good friend.”

“Did you sleep with him?” Wicked cocked her eyebrow at Raina.

That question had Zane leaning away from the wall, a deep growl rumbling in his chest.

“No.” Raina snorted, shaking her head. “Not that good of a friend.”

“Just checking.” Wicked said, then glanced at Zane with a puzzled look before looking at Thorne. “What are you laughing at?”

“Nothing.” Thorne cleared his throat and then nodded for Raina to continue.

“Anyway, not even a year after he took over the business, Brad came to me saying we were out of money and that bills were months behind. I couldn’t believe it because, during our monthly meetings, he never said a word. Told me and showed me all the budgets, etc. Everything looked good.” Raina shook her head in disgust. “He said that he had a person who had agreed to be a silent partner and that he would take care of everything for a fifty percent share of the business.”

“But that would give you less shares.” Wicked frowned angrily. “Please tell me you said no.”

“It was either that or lose everything,” Raina said, swiping angrily at a tear. “Which I did anyway.”

“Why in the world didn’t you call me?” Wicked tossed up her hands. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because this wasn’t your problem anymore,” Raina said, and Zane knew she was struggling to keep it together. “It was mine. Not seeing any way out, I agreed as long as I was able to have a lawyer look over the contract this silent partner had sent us.”

“And did you?” Wicked asked with a frown.

“Yes,” Raina whispered with a nod. “A lawyer that Brad recommended.”

“Brad isn’t a good guy in this story, is he?” Bruce, who had been surprisingly silent, spoke up.

“You could say that,” Raina replied just as her phone lit up in her back pocket. “After going over the contract with the lawyer, I signed.”

“And?” Wicked hissed, her eyes narrowed as if knowing what was to come.

“And...I went into work the next day to find all my stuff removed, most of it

piled up at the front door. I was handed the contract and told to read it by Brad and the lawyer who happened to be present.” Raina said, rubbing her eyes. “It was not the same contract I had signed the day before, but it was my signature. This contract signed everything over to Brad and contractually obligated me to work for the silent partner, not named, for the period of ten years.”

“What?!” Wicked slammed her hands on the table and stood up, shaking her head. “No! There is no way that this bullshit contract is legal.”

Zane watched Raina closely and noticed a sad smile appear as her shoulders slumped in defeat. “That’s what I thought, but that lawyer and another one I personally contacted told me that it is in fact, legal. Unless I want to go to court, there is absolutely nothing I can do.”

“Then we will go to fucking court.” Wicked said with an affirmative nod.

“Wicked, I don’t have the means to fight this in court,” Raina said, her voice cracking with emotion. “And even if I did, I was told that this silent partner has money to burn and could financially ruin me for the rest of my life. The advice I was given was to cut my losses and do my ten years to pay back what is owed by me to the silent partner. There is no way I am giving anyone ten years of my life no matter what or how much I am making, so I ran.”

“Who is this silent partner asshole. I’ll zap his ass back to the ice age.” Wicked said as she started to pace back and forth.

“I don’t know,” Raina said, then sighed. “What I do know is that he is powerful and gets what he wants, obviously.”

“No, he doesn’t.” Zane finally spoke, staring at Raina, who glanced his way. “And if you want to know who he is, then answer your phone. I’ll be more than happy to introduce myself to him.”

Zane had a feeling there was plenty of corruption going on with this deal, and a good lawyer could sort it out, which could take years. He wasn’t patient for that bullshit. He would rather take care of it himself after he found out who this bastard was, and that’s exactly what he planned on doing.

## CHAPTER 9



Raina felt a little better letting all of that out, but that feeling didn't last long after hearing Zane's words. "I'm sure that's not him calling me. If it's anyone, it's Brad trying to get me to answer using other numbers."

"Then I'll talk to Brad," Zane replied, his tone to the point. "Either way, whoever is harassing you will stop."

"I appreciate that, but I don't want to involve anyone else," Raina said, though she was really liking this protective feeling she was getting from Zane. It was hard to find alpha men, and Zane was definitely an alpha, which made him even more attractive. "I'm sorry, Wicked. I don't have anyone else, and I didn't think. I should have told you before I showed up here."

Wicked gave Thorne a glare before looking back at Raina. "Yes, you should have told me, but I would have told you to come here so there is nothing for you to be sorry for."

"I want to apologize for being harsh earlier," Thorne admitted, looking a little sheepish.

"You were just protecting your family as you should," Raina replied with a small smile. "I don't think anyone will look for me here, if they are even looking for me at all. I could just be paranoid, but I had to leave New York. As soon as my car is fixed, I'll find someplace else to go."

"You most certainly will not." Wicked frowned, shaking her head. "You will stay here."

Raina didn't say anything because she knew that couldn't happen. This was a very small town, and she knew there would be no way two tattoo artists could survive here. Tattooing was all she knew how to do to earn a living.

"We can discuss that later." Wicked said as if she knew exactly what Raina was thinking, and she probably did. That was what was special about their friendship. Each of them knew the other to the point they knew each other's feelings and thoughts. "I'll show you where you can sleep. You can get a shower and some rest when your stuff gets here."

"It's here. They dropped it off about fifteen minutes ago." Thorne held up his phone. "Keys are in it."

Raina nodded, relieved that her things were here. "Oh, okay. I'll just get what I need for tonight." She started for the door but stopped looking at Thorne and then Zane. "Thank you both."

"You're welcome," Thorne said with a nod, but Zane remained silent, just staring at her.

Once outside, she headed toward the driveway taking a deep shuddered breath. Never in a million years did she think her life would take such a turn. Once confident in what she was doing and where she was going in life had been shattered into not having a clue about anything. It was hard to hold it together, but she was a fighter, and yet, the fight was growing old.

Reaching her car, she opened the trunk, which was packed tight with some of her things. She just stood there staring at it, not even knowing where to start. Stepping back, she closed the trunk and stood there wrapping her arms around herself. Tilting her head back, she just stared at the sky.

"Do you need help?" Zane's voice came from behind her. The comfort she felt at just his voice scared her a little, and yet she was drawn to it.

Bringing her head back down, she stared at her car, "Everything I own is in there." She whispered as if just now realizing that fact. "I was so stupid."

"No, you were lied to, tricked, and taken advantage of," Zane responded, still behind her. "Big difference."

She turned to look up at him. "I should have known better." She refused to

give herself a break. Opening up the back door, she reached in to get her backpack tossing it out before climbing further in to find a change of clothes.

Climbing back out, she shut the door, but before she could pick up her bag, Zane grabbed it. They walked back to the house in silence. Taking her bag, she smiled at him. "Thank you...for everything," Raina said, wishing for a quick second that she was back in those arms again. Shaking those thoughts out of her mind, she frowned. "You didn't eat."

"What?" He asked, looking confused.

"You didn't eat anything." Raina nodded toward the kitchen. "Make sure you eat."

"Yes, ma'am." He chuckled, which made her smile.

"Goodnight, Zane," Raina said as she turned to walk to where Wicked was waiting for her.

Walking up the steps, she slowly looked over her shoulder to see Zane still standing there watching her. Their eyes held until she turned the corner. Her body quivered with emotion at the look he was giving her. "Wow."

"What?" Wicked's voice brought her out of her thoughts of Zane.

"Nothing," Raina said, following her into a room. Putting her things on the bed, she glanced around the room.

"This is one of the guest rooms on this floor." Wicked informed her, turning on the lights. "Our room, as well as the baby's room, is downstairs. You and Zane will have to share a bathroom."

"Oh, ah, he lives here?" Raina said, trying not to have any emotion in her voice at all.

"No." Wicked smirked. "He's helping Thorne build on to the house, so he is staying here until they finish. He has a place down in eastern Kentucky. Why? Does that bother you?"

"What? That he's staying here?" Raina snorted as she tried to look busy arranging her clothes. "Of course not. I was just curious."

“Curious, huh?” Wicked grinned, wiggling her eyebrows. “I saw you curiously checking him out. He is a very good-looking man, isn’t he?”

Raina sighed, sitting down on the bed with a flop. “He’s gorgeous.” Raina laid back on the bed, staring at the ceiling. “And very protective.”

Walking over, Wicked also flopped on the bed next to her. “Shifter men are very protective.”

She looked over at her friend, who was now also staring at the ceiling. “And alpha.”

Wicked looked over at her with a grin. “Oh, yeah.”

They broke out into loud laughter. Raina reached over, grabbing her hand. “I’ve missed you, Wicked.”

“I’m glad you are finally here,” Wicked replied, her smile fading. “We are going to figure this out, Raina.”

Raina didn’t say anything, just nodded. She wasn’t going to sour the mood by telling Wicked her plans to leave as soon as her car was fixed. She refused to bring trouble to her best friend and her family.

“So, about this alpha Shifter guy.” Raina’s smile spread across her face. “He dating anyone?”

Once again, their laughter filled the room as they lay on the bed like the old days talking about guys and life. For that small moment in time, Raina forgot all her troubles.



## CHAPTER 10



*R*aina stretched with a yawn, slowly opening her eyes. The room was dark and foreign to her. Sitting straight up in bed, she frantically looked around until everything came back to her all at once. Her stomach rolled as it always did at what the day would bring. Dread and fear overwhelmed her as she fell back on the bed, blindly staring at the ceiling. Every day started like this for her, and she hated it. So many emotions attacked her mind as she lay there wondering if even getting out of bed was worth it anymore.

With a curse, she whipped the covers up and jumped out of the bed. She was so sick and tired of feeling this way. Waking up in fear of her future was draining. She was exhausted both mentally and physically. Having gotten a quick shower last night, she quickly dressed. Needing to escape the room as well as her depressing thoughts, she glanced at her phone, debating on whether she should take it or leave it. She knew what she would find, tons of missed calls from numbers she didn't know. Her mailbox was full and, well, shit. She grabbed it, sticking it in her back pocket. She hurried out of the room as quietly as she could. Glancing down the hallway, she briefly wondered which room Zane occupied, then rolled her eyes at the thought. She had enough problems and certainly didn't need to add more.

Creeping downstairs, she looked around as she made her way to the kitchen. Searching cabinets, she found a glass for some water. Cringing as she slowly turned on the faucet, she quickly filled her glass. Finishing her water, she walked toward the door, but before she opened it, she noticed an alarm system and cursed. Damn, the last thing she needed to do was wake the

whole house in a panic. Hearing a noise, she frowned, turning to see Bruce spread out under the table. Heading that way, she bent to look under the table.

“Bruce.” She whispered, but Bruce didn’t move. Kneeling, she leaned closer to him. “Bruce.” She whispered louder.

“I need my balls.” He grumbled in his sleep but didn’t respond to her. “No snip, snip.”

Raina felt a smile slip across her face. Bruce was a talker in his sleep. Memories of the times she and Wicked had messed with Bruce filled her heart, making it feel lighter. “No, Bruce.” She whispered, then slapped her hand over her mouth as a chuckle escaped. “Your balls need to go. Yes, snip, snip. They will be displayed as the most...amazing balls...in the Cat Ball Hall of Fame.” Raina silently laughed her ass off. Damn, she missed this.

“Yeah,” Bruce mumbled, moving slightly. “Amazing balls. My balls.”

“Never mess with a guy’s balls.” Zane’s whispered deep voice had her hitting her head on the table when she jumped.

“Ouch.” She pulled herself up, rubbing the top of her head. “I was just trying to find out the alarm code.”

“Going somewhere?” He cocked his eyebrow as he stared down at her.

“No, just needed some fresh air.” She replied, then noticed he had no shirt, only sweatpants and no shoes. Holy shit, her body came alive and wanted to do dirty things to this man.

“Hmmm, sounded to me like you were talking about balls.” A smile tipped the corner of his mouth.

“Fine, but in my defense, Bruce has pulled so many pranks on me that it was well deserved.” Raina defended herself with a shrug and then frowned. “Do all guys dream of their balls?”

“I’m sure some do, but Bruce’s girl wants him to get fixed because she’s tired of being pregnant,” Zane said, then chuckled at the look of disgust on her face as she waved him off.

“Too much info.” Raina shook her head. “Bruce having sex is not something

I want implanted in my brain.”

“Golden balls,” Bruce called out as he turned over, then farted before settling back into sleep. Raina cringed in disgust, stepping further away. She knew Bruce’s farts, and they could clear a room in seconds flat.

“Now, see what you did?” Zane gave her a fake frown. “All he’s going to be talking about is having his balls dipped in gold to be displayed in the…”

“Cat Ball Hall of Fame.” Raina supplied for him, then slapped her hand over her mouth, laughing. After gaining control, she sighed. “Man, I’ve missed this.”

Zane didn’t say anything, just stood staring at her, his eyes intense to the point she felt her smile fading. No man had ever looked at her like that before. It was as if he was trying to see inside her soul, as if he wanted to know everything about her. They stood in the darkness of the kitchen, staring at each other until Zane looked away.

“You want some coffee?” His voice sounded rough, as if he growled the question.

“Please.” She answered, noticing her own voice was a husky whisper as if they just had sex. Hot damn, she needed to control herself with this one. Or did she? Hell, maybe she was due a one-night stand with a deliciously hot Shifter who moved like an animal stalking his prey. Her hungry eyes followed his movements; his skin was smooth and sun-kissed. Her eyes traveled lower enjoying the view very much.

“How strong do you like your coffee?” His voice had her eyes shooting from his ass to the back of his head. When she didn’t answer right away, he looked at her over his shoulder, his eyes searching hers.

“Huh?” Was the only word that managed to come out of her mouth from her mush-filled brain.

A half smile curved his lips. “Coffee?” He said as if knowing exactly what made her brain dead. “How strong do you like your coffee.”

“Oh.” She felt her face flame. “Ah, the stronger, the better.”

With a nod, he turned to finish as she rolled her eyes at herself. Lord, this man was as dangerous as they came. She shivered, then lightly slapped her hot cheeks, trying to get some control over herself.

“So...” She tried to talk, but her voice cracked. Clearing her throat, she tried again. “So Wicked told me you were helping Thorne build on to the house.”

“I am.” He replied, turning he leaned against the counter, crossing his muscled arms over his broad chest.

Raina swallowed hard, ordering her eyes to stay above the neck. It was actually a fight between her eyes and brain, and the brain was losing. “Do you do that?”

“Do what?” He tilted his head as he stared at her.

Realizing she was sounding like an idiot because her eyes and brain were at war, she let her eyes win with a quick up-and-down look before moving back to his face. That didn’t help because, honestly, she had no idea what she had asked and why. “What?”

Zane actually laughed, and the sound had all her girly parts screaming in need. Nothing turned her on more than a man who knew how to laugh and enjoy life. His genuine laugh was contagious, and soon, she was laughing with him. If there was one thing Raina was good at it was poking fun at herself.

“See why I need strong coffee.” She said once her laughter died down. “My brain is not fully functional until after two cups.”

“Only two cups?” Zane snorted teasingly. “So you’re a lightweight coffee drinker.”

“I said fully functional.” She countered with narrowed eyes but a smile. “Four cups, as long as the person making it knows what he’s doing, will have me totally capable of facing the day.”

“Oh, I know what I’m doing.” He countered back with a smirk.

“I bet you do.” She replied, wanting to add ‘big boy,’ but refrained from that...thank God.

“And to answer your earlier question...yes, I do that.” He grinned with a short chuckle. “I build houses.”

“Nice,” Raina said, leaning against the other counter. “That would be so amazing to have a house built exactly the way you want it.” Her mood turned a little sour, knowing that would never be a reality for her. The mess she found herself in may have put a stop to all the goals she had for her life.

“Yes, there are some people who get everything they want, but some don’t because either money or it just can’t be done. I do my best to please everyone, but many times that doesn’t happen.” Zane replied, still standing there looking sexy as hell. “What would be one must have if you had your house built to your specifications.”

“A pool,” Raina said without any thought at all. “With a slide. And lights.”

“Didn’t need to think about that one, did you?” Zane chuckled. “But that is not the house. What about inside the house.”

“Oh, well, as long as I got the pool, I would like a wrap-around porch that goes all the way around so I could sit anywhere and have different scenery.” Raina again answered quickly, then noticed the grin on his face growing. “What?”

“Still outside.” He replied, watching her closely. “What about inside? Do you want a huge chef’s kitchen, fireplaces in every room, or a walk-in closet fit for a queen?”

Raina thought about that, her nose crinkled up in thought. “I don’t cook often because it’s just me, so a regular kitchen would do. I would like a fireplace, but maybe just in the living area. And I’m no queen, so a small walk-in would be fine for me. I like being outside as much as possible, so I think all my plans would be for the outside.”

Enjoying the moment, Raina kept thinking about what she would want on the outside as Zane turned to pour them some coffee.

“Definitely a metal roof, so when I’m inside on a rainy day, I can hear the rain hitting the roof. I love that sound.” She sighed, getting lost in plans that would never happen. “And it would be blue. I’d want a log cabin with a wrap-around porch and blue metal roof.”

Zane turned, holding out her coffee. Raina walked toward him, reaching out to take it. “With a huge pool with a slide and lights.”

Their fingers touched as she took the cup. Her eyes rose to meet his as he stared down at her. “Yes.” She whispered with a slow nod.

His head lowered toward her as she tilted hers up, raising up on her toes. She slowly closed her eyes, ready for the kiss that was coming. Her body was humming in anticipation.

“Is that coffee I smell?” Thorne’s voice was like a bucket of cold water sending them apart.

“Fuck.” Zane cursed under his breath as he reached out and steadied the coffee in her hand. “Careful. Don’t burn yourself.”

Her eyes met his, and she saw the promise in his that this moment was not over, just postponed. Her heart soared, wanting nothing more than to escape with this man, this stranger that she couldn’t get enough of.

“I had the strangest dream.” Bruce’s sleepy voice had them grinning. “Do they have a Cat Hall of Fame where the balls of amazing cats are cast in gold and displayed for all to see?”

“What in the fuck is wrong with you?” Thorne appeared, shaking his head, glaring at Bruce, then nodded good morning to Zane and Raina.

“The dream was so real.” Bruce groused at Thorne, who poured his coffee. “I would seriously think about losing mine if they were dipped in gold. Where’s Wicked? I’m going to ask her. And fuck you, Thorne. Nothing is wrong with me, grumpy ass dickhead.”

“One of these fucking days I’m going to kill that cat.” Thorne grumbled, which only made the situation funnier.

Zane winked at Raina as they stared at each other, trying not to laugh, but Raina broke, laughing hysterically. For the first time in a long time, she forgot about her problems and had a small glimmer of hope for her future.

## CHAPTER 11



Zane held the board while Thorne hammered in the nails. His mind wasn't on work but on a beautiful little human who was quickly stealing his heart, a heart he thought was destined to be alone.

"Dammit, Zane." Thorne looked down at him from the ladder. "Get your head out of your ass and hold the board still."

Zane did as ordered but shot back, "If you can do a better job, climb your ass down here and hold it yourself so I can hammer those nails in like a man, not a boy."

"Fuck you." Thorne finished, then climbed down to glare at Zane. "Seriously, what has gotten into you?"

"Nothing," Zane replied, moving the ladder before picking up another board. Thorne burst out laughing, actually pointed at him, then bent over laughing harder. "What the hell are you laughing at?"

"Oh, shit." Thorne rubbed his chest as he stared at Zane. "She's it, isn't she?"

"What in the hell are you talking about." Zane frowned, walking past Thorne to place a board. He picked up a hammer and some nails. He began pounding the nail's in with such force that one bent. "Shit!"

"Don't act like you don't know what I'm talking about." Thorne chuckled, shaking his head. "I know the signs. Head up your ass is definitely a sign that you have found your mate."

Zane didn't say anything even though Thorne was right. He had found his mate, but to announce it to anyone other than himself was out of the question. Until he knew what Raina felt for him, he would remain silent, even with his best friend. Rejection was something that Zane had felt before. It was humiliating enough not to have others looking at you with pity.

Knowing he had to say something, he glared back at Thorne. "You had your head up your own ass way before Wicked came into the picture, so shut the fuck up so we can get this done."

"Denial of the obvious is also a sign," Thorne mumbled with a chuckle but continued to work.

Neither man said much as they worked. Before long, it was time for lunch. Cleaning up, they made their way to the back of the house.

"Did you hear from Mac about the wolf?" Zane asked before they went inside.

"Yeah, I talked to him earlier," Thorne informed him, wiping his boots on the rug outside the door. "Seems he's a Shifter who was thrown out of his pack. I talked to the pack leader, who came and got him. They do not condone violence against women and said they would make sure that justice was served since Raina doesn't have a man who would do it."

Those words sent his panther raging inside him. He felt his lips curl up in a snarl but kept his cool. Even though he felt it was his right to dole out justice on Raina's behalf, he also knew that, as of right now, he didn't know where she stood on their situation. She was a human, and humans didn't understand the mating rituals of his kind.

"You okay with that?" Thorne asked, watching him closely. "If not, I'm sure I can make a phone call. They just picked him up half an hour ago."

"She is not my mate." Was all Zane said, but added to himself...yet.

"If you say so." Thorne chuckled but opened the door and went inside before Zane could cuss him. The fucker.

Zane's gaze landed right on Raina, who was lying on the floor with Jamison on her knees, making airplane noises. Rose was crawling around them,



patting Raina on the cheeks. The twins were growing so fast. Jamison had started walking or attempting to walk while Rose was still a crawler.

“You’re so fucked.” Thorne laughed loudly as he passed with a plate of food.

Eyes narrowed, he glared at Thorne, keeping his words to himself. “What’s so funny?” Wicked asked with a smile.

“Nothing,” Zane replied, giving Thorne a warning glare, then looked at Wicked with a smile. “Thorne thinks he’s funny, but he isn’t.”

Zane watched as Rose crawled toward him. She was such a sweet, beautiful child that Zane was drawn to her. Kneeling, he waited patiently for her to make her way to him. Once she reached him, she used his knee to stand up. Her legs wobbled, but Zane was ready to catch her if needed. This girl would never be hurt on his watch, ever.

“Hello, Rose.” He smiled at her as she studied his face. Slowly, her hand reached out, touching his scars with her little hand. No one ever touched his scars. Her eyes which looked like Wicked’s, stared at his scars, then searched his gaze as if wanting to ask something. She did this all the time, and at first, he was very uncomfortable, but not now. It brought him some comfort, which was odd but true.

“Hurt.”

He heard the word that was gibberish, but he heard it as if it was clear as day. He smiled at her. “Not anymore, Rose.”

After that little moment, she gave him a good smack, then crawled back down his leg hitting her butt on the floor, and off she went. He cherished those little moments with Rose. It made him feel less of an oddity. One day, when she was old enough to understand, he would thank her for that kindness.

He rose from his kneeling position, his gaze landing on Raina, who was watching him closely. He knew she had witnessed the small moment between himself and Rose. Normally, that would bother him because, in that short time, he was vulnerable to anyone watching, but with Raina, he didn’t care that she saw it. That spoke volumes about what he felt for her.

Raina gave him a small smile just as Jamison dove into her, sending them both back to the ground in a fit of giggles. He watched them for a long time before feeling eyes on him. His gaze went to Thorne and Wicked, who were watching him with huge smiles on their faces. Rolling his eyes, he sighed, went and made himself a plate, and then slipped out the back, not realizing that Raina was also watching him.

## CHAPTER 12



Raina watched, disappointed as Zane got himself a plate of food and then left. She had been waiting for lunch so that she could see him. The scene with him and Rose almost brought tears to her eyes. It was sweet and very profound. It also showed what kind of man Zane was. To be patient with a small child, caring and sweet, said everything she ever had to know about this man.

“Okay, munchkins, it’s nap time.” Linda walked in with a huge smile. “I think you have worn Raina out.”

Jamison gave Raina a tight hug, almost cutting off her airflow before he waddled toward Linda. Rose crawled past her, looked up, and gave her a slobbery grin before crawling away. She watched as Linda picked up Rose and held Jamison’s little hand, disappearing down the hallway.

“Go get you something to eat.” Wicked ordered from the table. “It’s getting cold.”

Raina stood, brushing off her jeans and straightening her shirt. “I can’t believe how awesome your kids are.”

“They take after me,” Bruce said as he passed her. “I taught them everything they know.”

“What? Slobbering and gibberish?” Thorne snorted with a wink at Raina who grinned. “Yeah, you taught them real good.”

“You just wait,” Bruce warned, giving Thorne a narrowed glare. “When my

balls hang in the Cat Balls Hall of Fame, you will not be treating me this way any longer but worshipping my golden encased balls.”

Raina watched Bruce regally walk out of the room. She laughed, shaking her head.

“What in the hell is that fucking cat talking about?” Thorne snarled before taking a bite of his sandwich.

Fixing her plate, Raina continued to chuckle. Turning, she saw Wicked eyeing her suspiciously. “Okay. It was me. He was talking in his sleep about not wanting to get his balls snipped, and I may have suggested that there was a Cat Ball Hall of Fame.”

“And they call me Wicked.” Wicked laughed, giving Raina an appreciative nod. “We used to do that to him all the time when he talked in his sleep. I forgot about that.”

“Good times.” Raina smiled and started to sit down but stopped. “Where is Zane?”

Wicked and Thorne shared a look.

“What?” Raina asked, glancing between the two.

“He doesn’t eat in front of people,” Wicked said, getting a glare from Thorne.

“We don’t know that for certain,” Thorne said, not looking Raina in the eye.

“I’ve never seen him eat. Have you?” Wicked frowned at Thorne.

“No,” Thorne admitted with a shrug. “Maybe he just likes his privacy. Needs a minute alone.”

Both women snorted. “It’s because of his scars.” Wicked said what they were all thinking out loud.

“Well, that’s just sad and ridiculous,” Raina said, picking up her plate. She hated eating alone, which was what she did most of the time. Walking to the door, she ignored Thorne’s loud sigh.

“Don’t embarrass the man,” Thorne warned just as she exited the house. She heard Wicked giving him shit as the door closed.

Raina had no intention of embarrassing Zane, but she damn sure wasn't going to let him eat alone. Looking around, she had no clue where he might be. Walking down the steps, she noticed a path and headed that way. Seeing Zane sitting on the ground leaning against a wall that was only half built, she smiled when he looked up at her.

"Hey." She said as she made her way toward him.

"Be careful; there may be nails lying around." He warned, not looking very happy at her interruption, which was just tough.

"Care if I join you?" She said but sat down across from him before he could even answer.

"Sure." He replied, placing his half-eaten plate on the ground beside him.

"Ants are going to get your lunch," Raina commented after swallowing a bite of her food.

"That's okay. I'm finished." He answered, staring at her as if daring her to go further with the food issue. Well, he didn't know her very well. It really bothered her that he ate alone. Why it bothered her so bad she didn't know, but it did. "Don't pity me, Raina."

"Pity is the last thing I feel for you, Zane." She replied without hesitation. "But eating alone is...well, lonely. Take it from someone who knows."

"Not for me. I prefer it." Zane's voice had an edge to it that Raina should pay attention to, but Raina was sometimes tone-deaf and didn't read the room well. Or maybe she read the room just fine and didn't give a shit.

"Because of your scars?" Raina shot back the question and wondered if she had gone too far when his eyes narrowed.

He just stared at her for such a long time she felt her neck start to heat and wanted to squirm under his gaze, but she held her ground and stared back, waiting for the answer.

"Yes." He finally answered. "Because of my scars."

Shaking her head, she forked in another bite of pasta salad and chewed, studying his face. "Why?"

This time, he made an exacerbating noise in the back of his throat. “Because they are grotesque, and I don’t want to ruin someone’s dinner.”

“Your words or someone else’s words?” Raina frowned, knowing that someone in his past had hurt him badly, and she wanted to claw that someone’s eyes out.

“What does that matter,” Zane said angrily as he abruptly stood up, grabbed his plate, and tossed it in the trash bag that lay a few feet away. “It’s the truth.”

She heard the pain in his voice. Even as hard as he tried to hide it, she heard it as if it was her own. “We all have scars, Zane. Some you can see and some you cannot, but scars do not define a person.”

“They do if they are on your face for the world to see.” Zane shot back, then looked like he regretted saying anything at all. “I have to get back to work.”

Raina knew she had been dismissed, but she didn’t care. Standing, she also tossed her half-eaten lunch in the trash, but she wasn’t finished. “The most honest people on this planet are children. They see beauty and kindness that is invisible to others. Rose touched you today, and you allowed it. Why?”

Raina saw his shoulders stiffen, his back still turned toward her. “I said I have to get back to work.” He growled, still not turning to face her. “Maybe you should be worried about getting yourself out of your mess instead of worrying about my...scars.”

Okay, that was a dig, but Raina could handle it. She wasn’t finished and refused to let him chase her away. “You almost kissed me,” Raina whispered loud enough she knew he could hear her. “Scars and all, you were going to kiss me, and I was going to allow it, looked forward to it, and was disappointed when it didn’t happen. I don’t see scars when I look at you, Zane. I see a man who is kind, loyal, and handsome. That is coming from someone who just met you. My opinion may not matter, and that’s fine, but those who do see only scars are the ones you don’t want in your life anyway.”

Knowing she probably just ruined a perfectly wonderful and mind-blowing one-night stand with this handsome alpha Shifter, Raina didn’t care. It

sucked, but she seriously would rather let him know his worth than have a fast fuck. He was worthy enough to sit across while having a meal, and she wanted him to know that, even if he hated her for it.

Turning away after waiting to see if he was going to say anything, Raina frowned as she walked back to the house. She had hoped he would stop her but knew in her heart he wouldn't, and that hurt her more than anything ever had. She was in love with this man, this stranger, and even though it terrified her because they had just met, Raina knew it was real. How she knew was a mystery, but she was head over heels in love with Zane...hell she didn't even know his last name...and still that didn't frighten her. It just felt right. What terrified her now was that she had no clue how he felt about her.

Raina had always been well-grounded. She didn't believe in love at first sight, which you see in movies and read in books, but meeting Zane and her intense feelings for him blew that belief out of the water.

“Girl, you are in some deep shit.” She whispered to herself but smiled because she was a fighter, and she was going to fight for him. With that decision made, she decided to take his advice and take care of her past so she could focus on her future.

## CHAPTER 13



Zane worked until dark, even when Thorne quit for the day. He needed to work out his frustrations as well as think things through. Raina's words hit him hard today. It was hard to believe someone who said his scars didn't matter after living for years knowing that they did matter to most people, especially women. No woman, beautiful or not, wanted to be tied to someone with a disfigured face. As much as he wanted to believe her words, it was hard for him to do just that.

Hearing a noise, he turned to see Raina walking toward him, balancing a tray with plates and glasses. She stumbled over a clod of dirt.

"Whoa!" She said after steadying herself and the tray. Glancing up at him she wiggled her eyebrows after gaining control again. "Pretty impressive, huh?"

"What the hell are you doing?" He rushed toward her, taking the heavy tray from her. He noticed she was wearing a long skirt and a sleeveless blouse of blue that brought out her eyes. She looked absolutely gorgeous, so much so it took his breath away.

"Everyone ate already, and I didn't want to eat alone," Raina informed him, pulled a piece of wood over, and sat down on it. "Just set it here."

He sat it down, but Zane remained standing, looking down at her. "You don't give up, do you?"

"Nope." She said proudly, looking adorable, staring up at him. "And I'm really hungry. Those twins wear me out. I don't know how Wicked does it."



“It’s called...Linda.” Zane said, finally sitting down across from her.

“Truth.” Raina agreed with a nod. “That woman is a God send. I hope to find a Linda when I have kids. Do you want kids?”

“What are you doing, Raina?” Zane asked, eyeing her suspiciously.

“Ah, having a conversation and hopefully eating.” Raina frowned at him. “You have a problem with that?”

Did he? Searching her eyes, he realized she was sincere, and there was no hidden agenda that he could see. Feeling himself relax, he let a small smile escape. “No, no problem. And yes, I want kids.”

“Good.” Raina gave him a nod. “Now eat. I know you have to be hungry working out here all day. I know I didn’t work as hard as you, but man, those kids are a handful. By the time Wicked started fixing them dinner, I was ready to drop dead. Then Jamison puked on me, which ruined my plans of dropping dead because I had to get a shower. Wicked used her finger to whip me up some clothes.”

Zane’s eyes roamed from her face down her body. “You look very pretty.”

“Ahhh, thank you.” Raina flashed him a radiant smile. “That’s one thing I was always jealous of Wicked for. Ever since I was a little girl, I wanted to be a witch. Every Halloween, I dressed up as a witch. Hell, just last year, I dressed up as a witch. Anyway, then one day I met one, a crazy one, but a witch. I was a little disappointed she didn’t wiggle her nose like Samantha on Bewitched.”

“Why were you jealous that Wicked was a witch?” Zane frowned, wanting to know more about this woman in hopes that one day he could give her everything she ever wanted.

“Ah, hello.” She pointed to her clothes. “Just look at this outfit. Most of the time I’m in old jeans and T-shirts. I’ve ruined more clothes tattooing and painting. If I could just twirl my finger for a new wardrobe, I’d probably wear my damn finger out.”

“So what about you, Zane?” Raina said as she continued to eat and talk nonstop. “What did you want to be when you grew up? You know I wanted

to be a witch. What about you, and don't say Shifter."

Zane chuckled and then thought about that. "I guess I'm doing it. I was always building something. When Thorne got into real estate, I started getting properties and built houses for him to sell. Did you always want to be a tattoo artist?"

"No, actually, I didn't." Raina thought for a moment. "I wanted to be an artist and always dreamed of having a place to display all my art to sell, but unfortunately, that never happened. Rental property in New York is way too expensive, and I couldn't afford a place to display my artwork. I was a starving artist at the time, selling art off the streets. I made enough to eat and pay for a one-room apartment."

"Is that something you'd like to do today?" Zane asked, watching the sadness cross her face and wished he hadn't asked.

"Have an art studio?" She asked, then sighed when he nodded. "Of course, but I would have to start over. All my artwork was taken when Brad cleaned my stuff out. When I demanded to have it back, I was just laughed at. It's gone, all of it."

"I'm sorry." Zane frowned, watching the emotion cloud her eyes before she shrugged and hid it away.

"It's okay. I can always do more, but the personal pieces are the hardest to lose." Raina said with a sigh, then looked at her plate and then his. "Looks like we were both starving."

Glancing down, he noticed that, in fact, his plate was clean. His eyes rose to hers, ready to see gloating in her beautiful eyes, but instead, he saw a sincerity that hit him straight to his heart.

"This morning I meant no disrespect for you or your feelings, Zane," Raina said, her face more serious than he had ever seen it. "I just know how lonely it is to eat alone. No one deserves to feel that. I spent many meals with only myself. Those who truly care for you will always see past your scars, both visible and invisible. We all have scars, but that doesn't define who we are. Please never forget that."

Zane stood, taking two steps beside her. Reaching down, he took her hand,

lifting her toward him. Cupping her chin, he raised her face to his. “Were you really disappointed?”

“About the kiss?” She whispered, staring at his lips and then back to his eyes. She nodded, “Very.”

Slowly, he lowered toward her, and their lips touched. The kiss was soft at first, and their tongues met as the darkness of the night surrounded them. His hand tangled in her hair as the kiss deepened. Her body pressed against his felt like heaven as they molded together. He knew if he didn’t stop, he would have her right there in the midst of the construction mess. She deserved better.

Reluctantly, he pulled his mouth from hers, watching as her eyes slowly opened. A haze of what he knew was lust clouded them before they cleared.

“Wow.” She whispered, licking her lips, which made him groan.

“My thoughts exactly.” He murmured as he chanced a kiss to the corner of her mouth before he pulled her close to him. “Thank you.”

“For what?” He could feel the words she spoke against his body.

“Dinner.” He smiled against her hair when she chuckled.

“Next one’s on you.” She shot back, making him laugh.

“You got yourself a deal.” He said and meant it. With her in his life, he would never again eat alone, and never did he realize how much that had really bothered him. She had been right. It was very lonely.

## CHAPTER 14



After cleaning up and a few more kisses, Zane and Raina made their way up to the house. Her mind raced, and her body tingled as his hand rested on her lower back as they climbed the steps. She felt protected, and the feeling was amazing. Her lips were swollen from his kisses, and man, could he kiss. Her body shivered just as they arrived at the door.

“You cold?” Zane asked, his voice close to her ear as he bent toward her.

“No,” She shook her head, looked up at him then gave him a smile.

“Hmmm,” Was his response as his eyes turned dark and a sexy smile spread across the lips she had been kissing not five minutes ago.

Reaching around her, their bodies touched as he opened the door. Raina sighed and reluctantly walked inside, wishing they were anywhere, just the two of them.

“Where in the hell have you been?” Bruce paced back and forth glaring at them.

“Bruce, chill.” Wicked warned him before glancing at Zane then Raina giving her a knowing grin. “How was dinner?”

“Fine.” Raina rolled her eyes but couldn’t hide her own smile. Zane remained silent as he walked over to Thorne and sat down at the table. “What’s Bruce freaking out about?”

“Bruce is right here and can answer that.” Bruce looked offended as he glared

at them both. “I talked to Fat Bastard about your situation, and I think he can help.”

This time Wicked rolled her eyes, shaking her head. “Just ignore them. Trust me.”

“Who is, ah, Fat Bastard?” Raina frowned, totally confused about what was going on. She glanced at Zane, who was grinning with a shrug as if saying you’re on your own with this one.

“He’s a good friend of mine who did some online lawyering stuff,” Bruce said as if that explained everything.

“Lawyering?” Raina repeated, then glanced toward where Bruce pointed his paw. “Oh!” She gasped seeing a gray overweight cat licking his paw, his eyes watching her.

“I know.” Bruce nodded, also looking at Fat Bastard. “He isn’t much to look at, but he’s smart.”

“And uses a computer?” Raina’s eyes widened. She knew Bruce could do many things that ordinary cats didn’t do. Talking was the big thing, but using a computer, well, that was a little hard to swallow.

“Ah, yeah.” Bruce looked at her as if she was a fry short of a happy meal. “Cats have to have porn, ya know.”

“Dammit, Bruce, I thought I told you no more porn on the computers.” Thorne roared, glaring at Bruce. “I swear if I open up one of these computers and see a bunch of fucking cats, I’m going to kill you in the most painful way.”

“Whoa!” Bruce held up his paw toward Thorne. “I said it wouldn’t happen again, and it won’t. I use Fat Bastard’s computer now.”

Raina knew her mouth was hanging wide open as she listened to this unbelievable scene. What in the hell was happening? “Cat porn?” She choked out, then started laughing hysterically to the point she couldn’t breathe.

“Are you finished?” Bruce asked, looking a little put out after she tried to shut off her laughter. “Can I continue, please?”

“I don’t know if I can handle it, but yes, please do,” Raina said honestly. She almost peed herself and hoped the cat porn was the last of the crazy surprises.

“As I was saying, Fat Bastard has been doing online lawyering shit and thinks he can help with your situation. Do you have the contract with you? Any evidence you have would be of great help to Mr. Bastard.” Bruce asked as if he was a lawyer himself.

“Oh, ah, yes, I do have it.” Raina tried to take this seriously but was failing miserably. “What does Mr. Bastard charge for his services?” Okay, maybe she wasn’t even trying to take it seriously because this was the absolute funniest situation she had ever found herself in.

“Good question.” Bruce gave her an approving nod. “Mr. Bastard, what will you charge your client for the reading and consultation of the contract.”

“Good God,” Thorne said, rubbing his forehead. “Does it ever end with this fucking cat?”

Raina chanced a glance at Zane, who was smiling so big she let a laugh escape and had to look away from him.

“Mr. Bastard.” Bruce tried to get his friend’s attention, but he was busy licking close to his butt. “Hey, fat ass!”

“What?” Fat Bastard growled and looked up from his duties.

“How much for your services.” Bruce sighed rolling his eyes, then muttered, “Dumb ass.”

Raina was shocked when the cat looked her up and down in a very suggestive manner. “Fifty and a belly rub.”

“Did he just wiggle his eyebrows?” Raina asked shocked feeling as if she needed a shower. “Do cats have eyebrows?”

“Now that sounds like a solid deal for his expertise,” Bruce informed her, ignoring her question. “How about it, Raina? You ready to get this taken care of for fifty and a...belly rub.” Even Bruce shivered at mentioning the belly rub.

“Ah, that will be a no and a hell no.” Raina frowned giving Fat Bastard a

disturbing glare.

“Dammit, Fat Bastard.” Bruce stomped toward his friend. “I told you fifty was too much.”

Raina turned toward Wicked, Thorne, and Zane wide-eyed. “What in the hell just happened?” She then glanced back at the cats, who were arguing back and forth. “Did that really happen, or did I have a stroke and hallucinate that whole scene.”

“Oh, no, it happened.” Wicked sighed with a smirk. “Welcome to my world.”

“Bruce was always...different,” Raina said, walking toward them. “But now he has friends just as—” Raina tried to find the right word, but Wicked finished for her.

“Fucked up as he is.” Wicked nodded, then shook her head. “I’m terrified that one day Thorne will kill him.”

Zane stood and pulled out a chair for her. She sat down with a smile of thanks and then noticed Wicked and Thorne were watching them closely. “What?”

“Thorne is weirdly interested in my love life,” Zane informed her with a cocked eyebrow. “As I’m sure Wicked is with your love life. So when we showed up after dinner, and then I pulled your chair out, they are dying to know what, if anything, is going on between us.”

“Oh, so they are nosey busybodies?” Raina asked, seeing the uncertainty in his eyes. He was leaving it up to her whether or not she wanted anyone to know about them, whatever they was.

“Yes, pretty much.” He replied, searching her eyes for a clue to what she was thinking.

Knowing out of respect for her, he wouldn’t make a move, but Raina had no problems making moves. Reaching up, she touched his scarred jawline, thankful he didn’t flinch away from her. She did see the emotion in his eyes, and it seared her heart. “Then I guess we should give them something to talk about.”

Zane met her halfway, and their lips met. The kiss wasn’t as passionate

because of the audience, but it still curled her toes under the table. Slowly, they both pulled away from each other, their eyes meeting. “Think that will do?”

Raina glanced at Thorne, who was grinning like a lunatic, and then Wicked, whose mouth was wide open. She chuckled, looking back at Zane. “Yeah, I think that will do.”



## CHAPTER 15



“So, you and Raina, huh?” Thorne still wore that huge grin on his face. “I’m happy for you, man. It’s about damn time.”

Zane wasn’t as exuberant as Thorne. Sure, they shared some kisses, but to say that Raina, who was human, would even consider the mate stuff was still up in the air. She hadn’t even asked him about his panther, who he really needed to let run soon. She also hadn’t questioned him about what happened to his face. Not that he liked to talk about it, but it was a part of him, and wouldn’t she want to know that information if she was really interested in a relationship? There were still too many unanswered questions.

“Hey, don’t overthink this shit,” Thorne said, giving him a knowing look. “I’ve been there, and believe me, I overthought everything that came with Wicked. If I had it to do all over again, I would definitely go with the flow.”

“What in the fuck are you talking about?” Zane gave him a narrowed look. “Overthink what?”

“She’s your mate, so don’t fucking try to be a nice guy. If you want her, then fucking get her. I almost lost Wicked to some asshole, and believe me when I tell you not to overthink shit.” Thorne gave him that serious warning.

Zane thought about that, then frowned, his eyes going back to Thorne. “Did you kill the bastard?”

“No.” Thorne sounded disgusted by the fact. “Wicked wouldn’t let me.”

“Pussy.” Zane said then laughed at the sneer Thorne tossed his way.

“Hey, I’m heading over to Fat Bastards for a while,” Bruce informed them as he walked by with Fat Bastard following.

“Scanning the cat porn sites?” Thorne chuckled, shaking his head.

“No,” Bruce grumbled, then lifted his paw as if flipping him off.

“Yeah,” Fat Bastard said, contradicting what Bruce just denied.

“Hey, Fat Bastard,” Zane called out, causing Fat Bastard to stop and look at him. “If you ever look at Raina like that again, I will skin you alive. Got it.”

Fat Bastard nodded, then barreled past Bruce as if his ass was on fire. Zane looked over at Thorne, who was grinning again.

“Did I just threaten a fucking cat for looking at my woman?” Zane asked in disbelief.

“Yeah.” Thorne wheezed with laughter. “You sure as fuck did.”

“Damn,” Zane rubbed his forehead thinking about that one. He definitely had it bad for Raina because there had never been any other woman he would have threatened a cat over. Not a single one.



“DAMN, I’M GOOD.” Wicked said as they cleaned up the kitchen.

“You didn’t cook this. You witched it.” Raina was half paying attention.

“I’m not talking about the food.” Wicked snorted, snapping a dish towel at Raina. “I’m talking about my matchmaking skills. You and Zane.”

“Oh, so you’re taking credit for that, are you? How is that possible when you didn’t even know I was coming until a few days ago?” Raina wiped the counter off and then frowned. “Why in the hell are we cleaning? Witch this shit.”

“Because I wanted to get away from the guys for a minute and stop calling what I do *witching* it.” Wicked sighed then grinned. “And once I saw the way you two were looking at each other, I knew.”

“Oh, you did, did you?” Raina rinsed out the dishtowel and folded it on the counter. “Well, Ms. Matchmaker, we were pretty much at each other’s throats when we first met. So, I don’t know what you saw, but me thinks you saw wrong.”

“Whatever, you guys are together, so I’m taking the credit,” Wicked smirked, smacking her again with the towel.

“Stop it.” Raina grabbed the one she folded and snapped it back at her. As they smacked each other back and forth, Raina’s brain was working overtime. Were she and Zane together, or was this just a...fling while she was here? How did he really feel about her? As those thoughts went through her head, Wicked smacked her a good one on the ass. “Ouch! That one hurt.”

“That’s what you get for not believing in my matchmaking skills.” Wicked smirked, then put the towel away. She leaned against the counter, crossing her arms. “Listen, I talked to Zelda about your situation. I hope you don’t mind.”

“Okay,” Raina said, twirling the dishcloth. “I mean, if you trust her, then I know I can trust her also. I just don’t want to get too many people involved. As much as I want to meet your sister and dad, I’m glad they aren’t here, at least until this mess is straightened out. I already feel like I’ve put you and your family in danger.”

“They will be back after Halloween from their cruise. You will meet them then.” Wicked said, then smiled. “They are going to love you.”

Raina nodded but didn’t say anything. She seriously doubted she would be here then but didn’t want to say anything yet. Raina also knew she had to let them know she had to leave. She had read through the messages on her phone, and each one had gotten more threatening. “Listen Wicked, I don’t know how much longer I can stay here.”

“What do you mean?” Wicked frowned, her eyes narrowed. “And I swear if you say because you are bringing trouble, I’m going to whack you a good one with my towel.”

Raina pulled out her phone, handing it to Wicked. “I went through the messages that were left on my phone. The more I didn’t answer, the more

threatening the messages were. Now he knows they've been read." Raina sighed, rubbing her eyes. "I'm going to have to face this, Wicked. I can't run forever."

Wicked began reading the messages, her face becoming flushed with anger as she continued to scan them. Her phone made a noise as another call was coming through. They ignored it, letting it go to voicemail, but whoever it was never left a voicemail, only text messages. Raina had started out blocking them, but it was a lost cause because a new number would just call. Sure enough, after the call was finished, another text followed.

"A new text." Wicked frowned as she opened it. Raina sided up to her, looking over her shoulder she also read the new text.

*"I have warned you repeatedly that I am not letting this go. You have signed a valid contract with me, Raina. I will go to the ends of the earth, and I will spend every last dollar I have to make sure you fulfill that contract. Do not make things harder on yourself or worse, make it harder on your friends. I know you are with Wicked. I knew you would run to her because you have no one else. I told you I would make you both pay no matter how long it took and soon, very soon, it will be payday for you both."*

"Oh, my God." Raina slapped her hand over her mouth with a gasp.

"That sorry son of a bitch!" Wicked growled, glaring at the phone.

"What?" Thorne and Zane rushed toward them.

Wicked didn't answer Thorne but looked at Raina. "It's him."

"Jacob," Raina whispered, her eyes round with shock. "That's why he didn't leave a voicemail. He knew I would recognize his voice."

"Who the fuck is Jacob, and why am I going to kill the son of a bitch?" Zane demanded, his eyes black as night.

"Our ex." Both Wicked and Raina answered at the same time.

"Wait. What?" Thorne shook his head as if that would help him comprehend what he just heard. "Your ex. Meaning you dated the same asshole?"

"Without knowing we were." Wicked said, her voice shaking in anger.

“Raina figured it out first and came to me. She told me her suspicions, and well, I believed her because I was becoming suspicious myself.”

“We confronted him together, and he just laughed as if it wasn’t a big deal which pissed us both off. So we got his ass fired from the security firm he worked for.” Raina shrugged as if she didn’t care. “He deserved it. He was a total dick.”

“I wanted to put a curse on him, but Raina didn’t let me.” Wicked frowned at her.

“Ah, I didn’t want my new best friend sent to witch prison.” Raina shot back.

“There’s a witch prison?” Zane asked cocking his eyebrow at that news.

“Oh, yeah.” Wicked said with a shudder. “Nasty place, so yeah, I decided against that because with my luck I’d get caught.”

“So we just left it at that, getting him fired because he took us both to his job to show off, making us think he was a big badass and, well, petty or not, he deserved it,” Raina said, glancing at Wicked. “But in turn, he got us fired from our jobs.”

“That’s not all, is it?” Thorne frowned, looking between the two women.

“No, it’s not,” Wicked replied with a sigh. “It seemed this asshole had a thing for tattoo artists, which is how he landed us. Because Raina and I got along so well, we decided to open up a shop together. After six months of being open, a woman came in asking for us both.

“The bastard was married.” Zane cursed at the look on Raina’s face.

“He was married,” Raina confirmed with a sad nod. “With two small children who she brought with her to confront us. I was devastated and swore to make that bastard pay.”

“We told her everything.” Wicked said, then glanced at Raina. “We even wrote affidavits that she took to court, and Raina even testified on her behalf in the divorce proceedings.”

“Felt it would be better for me to do it just in case something came out about Wicked being a real witch,” Raina said, then smiled. “She won. She was

given everything she asked for. Then, about a month after the court date, Jacob showed up at the shop screaming, saying we ruined his life and that he would pay us back if it was the last thing he did. He swore he would take everything from us. I guess because I was the one to testify against him, he made good on his promise.”

“He also wrote whore on our shop as well as our cars. Finally, the cops arrested the bastard and informed us to get a restraining order, which we did. That was the last we heard from him.” Wicked said, then cursed. “Until now. Call that bastard! We got his number now.”

“No.” Thorne shook his head. “Zane and I will handle this.”

“I can’t let you do this.” Raina shook her head. “He isn’t playing. If he took everything away from me, he could do the same to you guys.”

Both Thorne and Zane laughed but then turned serious. “Let him fucking try.” Thorne answered with a growl.

“Do you trust me?” Zane looked her straight in the eye when he asked that question.

Immediately, she knew the answer to that. “Yes, I do.”

“Good.” He gave her a confident smile and then took her in his arms. “I’m sorry this happened to you, but soon you won’t have to worry about this guy.”

Raina nodded, but fear of something happening to him made her want to puke. It had been so long since she trusted anyone, and yet trusting Zane had been so easy. She hoped he didn’t regret meeting her after all was said and done.

## CHAPTER 16



*R*aina was restless, tossing and turning, flipping her pillow a million times. Nothing she did worked. Finally, with a huff, she hopped out of bed and looked out the window. She needed to get some fresh air. The room felt like it was closing in on her.

Throwing on a pair of sweats and a hoodie she had pulled out of her car, she opened the door and stepped out of the room. Stopping, she looked down the hallway to the door she now knew was Zane's. Biting her lip, she tried to find the courage to go to him. She actually wanted to see him more than she wanted fresh air.

Taking a deep breath, she headed down the hallway, stopping in front of his door. Closing her eyes, she lightly knocked. Not hearing movement from inside she knocked one more time a little louder. Disappointed when he didn't answer, she turned away and headed downstairs. Silently, she went to the alarm system and noticed it wasn't set. Wicked had given her the code just in case she needed to go out, and they weren't there.

Walking outside, she closed the door behind her and took a deep breath. The nights were getting cooler, the air brisk as she breathed in. Glancing up at the sky, she smiled at how clear it was. The stars littered the sky, sparkling beautifully. Her gaze moved to the moon, which was almost full. She loved nighttime. It was so peaceful and quiet. You could actually hear yourself think.

The stone beneath her bare feet was cold, but she didn't care. Walking to the

side, she stepped in the grass and wiggled her toes, digging them into the dirt under the grass, and smiled. There wasn't much grass in New York, which was a shame. There was nothing like standing barefoot staring at the stars. Laughing at her thoughts, she shook her head and then walked to her car, which still housed most of her things. The parts were supposed to be here in the next day or two. Zane promised to get it running soon. Tomorrow, he and Thorne were going to New York to confront Jacob. Her stomach twisted at the thought.

Wrapping her arms around her stomach, she leaned against her car and closed her eyes with her head tilted back. Zane asked her to trust him, and she did, but she didn't trust Jacob. He was a terrible person who didn't care who he hurt. Raina really didn't know if this was a good plan or not, but if she said anything, she was afraid Zane would think that she in fact, didn't trust him.

Opening her eyes, she sighed, blinked then jumped when her eyes landed on a sleek black panther. It stood staring at her, its eyes very familiar. Oddly enough, she felt no fear. Pushing herself away from the car she took a step then stopped waiting to see what it would do. It just stood there staring at her.

"Zane?" She whispered, taking another step. The panther made a low growl, showing sharp white teeth, and still, she didn't feel fear. After a few more steps, she was in front of him. Slowly, she reached out and touched his massive head. The fur was sleek and black as night. It pushed its head, which came to her chest, into her hand. Kneeling, she ran her hand over its body as she stared into its eyes. "It's really you." She smiled, tilting her head, watching its silver eyes stare into hers.

Raina didn't know how long she knelt there, just enjoying the panther's presence. Never in her life had she been close to something so magnificent. He stood alert as if protecting her from any danger, and she felt safe, exactly how she felt with Zane. Suddenly, she understood what Zane had really meant when he asked her to trust him. Protection was part of who he was. It all made sense now. Suddenly she wanted to see Zane more than anything.

"Can I have Zane back now? I mean, it was great, ah, meeting you. You're very pretty." The panther snarled, lowering its head. "Handsome. I meant fiercely handsome. Please don't eat me." Raina frowned, realizing quickly that panthers did not like to be called pretty, but he really was pretty.



She watched as the panther backed away, its eyes still on her until he turned and disappeared into the darkness. She waited, wondering if Zane would return. Wrapping her arms around herself, she walked back to her car and leaned against it. The temperature had surely dropped. While near the panther, she had been warm.

“You cold?” Zane’s voice made her jump as she looked that way. He walked toward her shirtless, barefoot, with only a pair of sweats on.

“A little.” She admitted her eyes roaming his body. Man, he was fine. “I met your panther. I called him pretty. I think I hurt his...pride. He snarled at me.”

Zane smiled, taking her into his arms. He rested his chin on the top of her head. “He likes you, but I did tell him not to snarl at you again.”

“I like him too.” She replied with a smile, knowing that they were one and the same, but it was still new to her. “Tell him I’m sorry.”

“He knows.” Zane pulled her away slightly to look down at her. “Does he frighten you.”

Raina shook her head. “The opposite.” She whispered, then touched his face softly. “I felt safe with him like I do with you.”

“I will always keep you safe, Raina,” Zane said before kissing her. “Never will you want for anything. You are my mate, and you are mine.”

“What does that mean?” Raina asked, even though she felt each of his words deep in her soul. They felt right; this felt right.

“Shifters have one mate in their lifetime. If they are lucky enough to find him or her, that is it for them.” Zane began, and she knew he was doing his best to explain, so she remained silent to let him say what he needed. “You are my one and only mate. I will never have feelings for another woman like I do you.”

“But I’m human,” Raina said with a frown. “Does that matter?”

“No.” He shook his head. “It’s rare, but it happens.”

“So, I’m the lucky one.” She smiled up at him.

“No. I’m the lucky one, Raina. I never thought I would find my mate, and for it to be you makes me the luckiest man alive.” He kissed her quickly and then pulled away. “But if you are not comfortable with this, I will understand. As a human, I know this is strange for you.”

“Zane, I think I have waited my whole life for you. Even when we first met, the feelings I had for you were so intense that I couldn’t explain it.” Raina bit her lip; his eyes shifted to her mouth. “Is it possible for a human to have a mate?”

“Yes.” His eyes rose to meet her, looking so hopeful it melted her heart.

“Then you are most definitely my mate.” Raina gave him a radiant smile. “So how do we seal this mate deal? Is there a ritual or something?”

“There is definitely a ritual.” He gave her a sexy wink before kissing her neck.

“Does it involve clothes?” She moaned as he nipped at her skin.

“No, it does not.” His words were spoken in a husky timber of need.

“Mmmm, I really think I’m going to like this mate thing,” Raina said as she kissed him while climbing up his body and wrapped her legs around him. “Make me your mate, Zane.”

He pulled back, searching her eyes. “Are you sure?”

“I have never been more sure of anything in my life,” Raina answered as a tear slipped down her cheek. “I am absolutely in love with you and have been since you saved me in the woods from the big bad wolf. I never believed in love at first sight. Thank you.”

“What are you thanking me for?” He frowned, pulling slightly away so he could see her clearly.

“For saving me.” She whispered, running her thumb across his lips.

He smiled and then kissed her softly. “I love you, Raina. Never doubt that.”

“Make me yours, Zane.” She whispered, laying her head on his chest. Without a word, he turned and carried her not to the house but toward the

woods.

“You were mine the first time I laid eyes on you, Raina,” Zane replied as he carried her deeper into the woods.

Raina savored those words to her very soul, and for the first time in her life, she felt cherished. Never in her wildest dreams did she think she would fall so hard and so deeply in love with a complete stranger. That is exactly what she did.

## CHAPTER 17



Last night had been special for both Raina and Zane. He had lost count of how many times they had made love under the stars. Neither of them wanted the night to end, but it did, and now the reality of their situation was upon them. They both knew that their lives couldn't move forward until Raina's issues were taken care of, and that is exactly what Zane planned to do. No one fucked with his mate.

Zane stood in the kitchen watching Raina play with Jamison and Rose. They were waiting for Zelda and Mac. The four of them were going to New York to confront this son of a bitch. After everything became clear, they had a conference call with Zelda, who had a lot of connections in a lot of high places. And, of course, Mac refused to let her go alone, so he was coming for backup as if Zane couldn't handle this shit alone. Though Thorne had his right to be there since Wicked was also involved, Zane had his ways to persuade assholes.

He could see that Raina was nervous. Her eyes kept darting toward him and then away. She had tried to talk him out of going and to let her handle it, but he refused. It was his job to take care of his mate, and that was exactly what he was going to do. This ended today.

"I hope I don't have to remind you not to let your panther out to play." Thorne, who was sitting at the table, reminded him with a stern look. "We are dealing with a human."

His panther rumbled his displeasure at those words, but the man just gave a

nod. “Yes, Dad,” Zane said, knowing that got on Thorne’s nerves, but in truth, this was the third reminder in less than an hour that he had received. “Maybe if you remind me one more time, it will stick.”

“Fuck you, Zane,” Thorne grumbled, but a grin slid across his face. “And I’m not that much older than you, so stop with the dad shit.”

Zelda appeared suddenly with Mac by her side. Raina yelped, scaring Jamison, who she was dancing around with. “I swear I will never get used to you witches popping in and out. You scared the sh...pit out of me.”

Zane agreed with a chuckle at her quick curse word switch. Wicked allowed no cursing when the children were present.

“Good save.” Wicked pointed a spatula at her.

“Okay, are we ready to get this show on the road and string this Mofo up by his testicles?” Bruce marched into the room, ready for battle. He glanced at Wicked, who was glaring at him. He stopped. “What? I didn’t cuss.”

“You aren’t going anywhere,” Zelda announced, then looked first at Wicked and then at Raina. “You two really know how to pick them.”

“Hey, he was cute.” Wicked said, then rolled her eyes when Thorne growled. “It was before I met you, so chill.”

“Well, I did a lot of digging and made some inquiries,” Zelda said, shaking her head. “He’s acquired quite a lot of money in the last few years. He married up in the world to an older widow who is rolling in the dough. He took his ex-wife to court, took the children away from her, and now she has to pay him child support. She is now living in a shelter. It seems like you two are not the only ones he is out for revenge against.”

“That son of a bitch.” Wicked sneered, stomping around the kitchen. Bruce gasped, pointing at her for cussing in front of the kids. “Shut up, Bruce.”

Zelda looked at Wicked with a concerned frown. “Did this man know you were a witch?”

“No,” Wicked replied without hesitation. “I trust very few humans with that information.”

“Even cute guys?” Bruce snorted at his own dig, making Thorne growl.

“How did you manage to muzzle him so he didn’t open his big mouth?” Thorne sneered at Bruce, who was grinning.

“Good, that makes things easier. I’ve talked to Baba Yaga—” Zelda began, then glanced at Raina. “She is more or less my boss. Let me correct that. She is the boss of all witches. Anyway, I’ve told her everything and have her permission to do whatever it takes to make things right without getting myself sent back to prison.”

“You were in prison?” Raina said, her eyes wide.

“Long story for a different day,” Zelda replied with a smirk. “So now I need you both to give me permission to see things right.”

“You don’t even have to ask because you already know my answer.” Wicked snorted, her eyes still narrowed in anger. “Make him pay for not only what he did to Raina but his ex-wife and children.”

Zane watched Raina nod, giving her own permission. He wanted nothing more than to go, beat this dude’s ass, and get back so he could start his life with his mate. She glanced his way as if searching for his reassurance. He gave it to her with a wink and nod.

“How did you find out all of this?” Raina asked, impressed with the information Zelda had.

“Because I’m damn good,” Zelda said with a confident nod. “Don’t worry. I got you, Raina. However, I do need that contract if you have it.”

“I do. It’s in my car.” Raina said, heading toward the door. “I’ll get it.”

Zane followed her out and waited while she rummaged through her things before climbing out with the contract in her hand. She turned quickly and ran right into him. “Whoa.” He steadied her, taking the contract from her shaking hand.

“Sorry.” She gave him a wobbly smile. “I’m just nervous, and I’m really getting sick of living out of my car.” She rolled her eyes, giving him a fake laugh.

“Do you trust me, Raina?” Zane cupped her chin, bringing her gaze up to his.

“Yes.” She nodded with a sigh. “I do trust you, Zane, but you have to understand I have always had to take care of myself. Never have I had anyone...like you in my life.” Her tears spilled down her cheeks.

“Hey,” Zane knelt in front of her, which made them close to equal height. “I’ve never had anyone like *you* in my life either.” His thumb slowly swiped at a lone tear. “This is new to both of us, but know that I will always take care of you, keep you safe, and love you with everything I have. But I need that promise from you also.”

“You have that promise.” She whispered, her lips trembling. “Though I seem to make a mess of things. Just thought you needed to know that, so if you want to change your mind.”

Zane laughed, kissing her forehead. “I will never change my mind, and if it makes you feel better, I’m a very messy homeowner. So you help me with my messes, and I’ll help you with yours.”

Raina nodded, a smile shining through the tears that still flowed. “I love you, Zane. Thank you for doing this.”

Zane kissed her and then whispered on her lips. “I love you.” He pulled away, looking straight into her eyes. “And never thank me for doing what’s right by you. As your mate, that is my main priority, always.”

“For Goddess’s sake.” Zelda said from behind Zane. “Do that after. We need to get a move on before the asshole leaves for the weekend. I have a Halloween party to get ready for which I expect you both to be there.”

Smiling, Zane gave her a wink. “I expect to see you in a sexy witch costume.”

“I think I can make that happen.” She replied, giving him a sultry smile.

Zane moaned, going in to kiss her one more time, but was stopped when Mac grabbed the back of his neck, pulling him away. “Come on, lover boy, time to go.”

Just as they disappeared, Zane saw the worried look on Raina’s face, and he

swore just as the swirling colors of transport surrounded him, he would never see that worried look on her face again.



## CHAPTER 18



Zane, Thorne, Mac, and Zelda ended up inside an empty office. Zane looked around, confused. “Where are we?”

“Where we need to be,” Zelda said, looking at her nails. “Patience is a virtue, Shifter.” Zelda waved her finger, and the office was instantly furnished. Zelda walked over to the large oak desk and sat down, looking regal.

“She is brutal when at work,” Mac stated with a proud smile.

Just then, a door opened, and in walked a tall man with clean-cut black hair. His blue eyes were stark against his fake tan. He was athletically built. Both Thorne and Zane growled at the sight of the man.

“Calm down, boys. Your time will come.” Zelda said, then turned her attention to the man who looked extremely uncomfortable and a little terrified. “Mr. Jacob Livingston?”

“Yes.” He said after clearing his throat, his eyes looking Zelda over, and his face clearly expressed he liked what he saw. “I’m sorry, but what is going on?” He looked at the three angry men standing protectively around Zelda.

“The ad you answered was false, Mr. Livingston. We will not be going out to dinner or anything else for that matter.” Zelda remarked with a cocked eyebrow. Then she put a hand on Mac’s arm when he took a threatening step toward him. “You are a married man, which you didn’t express in our messages. And for a married man, you seem to be on the single’s ads quite a bit, looking for your next victim since it was just last night that I posted.”

“I’m currently separated.” He muttered, his face red as he glared at her. “Not that it’s any of your business.”

“I do think your sweet wife would disagree.” Zelda frowned with a tsking sound. Just then, there was a knock on the door. “Mac, could you please get that for me?”

Mac walked toward the door, passing the man with an angry glare and trembling growl. Zane grinned at the fear he saw on the man’s face but was ready to stop Mac from killing the son of a bitch because that would be his job.

A pretty older woman walked inside, smiling up at Mac, and then her eyes fell on Jacob Livingston. Her smile faded as she looked at him with disdain.

“Beverly?” Jacob frowned, looking from her to Zelda. “What have you done?”

“Oh, I can’t take credit for the mess your life is about to be. That honor belongs to you.” Zelda smiled, standing to greet the older woman. “Thank you for coming, Beverly. It’s finally nice to meet you.”

The woman nodded at Zelda and then looked at the men before sitting down in the seat Zelda offered. “To say I was surprised by your call would be a lie. I have suspected things, and after talking to you, I knew I wasn’t crazy.”

“Beverly! What in the fuck are you doing?” Jacob took only two steps toward his future ex-wife but was stopped when Zane cut him off with a hard push.

“You speak to her like that again, and I will knock every tooth you have down your throat.” He gave him one last push, then positioned himself next to him, which wasn’t easy to do, but he promised Zelda to let her have her time before she let Zane and Thorne loose on the bastard.

“Who are you?” His eyes were wide as he looked up at Zane, his eyes going to his scars then quickly away.

Zane leaned close and whispered with a sneer, “Your worst fucking nightmare.”

“Beverly, here is the paperwork to file for divorce. All you have to do is sign.

I will sign as your witness. Nothing has been changed on what we talked about.” Beverly didn’t hesitate to sign. “I will make sure these are filed for you.”

Beverly stood and smiled at Zelda. “Thank you so much for everything.” She turned and walked in front of Jacob. “You should be ashamed for what you did to that poor girl, not to mention your ex-wife. I knew nothing about any of this, but now I do, and I have seen the proof. You best get a good lawyer because you will never see another penny from me.”

“They are lying. None of what they are saying is true. Beverly!” Jacob said in a begging tone. The older woman didn’t say another word as she walked out the door, but not before Jacob turned to his true character. “Old fucking bitch.” He yelled out just as the door shut.

Zane didn’t hold back. He punched out, hitting the asshole in the jaw knocking him to the ground. Suddenly, there was an invisible force holding him back. He growled, trying to break free.

“I am not finished, Zane,” Zelda warned, and he knew that it was her magic holding him back. With a curse, he backed off. “Good. Mac, pick him up and sit him in the chair, please, without further damage. I need him clear-headed for just a few more minutes.”

Zane’s smile was wicked as he watched the blood pour out of the man’s mouth. His panther was pacing inside his mind, wanting more blood, and so did the man.

“Can I have something to wipe the blood?” Jacob kept looking at the blood on his hand.

“No,” Zelda said, putting papers in front of him as well as a pen. “This will resolve your rights to your children and give full custody back to your ex-wife, Melinda, effective immediately.”

“I will never sign that,” Jacob said, then spat blood on the paperwork. “Fuck you bitch. You can’t make me do anything.”

“Oh, but I can, and I will,” Zelda said, her voice sickeningly sweet. With the swipe of her hand over the papers, the blood disappeared. She then twirled her finger, and his hand involuntarily lifted picking up the pen, and signed the

paper. She studied the paperwork quickly, and then it disappeared from her fingers. “Okay, that’s filed. Now let me see.”

“What are you?” Jacob stared at her wide-eyed seemingly forgetting all about his bloody mouth.

Zelda looked up at him from the papers she was looking at and gave him an evil smile. “Someone you never want to fuck with, Jacob.” She laid a new set of papers down in front of him. “Nor do you ever want to fuck with my friends, which is exactly what you have done. This is the contract that you falsely had Raina sign. As of today, this is the new contract dissolving the fake one. You do not nor will you ever have one second of that girl’s life to do as you please. You will also give her every single cent back that is owed to her. Is that understood?”

“This is what this is about?” Jacob tried to stand but was stopped when Zane slammed him back into his chair. “Fuck her. She deserved everything she got. She ruined my life. You might make me sign that paper, but I will go in front of a judge and tell them exactly what you did to me. Raina is a whore, and so is that bitch Wicked.”

Zane grabbed the back of the man's head, slamming his face into the desk. His teeth bared as Thorne fought Mac to get to the bastard. Zane was about to do it again, but Zelda stopped him.

“Enough,” Zelda ordered, her eyes narrowed on Jacob, whose blood from his broken nose mixed with the blood from his mouth. Once again, she used her magic to make him sign the now clean document. “You, Jacob Livingston, are on my radar. What has transpired here is done. I will be watching your every move as well as these men, and if you make one misstep, I will risk prison to make sure you never take advantage of a woman again, and that includes your ex-wives. Do you understand me? Today, what I did was mild compared to what I am capable of.”

“Fuck you.” He hissed, blood spewing from his lips.

Zelda slammed her hands on the desk and then stood, her eyes narrowed on Jacob. “Looks like Jacob needs an education in what I am capable of.”

The room became full of static as a rainbow of color came out of Zelda’s

hands. Wind began to blow, swirling around them, making it hard for even Zane to remain on the spot. Out of blackness that formed in front of them came two panthers and a wolf stalking toward a trembling Jacob. One panther walked straight up to Jacob, its mouth opened, and a sinister growl escaped its throat. The panther jerked toward Jacob, who pushed the chair back, almost falling over to get away from the beast. Zane smiled, loving every single fucking minute of the show. And then suddenly, everything stopped and disappeared.

“Let’s try this again.” Zelda bent down glaring into Jacob’s face. “Do you understand me now?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He said, his voice cracking in fear as he nodded like a bobblehead.

“That’s what I thought,” Zelda said, then smiled looking at Thorne, Zane, and Mac. “See, boys, violence isn’t always necessary.”

“I disagree with that,” Zane growled, glaring at Jacob.

“Now you may proceed,” Zelda said, sitting back down. “But no killing.”

Zane picked Jacob up by the throat, slamming him against the wall. “I am Raina’s mate.” He hissed in Jacobs’s terrified face. “If you ever try to do anything to her again, I will kill you in the most painful way and then rip you apart. Not only did Zelda ask me not to kill you, but so did Raina. This one time, you get a free pass but know if I even get a hint that you have mentioned her name, I will hunt you down.” He finished by letting out his panther’s growl as his eyes shifted to his panthers. He stayed that way long enough that Jacob cried out in fear. Tossing him to Thorne, he backed off to get his panther in check. Doing what he just did took a lot of control to not let his panther take him over completely.

Standing slightly away while Thorne had his say, Zane tried to quiet the roaring in his head. Every single instinct he possessed had him wanting to kill the son of a bitch, but out of his respect for Raina, he held those instincts at bay.

“Anything else before I send this asshole out of here?” Zelda asked, looking at each of them.

“Yeah,” Zane responded, then walked up to Jacob, once again pushing him against the wall. “Where is Raina’s artwork?”

## CHAPTER 19



Today was Halloween and Raina was excited. She was finally going to meet everyone who lived in Assjacket. After Zane got back from New York, she and Wicked had been filled in on everything that happened. Zane had been right, and she was glad she trusted him, as well as Zelda, to handle the problem with Jacob better than she ever could.

“You ready?” Wicked peeked into her room with a smile. She was dressed as a sexy Raggedy Ann doll and looked adorable.

“You’re not going as a witch?” Raina asked with a frown. “Though you do look amazing as Raggedy Ann.”

“I am a witch.” Wicked wrinkled her nose. “What fun would that be? Honestly, I hate dressing up, but Zelda has warned me repeatedly if I show up without a costume, she will pick one out herself and make me wear it. So, is it a witch for you?”

“Of course,” Raina said excitedly. “It’s tradition for me.”

“Sexy or spooky? Evil or ugly?” Wicked questioned, tapping a finger to her chin.

“Zane wants me sexy, and well, I’ve done all the others, so, yeah, sexy.” Raina blushed and then rolled her eyes. “Kid-friendly, though.”

Wicked laughed then wiggled her eyebrows. “This will blow Zane’s mind as well as other body parts.” She said with a wink, twirled her finger, and then whistled as she looked at Raina.

Raina rushed to the floor-length mirror and gasped. “Oh, wow.” She twirled, looking at herself in the mirror. The skirt was black and orange striped; her shirt was a tight black button-down with puffed sleeves. Her black boots came up past her knees, and the hat was the best witch hat she had ever seen. Her hair and make-up looked amazing.

“This is perfect!” Raina clapped excitedly and then hugged Wicked. “Thank you. And I’m still jealous I can’t do this.”

“Hey, that’s why you got me. Just tell me what you want, and you got it.” Wicked gave her a tight squeeze. “Okay, I got to run. I told Zelda I would help out, and I’m already late. First, I need to zap you somewhere, so don’t freak out.”

“Zap me where?” Raina frowned, not happy with that. “Wicked you know how much I hate zapping and alone at that.”

“I think you will like what is waiting for you.” She grinned and then waved her finger. “See you soon. Oh, and Raina.”

“Yeah,” Raina looked away from the mirror where she was looking at herself again.

“Be careful bending over in that skirt unless you and Zane are alone.” Wicked gave her a wink just as everything went black to colorful. Suddenly she was in a dark room, she couldn’t see anything. Stumbling, she felt strong hands grasp her. She immediately screamed in fear, slapping at the invisible hands.

“Raina, it’s me.” Zane’s voice instantly calmed her.

“I hate being zapped,” Raina said, holding tightly to Zane. “Where are we?”

“Holy shit,” Zane’s voice turned husky. “You look absolutely beautiful.”

Raina frowned. “How can you see anything? It’s pitch black in here.”

“I can see perfectly, and I can also see that I am going to have to refrain from killing every man at the party tonight.” Zane’s fingers brushed the tops of her breasts that were pushed up and out of her black shirt. “How badly do you want to go to this party? We could have our own little party here.” He



whispered in her ear, sending chills up and down her body.

“I was looking forward to meeting everyone, but...” She felt her body responding to his touch, responding to the man holding her. She rubbed herself against him.

Zane groaned and then pushed away from her. “Okay, let’s slow down.”

She tried to pull him back, but he refused. “You started it.”

His laughter in the darkness made her smile. “Oh, I most definitely did and will be finishing it later.” He stopped her roaming hands with another chuckle. “I have a surprise for you.”

“Will I be able to see it,” Raina said with a snort. “It’s so dark.”

“Yes, smartass, you will be able to see it.” He teased, giving her ass a gentle slap and then a rougher rub, causing her to moan. “Close your eyes.”

“But I can’t see anything anyway.” She said, then heard his sigh. “Fine. They are closed.”

“I know I can see that,” Zane said as he moved away from her.

Raina felt a little discombobulated without him near her. Then she knew the lights had been turned on but kept her eyes closed.

“Okay, open,” Zane said with a hint of excitement in his voice.

She opened her eyes, blinking quickly a few times to try to get them to focus, and what she saw brought instant tears to her eyes. “Oh, my God.” She slapped her hand over her mouth as she stared at the artwork displayed on every wall. Her artwork. “How?”

“Let’s just say after everyone was finished with that bastard, he was more than willing to cooperate.” He took her hand, walked her around, then opened a door. He flipped on the lights, and once again, she gasped in shocked surprise. “I wanted you to have a place for your art and to create art. Whatever I didn’t get that you need just tell me and I will make sure you get it.”

Raina stared in awe, shaking her head at how thoughtful this man truly was.

Not only in words did he tell her he loved her, but in his actions as well. Turning, she wrapped her arms around him, holding him close as if she was trying to make sure he was real. “Thank you, Zane. No one has ever done anything like this for me before.” She looked up at him. “How did I get so lucky?”

“I ask myself that same question every day since I met you.” Zane touched the softness of her cheek. She did the same, but her hand lovingly cupped his scarred jaw. “You never did ask me what happened to my face.”

Searching his eyes, she then looked at the scars before raising her gaze to his. “It doesn’t matter to me. Your scars are a part of you. I figured when you are ready, you would tell me.”

“Bruce,” Zane said with a straight face.

“Bruce?” Raina’s head snapped back with wide eyes. “Did that?”

A smile suddenly appeared as he laughed. “You should have seen your face.” He chuckled, and his eyes twinkled. “If Bruce did this, he would be bragging until I killed him. It was a long time ago. I got into a fight with a bear shifter. In the end, I won the fight but suffered for it.”

“Why were you fighting?” Raina ran her thumb along the deepest scar.

“He attacked my friend’s sister. We hunted for him, and I found him first.” Zane said as shadows filled his eyes.

“You’re a good man, Zane.” She leaned up, kissing him softly. “I love you.”

“And I love you.” He whispered, picking her up to deepen the kiss. “I know this isn’t New York, but I hope you decide to stay, and if not, then I will follow you to the ends of the earth, even New York.”

“Not much of a city guy, are you?” She teased, then laughed when he shook his head. “I have no desire to go back to New York. I want to be here with you, with family and friends. You are my home.”



RAINA AND ZANE finally made it to the party. It was late, but they made it. They decided to initiate her new art studio...twice.

Glancing over at Zane, she frowned. "Why didn't you dress up? I heard Zelda gets really upset when people don't wear costumes. Plus, we are late."

"I did," Zane responded with a half grin.

"Ah, no, you didn't." Raina shot back, looking him up and down. When he remained silent, she stopped. "Okay, what is your costume? Panther dressed as a human?"

"Hmmm, I like that, but no." He shook his head and then looked down at her. "I'm a man in love."

"Oh, nice answer." Raina kissed his scarred jaw. "But I don't think that is going to fly with Zelda."

"I'll take my chances." Zane wrapped his arm around her with a wink.

Walking toward the crowd of people, Raina noticed Bruce walking slowly with his head hung low. Pulling Zane with her, she headed toward the most dejected cat she had ever seen.

"Hey," She called to Bruce. He stopped, looked up at them, then continued to walk away. "Bruce?"

"What?" Bruce's voice was tense.

"What's wrong?" Raina kept pace with him, which wasn't hard. Zane followed, still holding her hand.

Bruce stopped and then looked up at them, but not before kicking out at a small rock. "I had the perfect costume." Bruce hissed, then glared toward the crowd before looking back at them. "But Zelda said *it wasn't kid-friendly*." Bruce made his voice sound like Zelda, which was impressive.

"Why?" Raina was a little afraid to ask but asked anyway.

"I had my balls encased in gold. I was my own golden ball statue." Bruce said, tossing another glare toward the crowd.

"Wasn't that painful?" Zane asked with a cringe.

Bruce snorted. “No, but you know what was painful? Having Fat Bastard wrapping my balls with gold foil was what was painful. And for what?” Bruce kicked another rock with a curse. “Now everyone is going to know that Fat Bastard touched my balls, and I ain’t got nothing to show for it. No pictures, no nothing.”

“Oh,” Raina said, clearing her throat and trying to absorb what she had just been told.

“Yeah, oh, is right.” Bruce sighed, shaking his head. “Nothing ever goes right for me.”

She felt terrible because this was all her fault. She was the one who put the golden balls and the Hall of Fame stuff in his head. “Listen, Bruce, how about if I paint you with your golden balls.”

“What?” Bruce perked up at hearing this.

“Yeah. What?” Zane looked at her like she had lost her mind.

“You would do that? For me?” Bruce asked wide-eyed.

“Sure.” Raina nodded, not really wanting to paint cat balls, but for Bruce, she would. “I got you, friend.”

“Yes!” Bruce smiled excitedly, then trotted off. “Wait until fat ass hears about this. I’m going to have my own painting done of my balls.”

Raina grinned and then looked up at Zane, who was frowning at her. “Stop looking at me like that. If you only knew the things I’ve tattooed on men and where, you would totally understand that this will be a piece of cake.”

“Do not tell me anything you have done on or with men ever again unless you want me to hunt them down and kill them,” Zane ordered with a serious warning in his tone.

“Jealous?” She batted her eyelashes at him.

“Whoa, where have you been hiding her Zane?” A handsome man walked past, eyeing Raina up and down.

“She’s my mate, Seth.” Zane snarled at the man in warning. “Watch

yourself.”

“Oh, shit.” Seth’s steps quickened. “Sorry, man.”

“Very jealous and territorial,” Zane warned her but ended up giving her a half smile.

“I’m not going anywhere, Zane.” She promised, then started to lift her arms to wrap around his neck.

“Whoa, don’t do that.” He grabbed her arms and then wrapped them around his waist. “When you lift your arms, your skirt goes up.”

“Oh,” Raina said, then frowned. “Is that why you were making me reach up to straighten pictures that I said weren’t crooked.”

“Guilty.” Zane laughed, not even trying to hide his deceit. “Shit, Wicked is waving us over. Guess it’s time to introduce you to everyone.”

“Don’t you want me to meet everyone?” Raina looked over at him as they made their way toward Wicked.

“Yeah, but I really like keeping you to myself.” Zane tossed her a wink as he pulled her tighter against him. Raina knew he was letting everyone at the party know that she was his, and she was absolutely fine with that.

“Dammit Raina!” Wicked hissed as they walked up to her and Thorne. “Did you tell Bruce you would paint a portrait of his golden balls?”

All Raina could do was laugh and nod. For the first time, Raina felt as if she belonged, and it felt wonderful. She had missed Wicked and Bruce. She was finally home. Wicked just rolled her eyes, but there was a hint of a smile on her face, while Bruce, on the other hand, walked past them with Fat Bastard.

“Dude, this is a once-in-a-lifetime thing for me, buddy.” Bruce’s voice sounded pleading.

“I told you I am not touching your fucking balls again.” Fat Bastard muttered in disgust. “Once was more than enough, and fifty bucks definitely wasn’t worth it. Find someone else.”

“Fine. I will, but you’re missing out. This could be huge, and I’m not talking

about my huge nuggets...asshole.” Bruce watched Fat Bastard waddle away. With a huff, he looked around, spotting another one of his cat friends. “Hey, Fred, wait up. I have an opportunity of a lifetime for you, buddy.”

## AFTERWORD

To check out all the side-splitting books in the Magic and Mayhem Universe, go to <https://magicandmayhemuniverse.com/>

And if you would like to read the book that started all the madness, Switching Hour is FREE!

<https://robynpeterman.com/switching-hour/>

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

## More About the Author

Teresa Gabelman is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* best-selling author of the Protectors series, Lee County Wolves series, and Stone's Wolf Sanctuary. When not writing about alpha vampires, sexy shifters, and the women who drive them crazy, she can be found on a lake with a fishing pole and Kindle, spending a fun evening with family.

Being a full-time writer has allowed Teresa to connect more with readers, which is what she loves most about writing. If you find the time, she would love to hear from you!

Email: [tgabelman@live.com](mailto:tgabelman@live.com)

