

The background of the cover is a photograph of a muscular man from the waist up, seen from behind. He is shirtless, showing his back muscles, and is wearing dark jeans with a silver belt buckle. His hands are on his hips. The background is a dramatic sky with a large, bright full moon and some clouds. In the top right corner, there is a circular logo with the text "THE MOON SERIES".

THE
MOON
SERIES

"Dark, dangerous, and addictive.
I couldn't put it down."

—ANGIE FOX,
New York Times bestselling author

Moonlight

Embrace your destiny...

LISA
KESSLER

The book cover features a muscular man from the waist up, seen from behind. He is shirtless, wearing a dark cap and dark jeans with a black belt. His hands are in his pockets. The background is a dramatic sky with a large, bright full moon on the left and a crescent moon on the right. The title 'Moonlight' is written in a large, flowing, golden script across the man's back. The author's name 'LISA KESSLER' is at the bottom in white serif font. A quote from Angie Fox is in the upper left, and the publisher's logo is at the bottom left.

THE
MOON
SERIES

"Dark, dangerous, and addictive.
I couldn't put it down."
—ANGIE FOX,
New York Times bestselling author

Moonlight

Embrace your destiny...

LISA
KESSLER

entangled. EDGE

MOONLIGHT

Lisa Kessler

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

Copyright © 2013 by Lisa Kessler. All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce, distribute, or transmit in any form or by any means. For information regarding subsidiary rights, please contact the Publisher.

Entangled Publishing, LLC
2614 South Timberline Road
Suite 109
Fort Collins, CO 80525
Visit our website at www.entangledpublishing.com.

Edited by Danielle Poiesz and Theresa Cole
Cover design by Kim Killion

Ebook ISBN 978-1-62266-108-4

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Edition July 2013

The author acknowledges the copyrighted or trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction: Aerosmith, Bellevue Hospital, Batmobile, Bat-Signal, Batsuit, Blu-Ray, Bruce Wayne, CatDog, Chrysler, Circus Circus, Crock-Pot, *Dark Knight*, Dr. Pepper, Dracula, General Hospital, *The Godfather*, Google, Hot Rod Cafe, Hummer, the Intimidator, Irish Spring, Jeep, Klonopin, Levis, Lexus, Little League, Mack, Macy's, Mercedes, Microsoft Word, Natural Glo, Old Spice, Papa John's, PayPal, Polo Ralph Lauren, Ringling Brothers, *San Antonio Express-News*, Starbucks, Stetson, Taser, *Three Amigos*, Trazodone, TSA, Twilight Zone, Wi-Fi, *Women's Day*, Yahoo!, Yellow Pages, Zest.

For Ken -

Who read the short story and convinced me there was a book to be written.

I love you!

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Forty](#)

[Chapter Forty-One](#)

[Chapter Forty-Two](#)

[Chapter Forty-Three](#)

[Chapter Forty-Four](#)

[Chapter Forty-Five](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Chapter One](#)

Chapter One

LANA

“I’ll have an Intimidator with extra bacon and two baskets of Cajun fries.” I handed my menu to the waitress, who raised a judgmental brow.

“That’s an awful lot of food for a tiny thing like you.”

I was actually twenty-five, but without ID to prove it, a truant officer would probably haul me right back to high school.

“Yeah, well, I’ve got a big appetite so...” I kept the fact that even though I looked small I could probably wrestle the big guy at the counter to the floor in a heartbeat to myself. I could also eat fast. With any luck, I’d be out of there before the creeps in the matching jumpsuits tracked me down again.

The waitress glanced over to the ladies room and back again. I rolled my eyes. “Look, I’m not binging and purging. Can I just have the burger and fries? Please?” I debated asking for dessert, too, but my order should’ve been enough food to keep me from getting blood on my hands later.

“Of course.” She snatched the menu from me and hustled away before I could give her my drink order.

Great. Oh well, I wasn’t thirsty anyway.

After fidgeting with the silverware, unfolding the paper napkin, and placing it in my lap, I glanced around the restaurant. I was running out of things to keep myself busy, and my paranoia grew with every passing second. Sighing, I peered out the window across the parking lot and then up at the dark night sky. No followers. No moon either.

I shivered. The new moon hadn’t been my friend in years.

Each new moon night meant waking up someplace I’d never been before,

without any memory of how I got there. The sleepwalking started around the time I turned eighteen. At least that's what I hoped it was—it *seemed* like sleepwalking. But my body only reacted in time with the phases of the moon, Lunar Phases. I'm pretty sure that's where we get the word "lunatic" but don't quote me on that.

Over the years, I learned to deal with "it," but not so much what "it" might be. And last year after a visit to Bellevue, I thought I might finally be getting closer to figuring out this odd monthly cycle of mine, but it only made my world unravel even further.

Then there was the squirrel incident.

My gut retched at the memory, and I checked over my shoulder. New moon nights made me tense, but this one seemed different. Something felt off.

I faced the table again, shaking my head. Nothing looked suspicious. No men in white coats armed with sedatives in the next booth.

Maybe I'd finally lost them.

It wasn't like Bellevue Hospital in L.A. would find me here in The Hot Rod Café in Reno and lock me up while I waited for my bacon cheeseburger and two baskets of fries. They wouldn't come this far. At least I hoped not.

So why did my heart race like crazy?

The bell on the door jingled.

Oh, God. They found me.

The hair on the back of my neck prickled, and my muscles knotted with adrenaline, aching to run, to escape. Cold sweat beaded along my spine as I fought stay in my seat. Forcing my lungs to breathe, I made a conscious effort to keep from hyperventilating and did my best not to let the panic show on my face when I turned around.

A tall, dark-haired man filled the open doorway, wearing blue jeans and a black Aerosmith concert tee. His bright green eyes scanned the restaurant, and I caught myself staring. I couldn't help it.

He was maybe six feet tall, but I sucked at guessing heights. His black leather boots were scuffed—more like hiking boots than biker boots—and he

wore a heavy silver chain around his neck with some sort of pendant hanging in the center of his chest. His very well-muscled and very broad chest.

When he looked my way, my jaw snapped shut. His dark hair was messy in that way that looks dangerous on a guy but sloppy on a girl. From under his stray locks, his gaze connected with mine. I was pretty sure I started gnawing at my lower lip. It was a bad habit, but I usually did it when I got nervous. Either way, he took it as an invitation of some sort.

I didn't have a great grasp of what guys considered a "come hither" look, so maybe I gave him one. I'd thought it was a "leave me the hell alone" look, but who knew.

When he got to my table, my gaze caught on the pendant around his neck—a bullet. Or at least it looked like a bullet. Weird. My eyes moved farther up, to see his face. The right corner of his mouth twisted into what might have been a smile, but my alarm bells rang inside. *Time to get out of the restaurant.*

"Aren't you going to invite me to sit?"

I frowned and rubbed my moist hands against my jeans. "I wasn't planning on it. There are plenty of other tables open."

He glanced around the café and then at me again. My pulse shot up in response.

"You're not at any of the other tables." Even with curls of hair hanging in his face, his emerald eyes bore into me.

"That's the point." Hopefully my voice carried more conviction than I felt. Stupid hormones. Gorgeous or not, I had no idea who he was or why he seemed so intent on my company. I had to get rid of him. "I wasn't looking for company."

He shrugged his broad shoulders. "Neither was I."

"Good, then go sit someplace else."

Oh, thank God. The waitress headed over with a huge tray piled high with my food. Saved by a burger.

He stepped aside to let her work, and when all the baskets were on the table, the waitress straightened and looked at tall-dark-and-handsome at

twelve o'clock. He stood there shamelessly while she gave him a slow once-over.

She glanced at me with a wry smile. "Is this gentleman with you?"

I opened my mouth to answer, but he beat me to it.

"Yes, I am." He plopped down across from me in the booth and winked. "Thanks for ordering fries for me, doll."

The waitress seemed satisfied and sashayed back to the kitchen. I glared at my unwanted dinner guest and picked up my one-pound bacon cheeseburger. "I'm *not* your 'doll,' and these fries are *not* for you."

"You've got quite an appetite for a little thing."

"Yeah, so I've heard." I shot an evil-eyed glare toward the waitress, couldn't help it.

"So what's your game?" He leaned closer and lowered his voice. "What the hell are you doing here during new moon?"

I almost choked on my burger.

Dabbing my mouth with the napkin, I scooted up in my seat a little. Up close his eyes looked like a dense forest of green. Easy to get lost in them if you looked too long. And I was getting lost. *Crap! Focus, Lana.*

He couldn't possibly know about me and the new moon. Unless... But he didn't look like the type who worked in a psych hospital.

I leaned back again and forced my mouth to move. "I don't know what you're talking about."

He pressed his large hands flat on the table, his shoulders tensed, and something in his eyes looked...confused? "I smelled you from outside the building. Why do you think I came in here?"

Without thinking, I kicked him under the table. Hard. I also took more than a little satisfaction in seeing the surprise on his face. "If you're *trying* to sweep me off my feet, telling me I stink isn't the way to do it."

He smirked. "If I were trying to sweep you off your feet, you'd be swept. Period." His tone was deep, leaving me unsure if he was threatening or teasing.

"Wow! You've managed to elevate pompous to an art form." I snapped up

a few fries and gave him my best get-lost glare. "Leave me alone."

His eyes narrowed on me, but then the door opened and he spun around. Four men in matching gray riot gear came in. The burger I ate turned to stone in my stomach.

I'd seen the leader's face in my rearview mirror before. They were here for me.

My unwelcome companion got up to intercept them. "Can I help you?"

His broad shoulders blocked my view. I hoped that went both ways and the goons couldn't see me either.

The leader came closer. "This doesn't concern you."

I shimmied under the table and slid out of the booth. The head guy rested his hand on his gun. My heart raced. I couldn't let somebody get shot because of me, but my years of self-defense classes didn't really prepare me for a group of armed, trained attackers.

"I think they're here for me."

My dinner date didn't take his attention off the ring leader. "I don't care who they came for. No reason for them to come in here with guns."

The mention of guns sent gasps around the café. I sent up a silent prayer that someone in the bathroom was calling 911.

The leader didn't move. "Step away from the lady."

"Can't help you there. Why don't we take this outside?"

"I don't have time for this, asshole." He nodded his head and his goons lunged forward to grab my protector's arms.

He yanked his arms inward, cracking the goons' heads together with a hollow thump. One of his arms came free and he used it to send another one of the men sailing across the café. The man's head crashed through the pie display case and his body lay limp. My muscled friend punched the second man in the chin, knocking him off his feet.

While he fought, the leader drew his weapon. "Watch out!" I shouted.

He tackled the leader around the waist just as the pistol fired. Screams pierced my ears and glass shattered. Hopefully that meant the bullet exited the building without hitting anyone. One more punch and the man lay

motionless on the floor.

My hands trembled at my sides while I kicked the gun away from his fingertips. Cyrus was embroidered on the upper left of his riot gear. He looked much less threatening when he was unconscious. Before I turned to go, I noticed something on the inside of his wrist. I squatted closer. The inside of his wrist had a tattoo, a lion's head with an "N" branded in the center. My chest constricted as I squinted my eyes for a better look. I'd seen that emblem before.

I'm losing it. All I needed was to pass out here in front of all these people. I took a step toward the door when my protector grabbed my hand. The moment I gripped his, he stumbled and glanced at me over his shoulder, frowning.

He blinked and shook it off before I ran toward the exit with him. "Sirens." It took a second before I heard the familiar sound. He had some crazy amazing hearing. "We need to go. Now."

I agreed completely. Dodging glass and bodies, we made it to the door. Outside, I yanked my hand free and glanced at my rental car in the parking lot. At this point, driving probably wasn't a great idea since I could lose consciousness at any time during the new moon. Shit.

"We can't be here when the police arrive."

His voice jarred me from my thoughts and I managed a nod.

"Good." His lip began to curl up into a smile, and then his expression quickly blanked. "Let's run."

I turned to bolt in the other direction, but his large hand caught my arm.

"This way. Away from the city." Electrical pulses shot up my arm, probably shock from almost being shot. Or the new moon working its craziness on me. How long could I run before I blacked out?

Whoever this guy was, his instincts were good. The last thing I wanted was to be sleepwalking in downtown Reno. When we got a few miles from the café, he slowed. I should've been winded, but I wasn't even out of breath.

"Thanks for helping me ditch those guys back there." Brushing my hair back from my face, I stared up at the handsome stranger who just saved my

bacon. "I don't even know your name."

"I'm Adam." He offered his hand and I shook it, feeling that same strange tingle.

"Lana. You were pretty amazing tossing those guys around back there."

He shrugged, his muscular shoulders rolling back. "Who were those guys, and why are they after you?"

The image of the tattoo inside the gunman's wrist popped into my head again. What did it mean? I forced my focus back to Adam. I'd have to figure it out later.

"I should be asking you the same question. You came looking for me. Why?" I jammed my hands in my pockets, reminding myself that I had a cylinder of pepper spray and my cell phone. Just in case.

His eyes narrowed. "Because in the past two weeks jaguar shifters have killed humans in my city and left mutilated bodies out in the open. I won't let that happen again."

I took a step back, doing my best to process this crazy talk. "Shifters? You lost me."

"Like you." He crossed his arms over his broad chest. He didn't appear to be joking. "Now why don't you tell me who those men were in the diner?"

"Like me?" I shook my head. Maybe he was drunk. "Look, I'm just passing through. I appreciate your help back there, but I'll be fine. I'm not who you think I am, so you really don't need to get involved."

"Someone tried to shoot me. I'm already involved."

I groaned. "I didn't ask you to protect me."

"You didn't look like you wanted to go with them." He pinned me with his intense gaze.

"I don't know who they are, okay?" My arms felt heavy. *Please don't black out now.* "Bellevue tried to lock me up for seventy-two hours and ship me to a psych facility back east, so I escaped. I'm guessing they sent these guys to bring me back."

One corner of his mouth twisted up. "Do you really think a hospital would send men with guns to shoot you?" He shook his head, his arms dropping to

his sides. “Why are you playing games?”

My head pounded. “I’m not playing anything. In fact, I was minding my own business having some dinner until you barged in like a crazy person.”

“Tonight is the new moon, and instead of staying away from people, you’re in the middle of a restaurant. If those hired guns hadn’t taken you out, my Pack would have.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I frowned. “Your Pack?”

“I should’ve taken care of you myself. You were in my sector of town, but you don’t seem like the others, and now...” He hesitated, clenching his jaw. “I couldn’t do it.”

“Couldn’t do what?”

His hands dropped to his sides. “Kill you.”

I didn’t hesitate. I ran faster than I had ever run in my entire life. Without looking back, I pushed my legs harder, fighting to put as many strides between us as possible. The streets gave way to shrubs and trees, blurring as I streaked past them. My lungs burned, but somehow Adam kept up. I ran off the streets, through the sagebrush and rocks, until the city stood miles behind us.

I never knew I could run so far or so fast, but I still couldn’t outrun him. When I stopped, he jogged up beside me and frowned.

“You need to shift.”

“What?” I huffed.

He tilted his head slightly, and I swear he looked even cuter. The same man who just told me he was supposed to kill me. I wanted to slap myself. *Snap out of it, Lana!*

His tough guy face faded, and for a moment a flash of compassion shone in his eyes. “You don’t know what you are, do you?”

My chest heaved, but for a moment my heart stopped. For the past five years I’d devoted most of my time to searching for answers, terrified of what might be happening to me. Now here I stood in the middle of nowhere with a man who seemed certain he knew the one answer I wanted more than anything.

I shook my head, my voice softer than I intended. “Do you know?”

He nodded, his gaze searching mine. “You’re one of the jaguars. A shape-shifter.”

My jaw went slack. He must’ve been joking, but he looked serious. Impossible. A shape-shifter?

No. I was a *sleepwalker*. That’s what all the psychiatrists said. They’d given me prescriptions for Trazodone and Klonopin, and when that didn’t help, I had a CAT scan. But instead of finding a brain tumor or telling me I needed surgery, they told me I had a brain anomaly that could lead to schizophrenia and decided I should be institutionalized.

I decided they should take a flying leap.

But a shape-shifter? No way. People didn’t turn into animals. Nervous laughter bubbled up from my lips.

He shrugged. “Laugh all you want, but you can see me and it’s pitch black out here. How do you explain that?”

I looked around. He was right. We were far from any streetlights or homes and no moon in the sky either. I didn’t notice it while I ran for my life, but I still saw my surroundings without even a sliver of moonlight glowing overhead. A chill shot crept down my spine.

“You just ran roughly ten miles at top speed. Marathon runners would be a little winded. How are you feeling?”

Other than the itchy feeling under my skin. I wasn’t even out of breath.

“Did you hear the sirens when we left the diner?”

I nodded slowly. “But not until after you told me you heard them.”

“My hearing might be a little more acute than yours, but I can guarantee you none of the humans heard them until we were long gone.”

It couldn’t be true.

“Do you wake up in strange places after a new moon?”

“How do you know that?” I jammed my hands in my pockets, fingering the tiny canister of pepper spray. “Who are you?”

“I already told you—I’m Adam.” He added without a trace of a smile. “I’m a werewolf.”

“No way. Werewolves don’t exist.” I kept grasping for some tiny scrap of reality. I pointed at the pendant resting against his chiseled chest. “And you wear a silver bullet around your neck!”

He rolled his eyes. “I suppose you think I howl outside Dracula’s castle too, huh? Those are myths, Lana. We get killed the same way any wolf does. It’s just a little tougher because we’re bigger. If I ran in front of a diesel truck during a full moon, it’d kill me as fast as any silver bullet.”

I shook my head in disbelief, but somewhere deep down inside, I wanted to believe him. He fought those trained men without breaking a sweat. Grown men tossed across the café like they weighed nothing. He heard the police sirens before anyone in the café even flinched. And he gave me an answer.

The impossible seemed almost real. I’d already tried doctors, psychiatrists, and medicine men, and no one came up with a theory that explained my once a month blackouts. As unreal as it sounded, I wanted Adam’s explanation to make sense. I wanted to finally know who, or what, I was.

Or maybe I *did* need to be heavily medicated and locked up somewhere.

“You turn into a wolf. Seriously?”

He nodded. “Yeah, but only during a full moon.”

“This is too much,” I whispered.

He cleared his throat. “I thought you knew what you were, and when you kicked me under the table at the café, I was pretty sure you knew what I was too.”

“You bullied your way into sitting at my table and then told me I stunk. You deserved it.”

“I said I *smelled* you, not that you stink. Big difference.” His smile faded. “What did you think has been happening to you all this time?”

“I had no idea. About seven years ago, when I was eighteen, I started waking up in strange places once a month or so, and I didn’t remember how I got there. Then there was a dead squirrel a couple years ago...” I shuddered at the memory of waking up covered in dried blood. “None of it made sense.”

“No one in your family told you about the change?”

“I don’t know my family.” I gnawed at my bottom lip and stared out into

the darkness. “Maybe they were monsters too.”

“You’re not a monster.” A growl rumbled in his chest. “It’s the other half of who you are. Your parents must have been jaguars too.”

I shook my head. It was too impossible, no matter how much I wanted an answer.

But he didn’t seem insane. Pushy and protective, yes, but not nuts. I searched his features, realizing again that I could see him perfectly in the darkness. His gaze never strayed from mine, no hint of dishonesty or spark of madness. My gaze slipped to his lips, and my heart skipped. He was good-looking and way too confident, but there was no trace of cruelty on his face. But if he wasn’t crazy or teasing me...

I shifted my weight. “I don’t know anything about my parents. I grew up in foster homes.” Keeping my voice even, I acted like I didn’t care. I grew up playing the tough-kid role, but inside, my stomach twisted at the admission. Saying the words out loud made me feel like I had “Unwanted” tattooed across my forehead.

He stared down at me and brought his hand up to cup my face. Unlike when he grabbed my arm earlier, his touch was soft. A comfort I wasn’t all that familiar with. His thumb felt rough against my cheek, slowly caressing my skin. I caught myself almost nuzzling into his touch. His eyes searched mine, and for half of a second, I thought he might kiss me. And when he didn’t, more than half of me was disappointed.

The man who admitted he was supposed to kill me. *I must be insane.*

When he stepped back, my skin tingled where he’d touched my face. He stared up at the stars. “I change into a wolf every full moon. My family is also my Pack. We try to live normal lives, but it’s our job to keep those who might reveal us to the humans out of our territory. A couple of jaguar males came into town a few months ago, and during the new moon they killed and ate two homeless men right outside the library. We can’t live among the humans with that kind of exposure, so we hunted them down and—”

“That’s why you came to the café tonight.” The insane puzzle came together in my head. It shouldn’t make sense, but somehow it did. “You

thought I was one of them.”

He nodded, and his lips curled into a hint of a smile. “Then instead of finding a shifted jaguar hunting humans, I found you eating a huge burger, and I couldn’t figure out what you were up to.”

I felt my cheeks heat and knew I must be blushing. Hopefully he didn’t see as well in the dark as I did. “I’ve been trying to eat larger portions during the new moon so I’d be full before I passed out.” I crinkled my nose. “No more squirrel incidents.”

Adam laughed, and I enjoyed the sound, surprising myself. “I’m glad you find it funny.”

“I’m sorry.” He chuckled. “If you’ll let me, I’ll watch over you tonight and make sure the jaguar stays away from the city.”

“No. No way.” I shook my head still refusing to allow myself to consider the whole jaguar thing. I did want to know what happened to me during the new moon, but believing I might actually be turning into an animal was too much. “You should go. Besides, if I really did turn into a giant cat”—*Don’t. It’s impossible*—“I could hurt you.”

“Nah, I’m fast. It’ll be okay.” Curls of his dark hair fell over his brow, but it couldn’t hide the spark of adventure burning in his gaze. Would he really be keeping me out of trouble...or hunting me?

“So will I. No one looked out for me before, and I’ve always been all right.” Secretly I wouldn’t mind seeing him again, but life had done a fabulous job teaching me that the only person I could count on was myself.

As if he heard my thoughts, he added, “I won’t let you down.”

I wanted to believe him. “What about the other...wolves? If I’m what you say I am, then I’m guessing the other wolves would assume I’m here to kill humans, right?” These were words I’d never dreamed I’d be saying out loud. “They wouldn’t be happy to find you helping me instead of...you know...killing me?”

“They don’t have to know.”

I looked up at him, taking in his chiseled features. He looked sincere. Hell, he just saved my life. But why?

“Why would you lie to them for me? You don’t even know me.”

He jammed a hand into the front pocket of his worn jeans. “I wouldn’t lie, but I could keep you from crossing their path. It’s obvious you’re not like the other jaguar shifters we’ve seen, but if they see a big black cat, they won’t ask questions.”

I didn’t have a lot of choices laid out in front of me. My skin crawled and my joints ached. The moment I started to fall asleep I’d... I couldn’t wrap my mind around actually being a jaguar. Not yet.

I shook my head. “I can take care of myself. Thanks.”

Adam heaved a sigh as he stared up at the stars. “You don’t get it, do you?” He glanced down at me, meeting my eyes. “The Pack isn’t going to care who you are or that you’re filling up on burgers so you won’t kill squirrels—or worse yet, humans. They will kill you, Lana.” He ran his hand back through his hair. “Look, I can’t let that happen, and I can’t explain why. You don’t have to trust me, but I’m not leaving you alone.”

My heart fluttered at the thought of not being alone, but my street instincts kicked into high gear. I yanked my pepper spray out of my pocket, gripping the canister. “I appreciate your help back there in the diner, but I’ve got it from here. And if you come any closer, I swear I’ll blind you and take you out at the knees.”

He rubbed his hand down his face with a groan. At least I wanted it to be a groan. It almost sounded like he growled at me. “You know what, do what makes you happy. I’m crazy. You’re just sleepwalking, whatever. But tomorrow morning we are going to talk.”

He turned around and started walking away. I tucked the pepper spray back into my pocket, annoyed with the emptiness that spread inside of me as I watched him fade into the night. Taking a deep breath, I spun on my heel. My vision wobbled and exhaustion brought me to my knees.

Oh, God, it was happening.

Chapter Two

ADAM

I waited behind a stack of boulders and stared down at my hand. It had tingled the second my skin touched Lana's in that café tonight. Opening and closing it, I grimaced. It still looked like my right hand, but this hand had just fucked up my entire world. It could only mean one thing.

On the other side of the rocks, Lana's curvy body contorted from a woman into a jaguar. The one creature we kept away from the Pack at all costs.

I never should have touched her. There had to be some kind of mistake. This woman could *not* be my damned mate. No way.

As the Alpha's oldest son, keeping the others safe fell to me. I didn't hesitate to hunt and kill jaguars who threatened our territory. Taking them out felt justified, like self-defense. But Lana wasn't a threat. I didn't see a murderer when I looked at her. Instead, I saw dark eyes that made me forget my responsibilities, a strong spirit, and an addictive smile.

The bushes rustled, and I heard the wet popping sound of joints mutating, but not a single moan or even a soft cry. It hurt like hell when I shifted. How did she get through it so silently?

Careful to stay downwind, I crept around and found a sleek black jaguar with dark eyes—Lana's eyes—snarling at me, pacing back and forth and swishing her tail. I couldn't tell if she recognized me, but since Lana didn't seem to have any memories from the new-moon nights as a jaguar, the cat probably didn't share her human memories either.

She challenged everything I thought I knew about jaguars. I'd never seen a female jaguar before. Only the males shifted, just like werewolves, unless

they bit a female and converted her. But Lana mentioned she started blacking out after she turned eighteen. I started shifting when I hit puberty. Maybe she was a late bloomer.

It didn't explain why she didn't remember. When I shifted, the wolf took over, but I was still in there too. Human thought processes and speech weren't there, but I could remember my human memories, and likewise I could remember full-moon nights with my wolf.

So what was happening with Lana? She couldn't have been born a shifter. It was unheard of. But if not, then how?

The jaguar moved without making a sound. When she turned away from me, I lost sight of her, and she melted into the darkness. I fought the human instinct to run, and concentrated on the scents around me until I caught hers. My wolf senses gave me a view of my surroundings even when I couldn't see with my eyes.

While the jaguar wandered off into the brush, I went back to collect Lana's clothes. Her shirt was ripped, but it looked like she got the rest off without too much damage. I gathered them up under my arm and headed south, following her trail. At the end of the night, I could leave them close by so she'd have them. Hopefully I could find a boulder or something to keep the bugs and snakes out.

The night wind shifted, and I stopped mid-stride. Frowning, I knelt down and took a deep breath. The jaguar scent grew stronger when I got closer to the ground.

Sagebrush snapped to my right, my head jerking in its direction.

Lana hadn't gone that way. Her scent definitely led toward the south. Every muscle in my body tensed—alert and ready—as I scanned the darkness.

We weren't alone.

If another jaguar hunted out here, it had better night vision than me. A huge disadvantage. Add to the shitstorm that my gun was back in my Jeep, I was miles from the city, and tracking another jaguar during the new moon with only my hunting knife. I was screwed. I should've been calling the Pack for

back up.

But I couldn't. If one of the other Pack members stumbled onto Lana they'd kill her first and ask questions later. I clenched my jaw, pushing the image out of my mind.

A couple more quiet steps to the east, and my brow furrowed. Nothing. No sound and such a faint scent now that I couldn't be sure it wasn't Lana's. Did she come this way while I grabbed her clothes?

In the distance, bushes rustled toward the south. I waited, staring into the darkness toward the east, but the night remained silent. It had to have been her scent. Our Pack always watched for jaguars, and the only one I'd found was Lana.

And now that I touched her, I knew exactly who she was.

My fucking mate.

I shook my head in the darkness. Insane to even consider caring about her, but fate ripped that choice right out of my hands the moment our skin touched. Scientists and members of my own Pack believed that wolves mated for life, but I did my best to prove them wrong, one girlfriend at a time. The elders in our Pack called me stubborn and hardheaded, but the truth was I couldn't imagine spending my life with one woman.

My father, our Alpha, often recalled tales of finding my mother at a dance and how the moment he touched her hand, the wolf inside of him howled and his spirit ached for her, binding him to her. He claimed he just knew, like his soul recognized hers.

It sounded like some romantic fairy tale bullshit to me. I'd touched plenty of women in my life and nothing crazy like that had happened.

Until tonight.

But if the stories were true—one mate for life—why her? Why a jaguar? The shifters had been nothing but trouble for us. Ruthless assassins selling their heightened senses and abilities to the highest bidder. We didn't try to understand them, we just did our best to keep them out of Reno.

It was safe to say my Pack would never accept Lana. Hell, if something inside me hadn't howled the moment our skin touched, I wouldn't have

accepted her either. In fact, the sane part of me was still struggling with it.

The wind gusted into my face as I squinted into the darkness, listening for Lana. I knew I should head back into the city—shit, I *wanted* to turn around and go back—but I couldn't physically bring myself to leave her behind.

Her eyes haunted me. From the moment she looked up at me in the café, I was lost. Crazy. It was an instant animal attraction. The wolf inside of me wanted to touch her. Maybe the wolf recognized her even before we touched.

No. Dammit.

My life was already complete. I didn't need a mate to tie me down with children and responsibilities. I trained the horses in my barn, I patrolled the city with the Pack, I drank the occasional beer, and when I could, I traveled. If I wanted female companionship it was easy to find at any of Reno's casinos, and they usually came with no strings attached.

I caught her scent again unwittingly and made my way west, trailing Lana.

Why her?

It seemed like I pissed her off just by breathing. She'd kicked me under the damn table. No woman had reacted to me like that before, yet here I was following her like some pathetic dog. My freewill battled my instincts.

And my fucking instincts were winning.

I ground my back teeth together and hopped up on a rock. Movement to my right caught my attention just as her tail swished through the air as she stalked through the scrub brush below. Just seeing her relaxed some of the tension building inside of me. In the morning we could talk again.

I didn't have any mate-for-life wolf instincts. That was nothing but old Pack legends. The stories of finding their mate, their eyes meeting and knowing with a single touch that they'd found the other half of their soul. Just because my father claimed it happened to him didn't mean it wasn't bullshit. None of my generation had found their "mate." Jason and Logan had serious relationships, but they never claimed their girlfriends as a mate. It couldn't be real. I'd never bought any of that romantic crap.

Maybe it was some sort of cosmic joke. Jaguars were our enemies, trained assassins. They encroached on our territory and killed humans. I was pledged

to hunt them and kill them.

Not to help them. Or her.

I looked up at the stars. *Just fucking perfect.*

Chapter Three

LANA

The sun crested over the rocky hilltop when I opened my eyes. Where was I? I sat up waiting for my foggy consciousness to clear. Then I realized I was naked, and it all came back to me.

The new moon.

Adam.

I pulled my knees up and wrapped my arms around them, shielding myself while I looked around. Instead of seeing Adam lurking in the shadows, I saw my clothes from the night before, neatly folded on top of a nearby boulder. Adam must've followed me and left my clothes when I settled in for the night. There was no other explanation. I caught myself hoping for a half second that what Adam had told me about shifting into a jaguar might be true. But I hoped this didn't mean he'd seen me naked. Maybe he saw me start to change and left the clothes before I was shifted.

Nothing I could do about it either way at this point.

After one last survey of the terrain, satisfied that I didn't have an audience, I got up and dusted myself off. A shower would feel great, but it would have to wait.

When I reached for my clothes, I found a cell phone on top. It wasn't mine. Strange.

I yanked my clothes on quickly and grabbed the phone, doing my best to ignore the new rips in my shirt and the torn leg of my jeans.

A red light flashed for a new text message. Curious, I opened it.

Lana, I took this for you last night.

I scrolled down and dropped the phone. The photo stared up at me as I took a step away. A black jaguar with dark eyes and lethal, sharp teeth glared out from the phone. Its ears were laid back as it snarled, but the dark chocolate-brown eyes were what had my heart pounding. I'd seen them in the mirror all my life. My eyes.

"No, no, no. It can't be... Not real..." I knew I wasn't schizophrenic like the doctors at Bellevue insisted. No one experienced a split personality only one night a month. I knew—I'd researched it just in case.

But a jaguar? I couldn't believe I was schizophrenic, but I could consider believing I was some sort of shape-shifter? Worrying my lower lip, I glanced around for the men in white coats again.

The tune of *Werewolves of London* broke the silence, interrupting my mental breakdown. The cell phone lit up on the ground. Before I realized what I was doing, I bent down and picked it up.

"H-Hello?"

"Lana? It's Adam."

"Where are you?" I turned around looking for any signs of life nearby.

"I'm coming back out there to get you. Stay where I left your clothes."

"Where am I?"

"You're a couple miles away from the city. Sit tight, I'm not far."

I closed the phone and stared at it. If the picture of the angry jaguar hadn't stunned me, I might've peeked through his contacts or something. I mean how often would a freelance writer get her hands on a werewolf's cell phone? But I wasn't in the mood for snooping.

Curiosity killed the cat.

Oh, please, tell me I didn't just think that.

I rolled my eyes at myself and slipped the cell phone into my pocket. If I was a couple of miles from the outskirts of the city, then Adam must've kept his word to keep the jaguar away from downtown Reno where the Pack was supposedly patrolling.

I climbed up onto the rock, looking over the terrain. It sure felt like I was awake, but this had to be a dream. Unable to help myself, I yanked the phone

back out and took a closer look at the photo, narrowing my eyes to see every detail.

“You didn’t like having your picture taken.”

I gasped and almost dropped Adam’s phone again. “I don’t like being surprised either.”

He smiled, instantly reminding me how difficult it was to stay annoyed with him for more than two minutes.

“So what *do* you like?”

My heart fluttered a little at the innuendo, but I did my best to hide it. “I like pancakes, eggs over easy, and dry wheat toast.”

He raised a brow. “I take it you’re hungry.”

“Starving.”

He nodded and walked over with my cell phone in his hand. “I thought you might want this back. I figured since you didn’t have my number, you could call your phone and find me.”

“Thanks.” We traded phones. “That picture was... Well, it was unreal.”

“I thought since you don’t have a family to teach you, you might have to see for yourself in order to believe.”

We walked through the sagebrush and oak trees in silence. I still didn’t know why he was helping me. After spending years in therapists’ offices, I was well aware of my yearning to belong and feel connected with people. At the same time, it felt like a weakness. I needed to protect myself. No one else would.

I couldn’t take the quiet any longer. “Thank you for leaving me my clothes and helping me find my way back.”

“No problem.”

I could feel him looking at me, but I resisted the urge to turn and face him. His eyes were too intense, his body too perfect, and I wasn’t sure I was strong enough at the moment to push away my only potential friend.

“Let’s grab some food and see if we can figure out who sent those goons after you.”

I kicked at the dirt to avoid his gaze. “I’ll figure it out. I’ve got a month

now before the next new moon. At least I understand why they're following me now. I can take it from here."

"You think they're after you because you're a shifter?" He frowned. "What kind of tests did they run? Did they see you shift?"

"No, but I had a CAT scan." His expression morphed from disbelief to concern. "The doctors told me they found a mutation in one of the lobes of my brain that could be a sign of schizophrenia. They tried to put me on a psychiatric hold whether I wanted it or not. I told them to take a flying leap and escaped before I got tossed in a rubber room."

"Damn." He shook his head. "That's why no one in the Pack goes to a hospital. We can't risk becoming their guinea pigs."

"It gets creepier. I took a peek at my chart." Goose bumps rose on my arms. "At the bottom under all the medical jargon, it recommended I be transferred to someplace called Nero." I met his eyes. "It was signed by a doctor I'd never met."

Adam took my hand, and in spite of the goose bumps, his touch sent a jolt of awareness through my body. "A hospital isn't going to send armed mercenaries to chase you from Los Angeles into another state. You're not a criminal."

"Maybe not Bellevue, but what about the place where they planned on transferring me? I've never even heard of Nero."

The leader's lion tattoo popped into my head, but I kept the information to myself. Adam had been good to me so far, but I wasn't ready to trust him with that info yet. It couldn't be a coincidence that the gunman's tattoo matched the emblem on the sweatshirt I had been wrapped in when my parents abandoned me in Texas.

I shook my head. "It sounds paranoid when I say it out loud, but I'm pretty sure I've seen those guys following me before."

"Why not hide out here for a while then?"

"And wait for your Pack to hunt me down instead?" I raised a brow. "It's better for everyone if I go. The sooner the better."

A muscle in his cheek jumped. "At least let me buy you breakfast and drive

you back to your car.”

I laced my fingers together, struggling for an objection. “I still don’t understand why you care.” I lifted my gaze to meet his. “Last night you were on a mission to kill me.”

“To take out a murdering jaguar assassin. I quickly realized that’s not who you are.”

“Maybe not, but it still doesn’t explain why you’re helping me. Your ‘enemy.’”

He pulled his hair back from his forehead, his biceps straining the sleeves of t-shirt. “Is it so wrong that I was raised not to leave a woman stranded and hungry?”

“No.” I broke eye contact, staring at the dirt. Maybe he was just being polite. What did I know about how his family had raised him. I’d never had one. Instead, I’d spent my life trying to appear like everyone else, hiding who I really was, afraid someone might discover the truth that no one wanted me. “But I think I have every right to question your intentions after you told me you were hunting me last night.”

“Fine.” Adam huffed out a breath. “My intention is to feed you and maybe get to know you better.”

Part of me ached to cave in and spend more time with him. I wanted to know him better too. I wanted to believe he thought I was worth spending time with. But self-preservation kicked in. What if he got to know me and realized I wasn’t worth the trouble?

“I think it’s better if I just go back to my car and get out of town.”

“All right then.” He clenched his jaw and started walking again. I did my best to keep up, but his legs were longer. He never looked to see if I was behind him.

When we got back to a paved street, he led me to an old, blue Jeep. It was actually in amazing shape for an older model. The chrome wheels sparkled in the morning sun, and the royal blue paint was buffed and shined like new. He offered me a hand to get in, and I climbed up into the passenger side without a word.

Adam walked around the front. I tried to keep from staring at his torso, but it was difficult. He was wearing a white T-shirt, washed a few too many times. It hugged his chest like a second skin. The Jeep didn't have a top or doors, nothing to slow him from climbing in the driver's side beside me. He never took his eyes off of me, and the intensity in his stare stole my breath away.

"Lana..." His voice was low. The growl was back, but it wasn't menacing now. It was hungry. And my body responded, hot and edgy. "I know this doesn't make sense to you, but I think I can help. I want to help you."

He was so close that I could feel the heat radiating from his body. His scent surrounded me, clean and masculine, and my pulse jumped. "Nothing about any of this makes sense."

"Look, I don't know all the answers either, but I can at least show you a few perks of being a shifter." The corner of his mouth crept up into a crooked smile that made my heart clench in my chest.

"That's tempting."

"What if I throw in a bag of donuts, too?"

Unexpected laughter bubbled out of me. "How can I resist?" I sobered, clearing my throat and struggling to regain rational thought. "But you've got to take me back to my car afterward, okay? I need to get moving."

"Deal." Adam grinned and rocked back into his seat, turning the key in the ignition. The V-8 roared to life. He revved the engine a couple of times while he gripped the knob on the gearshift. His chiseled forearm muscles contracted, and I forced myself to look away when everything inside of me was attracted to him.

The wind whipped my shoulder-length hair into a wild frenzy, and an unexpected smile curved my lips. I threw my head back and put my arms out, embracing the feeling of pure freedom that the crisp morning wind offered. Adam glanced over at me with a grin that gave me chills. His eyes were green, but right now they almost glowed, and where my skin was fair, his was tanned enough that his eyes and his teeth looked even brighter, dangerous.

Closing my eyes, I welcomed the warm gusts of wind that tugged at my

shirt and tangled my hair around my face. The sun felt like a cozy blanket, and I wanted to snuggle in it forever.

My eyes popped open when Adam turned off the engine. *Oh, God, did I fall asleep?*

“I get tired after I change too.” He pulled the key out of the ignition.

“Sorry about that. I was enjoying the ride.”

He chuckled and shook his head. “You’re the first woman to ever take a ride in Chaney and enjoy it.”

“Cheney?” I laughed and tried not to think about all the other women who sat in this seat before me. “You named your Jeep after Dick Cheney?”

“No.” Adam grimaced. “Chaney, as in Lon Chaney.”

“The Wolf Man?”

He nodded with a grin. “That’s the one.”

“Let me get this straight. You wear a silver bullet around your neck, your ring tone is *Werewolves of London*, and your Jeep is named Chaney after the first Wolf Man...” My voice trailed off as I stared over at Adam. He was still in the driver’s seat staring right at me with a sexy smile that derailed my train of thought.

“No one believes in werewolves, and I’ve never had a problem with what I am. In fact, I’m proud of what I can do.” He got out of the driver’s seat and ran his hand along the curve of the steering wheel. “As long as we only exist in fiction, why live in fear, right?”

A million reasons to hide popped in my mind. Being committed to a mental ward, or maybe studied like a lab rat, or hunted, or who knew what.

Adam tipped his head toward the donut shop. “I’ve heard this place is great.”

“You’ve never been here before?” I unfastened my seatbelt.

“I can’t take you to any of my usual restaurants. If any of my Pack saw us together they’d catch your scent in a heartbeat.”

The Pack. I’d almost forgotten about them.

“Ahh...they wouldn’t like seeing you with a...” I hesitated. I couldn’t say it. “A girl like me?”

Adam met my eyes and lowered his voice. "The only jaguars we've ever run into were bloodthirsty killers. My Pack would smell the cat in you and assume you were the same."

"So they're racists." Being the token foster kid all through school, I was used to being judged before anyone bothered to get to know me. Not fitting in was a constant for me, why not add being a flippin' jaguar to the mix? Okay, it was possible I had a chip on my shoulder, but the thought that I would be judged and possibly killed because I smelled different pissed me off more than it frightened me.

He blinked and frowned. "No, they're not... I'm just trying to protect you."

"They don't even know me, but you think they'd kill me on sight because of the way I smell? That's beyond racist, it's insane."

"They might not kill you, but they'd definitely want you to get out of town."

He was clearly backpedaling now. I shrugged and got out of the Jeep. "I'm planning on leaving town anyway."

He came around and met me at the front of the Jeep, his gaze demanding my full attention. "Leaving isn't going to keep you safe, but I could."

The way he said the words, the look in his eyes, stopped me in my tracks. My pulse thrummed and part of me wondered if he could possibly be as attracted to me as I was to him. I blinked. No one should be allowed to have eyes that mesmerizing. "What do you want from me?"

"I don't want anything." He shrugged his broad shoulders. "I'd like to help you get rid of these guys chasing after you, and maybe get to know you better. That's all."

For a moment, my heart leapt at the thought that this hunk of a man with the most amazing smile I'd ever seen wanted to spend time with me. But before I could open my mouth, my brain started to function again. Just because he wanted to be with me, didn't mean I would be safe. Between the threat of being locked away in a mental institution or hunted by a pack of angry werewolves, getting out of town was a no-brainer.

But knowing he wanted me to stay made my insides flutter.

I looked down at my hands. “It’d be nice to stay, but you said it yourself—if the other wolves in your Pack find out they’ll make me leave. Or worse.”

“They don’t have to know you’re here.” He pushed his thick hair back from his forehead. “I know this is a lot, and you still don’t really believe me about being a shifter, but I can prove it to you. You’ve got abilities you haven’t tapped into yet.”

I bit my lip, tempted again by his offer to show me. Like the rest of him wasn’t tempting enough. What was I doing? I couldn’t stay here. Could I?

While I mulled over his offer, the filter between my brain and my mouth vanished again. “Why are you being so nice to me?”

“I’ve never met anyone like you before.”

My inner foster kid smirked. “Oh, that’s a good one.” I rolled my eyes. “Does that usually work with the women you date?”

“God, you’re a pain in the ass.” He leaned against the front grill of the Jeep, crossing his arms. I tried not to notice the way his muscles stressed the sleeves of his shirt. “Yes, I can be smooth when I need to be, but this isn’t it. This is just me wanting to be with you.” He shook his head. “I’ve never had to work this hard to get a woman to spend time with me. I wish I could stop trying, but I look in your eyes and...” He shook his head and straightened from the Jeep. “Forget it.”

I took slow breath, doing my best to organize my thoughts. “All of this is a lot for me to take in. Add to it that some guys with guns are looking for me, and then there’s your Pack...”

A couple came out of the donut shop, interrupting me. They held hands, laughing. Happy. I knew in reality not everyone was, but I’d been alone for so long that I often watched couples with hungry, greedy eyes, wanting that illusive feeling of unity, of being someone’s favorite person in the world.

I’d never felt it before, so the simplest solution was to decide it didn’t really exist. It can’t hurt you if it’s not real.

But now I was staring at a man who had watched over me, and left me a photo and folded my clothes while I was running around the darkness as some kind of jungle cat. In fact, he could have called his buddies and

probably killed me if he wanted to, but he didn't. He helped me without asking for anything in return.

I trembled at the thought. Hope was a terrifying emotion.

He held his hand out to me, palm up. For a moment I only stared at his gesture, but finally I found myself placing my hand in his.

The corner of Adam's mouth quirked and threatened to weaken my knees. "Nothing complicated, all right? We'll just start with breakfast."

He guided me to the door, and I did my best not to obsess over how good his warm hand felt at the back of my waist. Adam held the door open, overwhelming me with the delicious sweet scent of fresh donuts. My stomach growled in anticipation.

We walked up to the glass case and I wandered to the other end, eyeing the apple fritters. Across the store, Adam opened the refrigerator case. "Thirsty?"

"A bottle of water would be amazing."

A young man came out from the back and flashed me a dazzling white smile. "Can I help you?"

I nodded, pointing at the glass. "I'll take an apple fritter and a glazed twist."

He plucked my requests and met my eyes. "Anything *else* I can do for you?"

Adam was suddenly right beside me, his arm wrapped around my waist, holding me close to his side. "I'd like some donuts too."

"Oh, sure." Donut guy sized up Adam. "I didn't know you were together."

Adam's fingers splayed, singeing my skin right through my shirt, his voice carried a deep tone of warning. "We are."

"Sorry about that." Donut guy hustled to box up the rest of the donuts and ring up our order. Adam paid and took the box and drinks in his free arm, keeping his other hand planted at the base of my spine.

"Come again," donut guy called from behind the counter.

Adam answered with a glare over his shoulder. I hurried to my side of the Jeep, unsure whether I should be flattered or terrified. When Adam got in he put the water bottles and donuts on the backseat. He fired up Chaney's

engine, but before he could sink the gearshift into reverse, I caught his forearm.

“What was that back there?”

“Back where?”

I rolled my eyes. “In the donut shop.”

He shrugged and dropped the gearshift into reverse. “Just wanted that guy to back off a little.”

I nodded and swallowed the lump in my throat. His over-protective streak made my heart race. Trouble was I couldn’t decide if it was attraction...or fear.

Chapter Four

ADAM

I tried to downplay the surge of territorial instincts that swamped me in the donut shop, but Lana didn't look like she was buying it. Maybe she shouldn't. If the guy behind the counter hadn't broken eye contact with her and dropped the innuendo in his voice, I wasn't sure what might've happened.

Until now, the wolf inside of me never took notice of the women I dated. But this went way beyond noticing. The second I saw how the asshole was ogling Lana, rational thought escaped and full-on wolf instinct kicked in. I'd always tended to fight first and think later, but this shook me. It felt different, menacing, and a little out of my control. I tamped down the frustrated growl that wanted to break free.

"Where are we going?" Lana's voice knocked me back to reality.

Glancing over at her, I shrugged, trying to shake it off. "It's a nice day. Want to eat at Lake Tahoe?"

She shifted in her seat. Shit. I had scared her. "That's okay. I'd rather get back to my car and get on the road before the guys in gray jumpsuits come back."

"You're safer if you stay here." My grip on Chaney's wheel tightened as I struggled to calm the restless wolf inside of me. "Those guys after you were human. You've got skills you don't even know about yet."

"This sounds totally insane, but how can you be so sure they weren't...like me?"

"Remember I caught your scent from outside?" I cut my eyes toward her

for a moment, remembering the nasty kick she'd given me. "These guys reeked of Irish Spring and Zest, but nothing supernatural." I focused back on the road. "I can keep you safe while you learn to protect yourself."

"I know how to protect myself just fine, thanks." She hesitated, and I hoped she was going to give me this one. She took a deep breath and shook her head. "I can't stay here."

I gave it one more try. "I'm not suggesting forever, but maybe a couple days?"

Her eyes drifted over my way, and she raised a brow. "What about the Pack? Will you be able to keep me a secret from them?"

I didn't want to think about my Pack right now. "We'll figure it out."

We zipped past a Lake Tahoe sign, and she tried to tame her hair, holding it behind her head. "How far is the lake from here?"

"About an hour away now."

Her teeth caught her full lower lip, and I forced my eyes back onto the highway as blood rushed below my belt.

She freed her hair and touched her pocket, probably checking for her pepper spray. *Great.*

Finally she nodded. "All right, but just for the afternoon."

Everything about Lana distracted me. Her scent, her smile, her lips. I felt like an addict. She didn't seem to have any idea how sexy she was, which made her even more attractive. She didn't have to *try* to get my attention. She just had it.

In spite of her race being an enemy of the Pack, the wolf inside of me staked his claim anyway, leaving me scrambling for a solution to this impossible problem. I was screwed. She couldn't stay in Reno, and I couldn't tell her why I wanted her to stay without sounding like a stalker. I'd had no idea how strong the instincts of the wolf inside me could be. It went beyond physical want, a need to have her nearby, to know she was safe.

I had to figure out how to protect her from the men after her *and* from my own Pack. She was right. It was probably safer for her to leave town. But I couldn't let her go. It'd be great if I could figure out how to live in the

moment and enjoy today because I may not see her again tomorrow, but I flat-out couldn't.

A sarcastic chuckle slipped out of my mouth. I sold that same line of bullshit to women I dated many times. I never realized what a heap of crap it was until I tried to pitch it to myself. I was an asshole.

And apparently fate had a sick sense of humor.

"What's so funny?"

I glanced over at Lana. "Nothing." She didn't look convinced. I decided to change the subject.

"So what do you do for a living?"

"I'm a freelance writer."

Not what I expected. "What do you write?"

"Anything really. My last article was for *Women's Day* about going on day hikes with your children. You know, fresh air and exercise make for good bonding time with your kids. That kind of thing."

"Do you have kids?"

"No!" She laughed and shook her head. "But I go hiking, and I'm a good writer. I can research, and thanks to pen names, no one needs to know I'm not a mom. Magazines pay pretty well for articles, and I can get paid electronically. No need for a local bank. Which works well since I've been... moving around a lot lately."

I pulled off the freeway and stopped at the light. "Do you write books, too?"

"Not right now." She ran her fingers back through her hair, pulling it away from her face. "I have to crank out plenty of articles to make enough money to live, so there isn't any spare time right now for fiction that doesn't pay. What about you?"

"I'm a horse trainer." I could feel her eyes on me and glanced over before taking the road toward the lake. "What?"

"Really?"

"You sound surprised."

"You don't wear a cowboy hat or boots."

I laughed. “The horses don’t actually give a shit about cowboy hats and boots, so neither do I. A comfortable pair of jeans and tennis shoes work fine for me. I save the Stetsons and boots for the horse shows.”

“So you really get paid for riding horses?”

“Yeah. I have a ranch a few miles outside of Reno. Do you ride?”

“I always wanted to when I was little, but I moved around a lot.” She stared straight ahead again. “Not many ponies around.”

“We’ll have to go for a ride sometime.”

I left the offer on the table, although we’d probably never ride together. If anyone in the Pack found out a jaguar lived within our territory they would hunt it down. Lana would be in danger on the ranch.

She was already in enough danger. I put her there by asking her to stay.

But I couldn’t let her go.

Fuck.

I pulled into a parking spot on the north shore. Fewer campers over there. After shutting off the engine I turned to her. “Welcome to Lake Tahoe.”

The sunlight sparkled on the deep blue surface of the lake as we walked along the water’s edge. A small, orange fishing boat floated out in the center of the water. A patient fisherman sat at the bow, toying with the line of his fishing pole, and all around us the breeze moaned through the pine trees.

I reached for her hand and led her along a trail toward a granite boulder. Every time we touched the mate bond pulled at me, like I walked into a spider web and might never get free.

“Lana?” I pointed up at the eight-foot-high boulder in front of us. “Can you jump up there?”

“Jump?” She stared at the top. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Not at all.”

She checked the rock again like it might have shrunk, then crossed her arms. “No one can possibly jump that high.”

I leaned in and kissed her cheek. Her eyes grew wide and she blushed. I couldn’t resist the grin tugging at my lips. “Watch me.”

Rolling my head to loosen up, I took a few steps back and gave the area a

quick look-over. Other than the fisherman out on the lake, there didn't appear to be anyone else around. I sprinted toward the rock and leapt into the air. Nothing felt better than pushing my body and feeling the power brewing inside. I landed at the top of the boulder and smiled down, daring her to follow.

"Unbelievable. How did you do that?"

"You can do it too." I straightened and glanced at the lake. "You just don't know it yet."

She shook her head. "No way."

"Last night you turned into a big, bad-ass jaguar. You can make a little eight-foot jump onto a rock." Something drew my attention back toward the water again. There was a disturbance in the air—I could feel it but couldn't pinpoint what it was. I looked back at Lana. "I told you I'd prove you have enhanced abilities." I opened my hands, ready to catch her. "Let's do this."

She walked a few paces back, bitching and moaning the whole way about how impossible it was and something about suing me if she broke her leg. Finally she ran, and the moment she let go, her natural abilities took over. Her strides were fluid. Her feet pounded the ground, legs pushing hard until she jumped.

Lana landed in a crouched position right beside me. Gazing down at her footprints, I caught the pungent scent of adrenaline wafting off her.

"That was amazing."

I nodded. "Just the beginning."

"I was always a tree climber, and I kicked ass in my college self-defense classes. I could flip guys twice my size, but I just thought I was stronger than I looked. I never tried jumping..." She looked over at the water. "I can't believe this."

I caught her hand and gave it a squeeze. "Give it time."

We sat on top of the boulder, and I worked on helping her recognize scents with her eyes closed, relying on her atrophied shifter senses. Seeing the joy on her face and knowing I had something to do with it... It didn't suck.

A breeze brushed over us, and I closed my eyes, breathing in all the scents

the air offered.

“Can you tell who is out on the boat?”

She took a deep breath. “I know it’s a man, and he’s probably older.”

Fast learner. “And how do you know that?”

“He’s wearing a thick layer of Old Spice aftershave. I don’t know anyone under fifty who splashes that on.”

“Nice.” I nodded. “You’ve probably been doing this your whole life without realizing you had heightened abilities. Like a person who doesn’t realize they’re losing their twenty-twenty vision.” She glanced my way, and I added, “You know, you can’t tell your senses are any different because you’ve always lived with them. Until someone points out your abilities, you don’t realize they’re there.”

She rolled her eyes and nudged my shoulder. “You’re just trying to make me believe I turned into a giant cat last night.”

“Well, there is that.” Her eyes hypnotized me, and I had to touch her. Taste her. My fingers ran along her cheek and into her hair. Her breath warmed my lips as the wind shifted.

I jerked back, instantly alert.

“What’s wrong?” she whispered. Then she smelled it too.

Blood.

Forcing myself away from Lana, I leaned over the edge of the boulder. I didn’t see anyone below, but that didn’t mean there wasn’t someone there. Eyesight wasn’t my strongest asset. Being a werewolf, I relied on my heightened senses of hearing and smell more than my sight.

A moan drifted up on the breeze and I froze.

I looked back at Lana and whispered, “Wait here.”

“No.” She got to her feet. “I’m going with you.”

I shot her a back-off glare. “I don’t have time to fight with you.” My eyes narrowed, trying to find any movement below. “Stay here.”

I didn’t wait for an answer. Leaping from the boulder, I managed a pseudo-silent landing. The scent of blood grew much stronger closer to the ground. My gut clenched in response. I prayed it wouldn’t grumble and reveal my

location. Blood always made the wolf inside of me restless, with or without a full moon.

After making my way through the bright yellow mustard plants and sagebrush, I finally found what I searched for.

I rushed to Gabe's side. Or what was left of it. *Shit*. What the hell happened to him? His entire right side was sliced up. I could see the white bone of his ribs in a couple of places, and his shirt was drenched in blood. My chest constricted. I needed to get him out of here. He couldn't die. Not Gabe.

He'd been my Pack mate and my friend my entire life. What was he even doing out here? The Pack was supposed to be patrolling the city last night.

"Dammit," I groaned, searching the area for his attacker.

"Adam?" His voice sounded raspy and...wet. "That you?"

"Yeah, I'm here, Gabe."

He lifted a shaky hand to clasp my forearm in the traditional greeting of the Pack. "Jaguar. Edge of town. Tell the Pack." He coughed and blood trickled out the corner of his mouth. A cold chill shot down my spine. A jaguar did this. While I'd been tracking Lana I thought I caught the scent of another jaguar. And I didn't warn them. I should have made the fucking call.

This was my fault.

I didn't have time to think about it right now while Gabe bled out. I pushed the thoughts from my mind and did my best to focus on my friend. "You can tell them yourself. We've gotta get you out of here. Jason will sew you up."

He started to smile, then grimaced. His teeth were stained crimson. The scent of blood teased and disgusted me at the same time. Too much blood.

"Give me your shirt," a voice said from behind me. I looked up to find Lana holding out her hand. I never heard her coming. I should have. "Come on, Adam, we've got to stop the bleeding."

She knelt down beside me. Just having her close by made it easier to breathe and think clearly.

"We need your shirt," she prodded again. "I did ride-alongs with EMTs for a couple of articles a few months back."

I yanked it over my head and handed it to Lana. She wadded the fabric into

a compress and pressed it against Gabe's side, making him groan in pain.

Until he caught her scent.

Gabe's eyes popped open wide, and he pointed at her with his other hand. "She's a—"

"It's okay, Gabe." I tried to calm him, but he shook his head, struggling. "Gabe, this is Lana. She's trying to help you."

He caught her wrist, trying to pull her hand free, and shifted to turn away but the movement made him cry out in pain.

I reached for his shoulder. "You need to stay still." His arms collapsed, and he turned his head, coughing up blood and clots of tissue. "Gabe, no!"

A final breath gurgled out of his mouth, and his eyes closed. I shook my head, praying he'd breathe again, but he didn't make a sound.

Gabe was gone.

"Oh my God." Lana shook my shoulder. "Call nine-one-one. Adam, he needs an ambulance."

I shook my head.

"What?" She stared at me like I was nuts. She might be right. One of my closest friends just died because of a Jaguar attack. An attack that could have been avoided if I had followed through and done my part to keep the Pack safe. There had to be a second jaguar. A jaguar I should have been tracking. Fuck.

Instead of eliminating the danger to my Pack, I'd been tailing Lana, and while one of my best friends bled out, I'd been leaning in for a kiss. My chest tightened.

She yanked her cell phone from her pocket and flipped it open.

"I said, no!"

Her eyes narrowed. "He's dying, Adam. We've got to call for help."

"He's already gone." I closed my eyes, composing myself before looking over at her. "If we call nine-one-one they'll want to perform an autopsy. They'll find out he's not entirely human. We can't risk having our race exposed like that, remember?"

I watched her mulling it over. Tears filled her eyes, and she nodded slowly.

She took a deep breath and pocketed her cell phone. "So, what do we do with..."

My shoulders tightened and my hackles rose. "His name was Gabe."

"I didn't mean it like that." She winced as if I slapped her. "I'm sorry."

I pursed my lips and carefully rolled Gabe onto his back, thankful when I noticed his eyes were already closed. "What could have done this to him?" Lana asked, inspecting his wounds.

"A jaguar."

Lana paled. "How do you know?"

"He told me before you got over here. That's why he panicked when he recognized your scent."

The question hung in the thick silence between us.

"Did I..." A tear rolled down her cheek, and her voice trembled. "I didn't." She shook her head, crossing her arms. "I couldn't have... I was far from here." She paused and added, "When I woke up this morning I was clean. Blood would've been all over me if I did this, right?"

I didn't think about it before, but she was right. When I picked her up, her clothes were clean. I would have caught the lingering scent of blood. "Yeah. It couldn't have been you. I would've smelled the blood on you."

"So there's another jaguar around?" Her eyes scanned the lake.

"Apparently." I scooped up Gabe's body, when Lana reached over to stop me.

"Wait a minute. How did he get out here?"

I frowned. "He probably walked."

"No, we both smelled blood a minute ago. If he'd been here all day, you would've caught the scent as soon as we got out here."

Damn, she was quick. And right on target. I'd caught the scent of cologne, but I never heard footsteps accompanying the smell. No teenaged kids who doused their bodies in Polo. That's why it had caught my attention earlier when I first jumped on the boulder. Now I knew the cologne was a mask. Someone didn't want me to catch their scent.

I searched around Gabe's body for any signs of animal tracks. Nothing.

Then I turned back and noticed some tracks in the dust, but they weren't jaguar prints.

They were tennis shoes. And only one set.

"He didn't get attacked here." My hands tightened into fists. "Someone dumped him here."

"What? How do you know?"

"There are tracks, but no sign of a struggle. The jaguar attacked him as a cat last night, and dumped him at our feet today as a man."

"But no one knew where we were."

I met her eyes. "Someone did."

We wrapped my shirt around Gabe's torn mid-section to hide his injuries, and I carried him back to the Jeep. I barely broke a sweat. Even when I wasn't in the physical form of a wolf, I was much stronger than any man.

I laid Gabe's body across the backseat of the Jeep and fought back another wave of emotion. My twin brother Aren and I had grown up with Gabe and his twin Gareth. Nature of the beast with werewolves—only the males carried the shifter gene, and we were always born in matching sets. Rage burned in my gut. We graduated high school a year apart. I thought we'd have more time. Now I'd be the one to tell Gareth his brother was gone.

Because of me.

Staring out at the water, I collected myself again. Mourning would have to wait. I turned around and found Lana already in the passenger seat. She didn't seem frightened, or shaken, but rather determined and focused.

Only the gnawing at her lower lip gave her away.

I climbed behind the wheel and forced myself to breathe through my mouth, not wanting to catch the scent of Gabe's body. The storm of pent-up emotions calmed with Lana nearby. Until now, my relationships remained physical. No emotional ties. My Pack brothers were the only friends and family I needed. But here she was.

Hard to believe how quickly everything could change.

She tapped my leg. "You okay?"

One of my friends lay dead in the backseat of my Jeep. How could I be

fucking okay? Hysterical laughter threatened, but I fought to remain calm. "I'll be fine."

Taking a deep breath, I kept my eyes focused on the front of the Jeep, and fired up Chaney's V-8 engine. I jammed the stick shift into gear, but before I let out the clutch, Lana placed her hand over mine. She didn't say a word. Maybe it meant more that she didn't speak. She was with me, and her solidarity gave me strength.

Once we were on the highway, safe from prying ears, I looked over at her. "I need to drop you off first."

"What? Why? Shouldn't we do something about Gabe first?"

I shook my head, careful to keep Chaney below the speed limit. The last thing I needed was to be pulled over with a mangled body in my backseat.

"You can't come with me. I have to take Gabe back to my ranch and call the Pack."

"And?"

My fuse was short. This was tough enough without her questions. I shot a glare in her direction. "And you're a jaguar, Lana. They'll think you did this."

She opened her mouth to reply, but then closed it and looked out the window. My simmering frustration fizzled. I reached over and took her hand. "I'm sorry. I know this wasn't your fault. But it wouldn't be safe for you."

She nodded and stared out her window. Silence settled in for the rest of the drive. What could I say? All I could think about was retribution. This went beyond patrolling our territory to keep it safe from jaguars who threatened to expose our kind to the humans. I wanted the bastard that killed Gabe. Revenge wouldn't bring him back, but I didn't really give a shit at this point. I needed to do something.

I pulled off the freeway and took the back streets to Lana's hotel. Other than telling me where she was staying, she remained quiet. I dropped her off at the rear entrance.

"I'll call your cell later."

"All right." She nodded and gave my hand a squeeze before getting out of

the Jeep. She turned back, her dark eyes locked on mine. "I'm sorry. About everything."

"Me too." I slid the gearshift into first. "Don't disappear on me."

Lana ran her hand up her opposite arm like she caught a chill. "My car is still at the diner."

I watched her walk away in my rearview mirror. That time she didn't look back.

"Fuck!" I slammed my hand against the steering wheel.

Merging onto the highway, I cranked up the radio and focused on ratcheting up my rage. I was better at being angry than dealing with all the conflicting emotions festering inside me. Easier to be furious at whoever killed Gabe, and angry that my own Pack was a threat to my mate, than to allow myself to shoulder the guilt for not following through on my responsibilities. But where exactly did my loyalties lie, with the Pack who raised me or with an alluring jaguar woman I'd only known for a day?

Stupid.

Chaney's tires squealed as I cranked the wheel to turn up the steep drive to Whispering Pines Farms, my stable. Since Gabe's body was in the back of the Jeep, I drove right past my ranch house and down the narrow blacktopped road toward the barn. I'd have to call the rest of the Pack and have them meet me up there. I couldn't risk driving Gabe's body around any longer than necessary.

The barn had twenty-four stalls, but right now two at the end of the barn were empty. The walls were stained a dark walnut color, with forest green trim to blend with the pine trees that grew all over the property.

Gabe had helped me build it.

My vision clouded for a moment, and I clenched my jaw, fighting the emotions pummeling me from the inside out. I needed to hold myself together and make some calls. Once the Jeep was parked and covered, I walked down the barn aisle visiting with the horses. The familiar sounds of horseshoes pawing through the wood shavings, noses splashing in the water buckets, and nickering, helped settle me. When I got to the corner stall, a

large black shadow made its way to the door.

“Hey, Bruce.” His full name was Calisto’s Dark Knight, but we all called him Bruce Wayne. Bruce for short. He seemed okay with it. I had leased the Morgan stallion for the past five years. I trained him for his out-of-state owner, and after he won the world championship in western pleasure, we’d made arrangements to stand him at stud in my barn. Bruce was probably my closest friend these days. I ran my hand down his thick neck, patting him and admiring his slick coat.

“Did Luke give you a bath today?” The big black stallion shook his head as if he understood what I’d asked. “You’re a good guy, Bruce.”

Where was Luke anyway? He was the youngest Pack member and also my right-hand man at the ranch. I scanned the property, and noticed the feed room door wide open. It was early for feeding the horses, but maybe he’d loaded the grain buckets for later. When I got to the feed room, the lids were off all the grain-filled trashcans, feed buckets were lined up to be filled, but no sign of Luke.

I pulled out my cell phone and caught him at the taco shop.

“Can you call the Pack for me? Have them meet at the barn in an hour.”

“Sure thing, Adam. Everything okay?”

I glanced down the barn aisle at the Jeep. “Just get everyone over here, all right?”

I knew he was curious, but I couldn’t talk about what happened to Gabe over the phone. I jammed my cell back in my pocket. Anxious to keep my mind occupied, I started filling the grain buckets. We lined them up in the same order as the stalls in the barn. Each horse had his own mixture of feed. Some got extra oats for energy, while the younger horses needed more weight and less spunk so they got barley-corn and some bran. Each horse also got a handful of Natural Glo vitamin supplement, and for the show horses we added a dash of linseed oil to help keep their coats soft and smooth.

Carrying the grain buckets down the barn aisle instantly made me the most popular guy in the place. The horses pranced around their stalls, shaking their heads, nickering and stamping at the ground. I fed Bruce first, dumping the

grain into his large, black feed bucket. He lowered his head to snatch up a bite, and then stared at me with intelligent eyes while he ground up the goodies. Horses were excellent listeners.

I stepped up to pat his neck.

“We lost Gabe today.” My voice started to waver. I cleared my throat. “I’m going to find out who killed him, Bruce. I won’t stop until I find him.”

I didn’t know how complicated that promise was about to become.

Chapter Five

LANA

Five hours later, Adam still hadn't called. My stomach growled, reminding me I skipped lunch. Gnawing at a cuticle on my index finger, I stared at my silent cell phone. My rental car was still at the diner, and the guys in the gray jump suits could be anywhere. Maybe I could order room service.

Or I could get a grip and figure out what was going on with me. Who were those guys and what was Nero? Nero couldn't just be another mental asylum back east. It was something more sinister with gun toting, tattooed, trained teams, and somehow I had been connected since I was a baby. I clenched my fists. I couldn't just hide out in my room waiting for someone to save me. Besides, I was usually pretty good at saving myself.

Until last night.

I tossed a glare at my phone and headed for the bathroom. Brushing out my hair, I stared into the mirror. Could my parents tell I was different at birth? Adam told me shape-shifting was inherited. They must have been shifters too.

And then there was the tattoo. That lion's head with an "N" emblazoned on the forehead was forever burned into my mind. When I was old enough, one of my social workers gave me the sweatshirt I'd been found in. It was unmarked, not even a tag in the back of the neck, but it bore the same insignia tattooed on the gunman.

Whoever these guys were, my parents must have been connected.

For most of my life, I'd tried not to think much about them. Through my teen years anger kept me from searching, but as time passed, my anger faded

to indifference. Being bitter was a waste of energy.

But if they were shifters like me, why would they get rid of me? They had to know it would be a bad idea to leave me alone with humans.

I snatched up a black rubber band and quickly pony-tailed my hair while I tried to keep the emotions at bay. It would be easy to imagine scenarios of a sobbing mother, who had no choice but to leave me. But I steeled myself for reality. Whatever the reasons, they hadn't wanted me.

I slid my cell phone into my pocket and grabbed my coat. It was time to find out more about where I came from. With room key in hand, I headed for the elevator. When the doors opened on the ground floor I caught a whiff of the lobby restaurant, and my belly groaned for food. I could eat later. The library might not be open if I ate first.

The concierge helped me with a map, and I headed out toward the downtown library. They'd have more reference materials about child services than I could find on Google anyway. I needed a contact who would be able to dig into my sealed juvenile case file, or better yet, get a copy so I could go through it myself. Maybe I'd get lucky and be able to track down some information on Nero, too.

The cool evening air soothed my skin as I maneuvered through the throngs of people. If I could get to the library before they closed, I could get copies of child welfare laws for San Antonio and maybe track down a licensed PI in Texas all in one trip. The sooner I could find out if they had any record of my birth parents, the closer I'd be to some answers.

In the past when I used private investigators for articles, I found out I worked better with the old-school detectives. Too many of the PIs who advertised on the internet tended to only use the internet for their digging. I could use Google better than most people, so if I was going to pay for help to track down my birth parents, then I wanted someone who had friends and connections in San Antonio Children and Family Services.

That's where I had been abandoned—Texas—and I spent my childhood floating from foster home to foster home. There were plenty of horror stories out there about being a ward of the state, but I'd never known any other way

to live. For me, moving to a new school, new friends, a new house, it was the way my life had always been. The only resentment I felt was toward my parents who gave me to the State of Texas in the first place, but I boxed up that rejection and kept it in a dark corner of my memories. Until now.

The library was a stern brick building in the heart of Reno. The front was lined with glass windows and large glass doors. Although the lights were still on inside, when I tugged on the brass handle, the doors were locked.

“Damn!” Now that I’d finally admitted I needed to start the search for my parents, I didn’t want to wait. When I spun around to leave, I nearly smacked into a tall man with dark eyes, olive-colored skin, and black shoulder-length hair.

“Sorry about that,” I said, veering to my right.

“Not a problem,” he replied, nodding toward the library. “Is it already closed?”

“Looks that way.”

He looked past me to the doors. “Too bad.”

I offered a half-hearted smile and went on my way. I could check with the library tomorrow, though patience was not one of my virtues. *Ugh!* Maybe I could distract myself with food. My stomach growled, apparently a fan of my new plan.

When I rounded the corner, I caught the scent of something...different. Adam had encouraged me to trust my heightened senses, so I checked back over my shoulder. Nothing looked out of the ordinary. I wiped at my nose, hopefully hiding the fact that I was sniffing the air. There was a definite scent, earthy but clean. It seemed out of place on this busy street in downtown Reno when so many of the people reeked of perfumes, aftershaves, and body odor.

Shaking my head, I walked back toward my hotel. After I got some food in my stomach, I’d call a cab and see about getting back to the diner for my car. By morning I could be back on the road.

A flash of Adam’s green eyes filled my mind with an echo of his words. *Don’t disappear on me.*

Regret stabbed at my heart, but I forced it down. I was making the right choice. I could get the car, exchange it in case the Nero guys had my plate number, and head for Texas to dig up more on who my shifter parents might be.

A block from the hotel I caught a whiff of garlic and marinara. My mouth watered, and I wandered into the lobby restaurant.

Halfway through my lasagna, I caught the scent again. A chill ran up my spine. My senses were on full alert, but after glancing around the restaurant, I had no idea why. Nothing seemed out of place. I didn't recognize anyone. No one was staring at me, or looked angry or upset, and thankfully no men in riot gear.

So why did I feel the undeniable urge to run away?

"How is everything?"

Jumpy isn't usually one of my character traits. Late maybe, and stubborn often, but nervous and jittery wasn't me. Still, I almost needed to peel myself off the ceiling. "Oh! Everything's fine." I looked up at the waiter as I caught my breath. "Could I get a to-go box and my check?"

"Certainly." He gave me a curious stare and then vanished toward the kitchen.

Sipping my iced tea, I kept glancing around the restaurant, trying to take notice of every patron's face. Something about the scent put me on full alert, but nothing I saw with my eyes appeared dangerous.

What good was using my superhuman senses if I couldn't recognize what I was smelling? Where was Adam when I needed him?

I almost groaned. I couldn't afford to "need" anyone.

After I paid the bill and boxed what was left of my lasagna, I walked toward my hotel, careful to keep peering back over my shoulder. I still didn't see anything.

Instead, I walked right into it.

I knew the second we collided. I recognized the scent now. It was coming from a tall dark-haired man who was now smiling down at me.

The man from the library.

I stepped back, ready to run. "Sorry. I should've been watching where I was going, but I'm looking for my friend. She's picking me up."

He raised a brow with a smirk. His teeth looked sharply white against his tan skin. "I did not see your friend at the library or in the restaurant."

I frowned. "Are you following me?"

"I could ask you that same question." His self-confident smile never faltered.

My heart pounded in my chest, but I fought to keep it from showing. I lifted my chin slightly, my hand sliding into my pocket for the pepper spray. "Look, I don't know who you are, but I'm not interested." I gripped the canister. "Leave me alone."

I walked away, fighting the urge to look back. I didn't need to look, I reminded myself. If I paid attention, I could hear if he was following.

Suddenly he was right in front of me again, his broad shoulders blocking the flashing lights of the casinos, leaving me in shadow. I didn't hear a thing. Shit.

"We need to talk, Little One." He wasn't smiling anymore and a lock of his black hair fell across his forehead.

My brow furrowed. Who the hell was this guy? "I don't need to talk to you."

I withdrew the pepper spray just as he grabbed me around the waist. A spray of the canister went off, hitting him in the face. He grunted, clamping his other hand over my mouth as he lifted me up and rushed into a darkened alleyway lined with parked cars. In the faint light, I still caught a glimpse of a lion tattoo on the inside of his wrist. The same tattoo as the leader of the team that came for me during the new moon. Thank God for night vision.

My self-defense training kicked in. I threw my head back, cracking against his hard enough that I saw stars, but he still didn't loosen his grip. Adrenaline spiked my blood stream. I kicked my legs back hard, connecting with him a couple times, but the most he uttered was a grunt. He stopped behind a big silver Hummer and growled against my ear.

"I know what you are." My struggling wasn't loosening his grip, but it was

apparently pissing him off. “I could snap your neck before you could scream. Understand?”

I nodded, and he slowly slid his hand down from my mouth. His fingers rested around my neck. I was sure he could feel my racing pulse.

“The Organization sent me to find you and bring you back. You have been difficult to track.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” The Organization? How could I go *back* to a place I’d never been?

“We are the same, Little One.”

“You’ve got the wrong girl.”

He squeezed my throat, trapping a sob as he growled. “Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not lying,” I gasped. “I’m a writer.”

He let go of me with a hard shove, and I hit the pavement like a rag doll, sucking in air while he paced around me.

Without making a sound.

Something in my brain clicked. The scent. The same scent that had lingered around Gabe when we found him. This guy was a jaguar. That’s why he could move silently and my senses were on full alert. The animal in me knew I was in danger—something wasn’t right about this guy. He knelt down beside me, lifting my chin to meet his eyes. His slick smile was back in place, like a cat that just ate a canary for lack of better description.

“You are a beauty, Little One. Why has no one claimed you?”

I shook my head, shifting onto my knees in hopes maybe I could spring up to outrun him. “I’m no one’s ‘Little One.’”

He laughed and took my hand, pulling me up onto my feet. “You are a treasure to our kind. You must come with me.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you.” I rammed my knee into his groin with all the force I could muster, and when he folded over, I followed it up with an uppercut to his jaw that knocked him on his ass.

I didn’t waste any time admiring my fighting skills. Instead I spun around and ran toward the well-lit, highly populated streets. Ducking into a Starbucks, I found a table in the back corner and collected myself. I needed to

get back to my hotel and get the hell out of dodge, but I also didn't want to chance the jaguar might follow me and find out where I was staying.

The door opened, and my heart sank. The tall man walked directly to my table and pulled up a chair. The corner of his mouth was starting to swell, his eyes were red from the pepper spray, and a little blood stained the side of his nose from my head butt, but it didn't stop him from giving me that sick predator's smile.

In the light I could see his eyes were bright green, or maybe they just looked brighter because his olive-colored skin was dark. Either way, it gave his stare an intensity that could have been magnetic if he hadn't just tried to abduct me. Under other circumstances he might've been attractive, like a younger Jimmy Smits.

"Every rose has its thorn, Little One." He rubbed his bruised jaw. "I am impressed. But you can't hide from me. Your scent is too strong."

"Goes both ways, buddy."

He chuckled. "You didn't catch my scent at the lake."

My face paled and I swallowed the swell of emotion. "I thought I recognized your scent. *You* killed Gabe..."

"So he is dead? Good. One less filthy wolf in the world."

I slapped him. Hard.

All eyes in the coffee shop turned to look at us. The manager came around in front of the counter. "Is this man bothering you?"

The jaguar man never lifted his gaze from mine, ignoring the Starbucks manager as he snatched my hand and brought it to his lips. "Some are born to sweet delight. Some are born to endless night," he whispered. "The night is ours, Little One. I will find you again. Stay away from the wolves."

Without another word, he rose and walked out of the Starbucks.

I jumped when my cell phone rang.

"Adam? You've got to get over here. I know who killed Gabe."

Chapter Six

ADAM

My shoulders tensed, my hands shook with rage as I closed my cell phone and put it back into the front pocket of my jeans. Aren, my younger—by a few minutes—twin brother, was staring at me with his arms crossed over his chest. If he expected me to tell him who I called, he could keep waiting. Instead, I cleared my throat, working to keep my expression neutral.

“Everything okay?” Aren asked.

No, it was fucking miles from okay. I shifted with a nod. “Yeah, it’s fine.”

Aren waited for more, but I didn’t bother to fill in the silence. He knew me better than anyone else on earth; being twins, we had a sixth sense when it came to one another. Keeping a huge secret, like the fact that I accidentally found my mate, was going to be tough. But I didn’t see any other way around it. I couldn’t introduce him to her any more than I could tell him that Lana was a jaguar. I needed to either keep quiet or lie.

I didn’t have any other choice.

And Lana knew who killed my friend.

How could she have found out? I left her at her hotel. Did she have some kind of jaguar hotline I didn’t know about? She couldn’t possibly know.

Unless the jaguar found her.

My pulse skyrocketed. If I could smell the jaguar in her, then her own kind most definitely could. I shouldn’t have left her alone. My muscles tensed with adrenaline. I reminded myself that Lana had managed to keep ahead of the armed mercenaries who tailed her before she ever met me. She didn’t need me to come to her rescue.

But that was my human rationale. For the wolf inside of me, the physical need to go to her was almost overwhelming. The wolf demanded protection for his mate. For the first time in my life, my loyalties were torn. The wolf wanted to go to Lana, but my Pack needed me to stay and honor Gabe.

Aren's eyes narrowed, but he finally shook his head and his arms slid down to his sides. "We should get back down there with the others."

The rest of the Pack was gathered at the end of the barn aisle. My gut twisted and grief burned inside me, coloring my voice. "I can't believe he's gone."

"We'll find out who did this, Adam." Aren gripped my shoulder. "We'll make things right."

"This will never be right." I shook off his attempt at comfort. I didn't deserve it. "He died in my sector. I let the Pack down."

Aren ground his teeth and grabbed my arm, pulling me in closer to him. "Don't put this on yourself. I know Gabe was your friend, but this is not your fault. The Pack is lucky to have you. You're fast, and you never turn away from a fight."

Yanking my arm free, I shook my head. "Not fast enough."

Without another word, I stormed through the center of the barn, away from Aren. I couldn't stomach listening to him trying to convince me this wasn't my fault. I knew the truth. While I was out watching over Lana, I should've been warning the others about another jaguar. Instead, Gabe was ambushed and dumped out on the shore of Lake Tahoe.

Gazing at all of the faces gathered around Gabe's body, my throat tightened until I felt like I was choking on my own emotions. My father, Malcolm, our Alpha, stood at the head of the pyre. The breeze pulled at his silver hair. His piercing green eyes and strong jaw made clear our family resemblance. Although he was nearing sixty years old, he had an aura of power that surrounded him, giving him an animal magnetism that was hard to deny.

His gaze met mine for a moment before he carefully washed the blood from Gabe's face with mineral oil. The oils helped the fire dispose of the

bodies faster. Cremation was the only way to ensure those from our wolf clan wouldn't be examined by a coroner. Secrecy was a cloak our kind had worn for thousands of years.

Luke and his twin Logan stood shoulder to shoulder across from me. Their ice blue eyes pointed down at the dense wooded pyre as if they could light it with the intensity of their stares. Logan wore his light brown hair longer than his brother, but the cut of their sharp features were identical. Jared and Jason stood across from one another on opposite sides of their fallen friend.

Jason looked like a surfer with his tan skin and sun-streaked light brown hair, but he actually spent most of his time at the local hospital working as a doctor. Every pack needed one since traditional medical centers were too risky. As Malcolm applied the oils to Gabe's body, exposing the extent of his wounds, I could see Jason studying the injuries. I bit back the urge to smack him—Gabe was our friend, not a cadaver to learn from.

Then I reminded myself it wasn't Jason's fault Gabe was on the pyre.

Facing forward again, I found myself staring directly into Gareth's dark brown eyes. His rough hands clenched into fists at his side, every muscle in his arms tense. For a moment, it felt like Gabe's twin brother could see right into my soul. Did he see the regret that weighed on my shoulders? How would Gareth go on without Gabe?

Werewolf pairs were nearly inseparable from birth. Two identical infants who would one day be identical hunters when the moon was full. Gareth was an exact copy of the mutilated body lying on the pyre behind my barn, only their haircuts differed. Gareth wore his jet black hair tied back in a ponytail, while Gabe always kept his in a short military cut. It was on the inside where the two brothers differed. There was a cold edge to Gareth. He was the first-born son by three minutes, and he took the mantle of older brother onto his shoulders like a second skin. He was always tense, while Gabe was quick to laugh. But Gareth seemed content to fade into the shadows and allow Gabe to shine.

I stared down at Gabe's pale, lifeless face, and my chest constricted.

I'd never see him smile again.

Malcolm lifted his arms, his face up toward the stars and the sliver of moon that shone above us. The Pack lifted their heads in response as our Alpha chanted into the night.

“We offer our brother back to the moon and the night. May his spirit be lifted, free to run with the pack of our ancestors and watch over those he left behind.”

It was tradition for each Pack member to speak before the pyre was lit. Gareth, being Gabe’s last living relative, spoke first.

“I call to our father, Dominic, and our mother, Isabelle. Please guide my brother. Take him back into your arms.” Gareth paused, but his voice never betrayed the emotions he kept so well guarded. “He is no longer bound by his physical body. His spirit is free.”

After a moment of silence, Luke and Logan spoke in unison. “Run free, Gabe.”

“Spirits guide him. Moon embrace him,” Jason said quietly.

His twin Jared added, “I can almost hear you howling, Gabe. Be free.”

“Gabe...” Aren cleared his throat, but his voice wavered anyway. “Watch over your brother.”

I blinked my eyes hard trying to force back the tears that were threatening. What would happen if I ever lost Aren? We’d been together since birth, watching each other’s backs, and leaning on each other when we couldn’t stand on our own.

I gazed across the pyre. Gareth was alone now.

With a deep breath, I tipped my head up toward the stars. “Spirits, please guide my friend, our brother.” I clenched my jaw, allowing my pain and guilt to smolder toward anger. “Help us avenge his death. He was taken too soon.”

Malcolm lowered the torch to the dry timbers and the flames crackled to life. Someday the task would fall on my shoulders as the eldest son of the Alpha, and it was a responsibility I never wanted to face. But fate made the decision for me, like it or not.

Smoke stung my eyes as I turned and walked away. Aren was close behind me. Only Gareth would stay behind to watch his brother’s spirit soar up to the

moon.

The muted nicker of the horses broke the silence as Aren and I walked the length of the barn. When we got to the other end, I sighed and shook my head, staring out into the darkness. "I'm going to make whoever did this pay."

"And that's going to bring Gabe back, how?" Aren asked.

I glanced over at my brother. Aren was always so logical. It was annoying as hell.

"Nothing can bring him back," I said. "But knowing the cat who did this is no longer breathing might go a long way to relieving some of my anger."

Aren nodded, crossing his arms in front of his chest. "It might. But the question is, why are you so angry?"

"What?" My blood pressure shot up a couple of notches, but I did my best to hide it. "I'm pissed because one of our best friends is dead. Gone way too soon. A jaguar murdered him, and I intend to even the score. Simple."

"Is it?" Aren raised a brow.

I shook my head. "They murdered Gabe, Aren. Are you going to stand by and let that happen? Doesn't this piss you off, even a little?"

My brother nodded slowly. "Yeah, I'm upset. We all are. But we also hunt as a Pack. You're acting like you're going to jump in your Jeep like a one-man militia. We've lost Pack members before. I want to know why this time has you so riled up."

I stared at my brother. My twin. My best friend. For the first time in my life, I was hiding something from him. How could I tell him that while I'd been on patrol for jaguars during the new moon, I actually found one? And instead of killing her, the wolf inside of me recognized her as my mate.

I couldn't. I couldn't tell any of them. They wouldn't understand. Hell, I didn't understand it myself. Until I did, I couldn't let any of the Pack know about Lana.

I shook my head. "I'm not going to debate this with you. I'll find the bastard who did this, and then I'll make him wish he never set foot in Reno."

"I'll go with you," Aren said. "No one should go after this guy alone."

“New moon is over. He won’t be able to shift. I can take care of it.”

“He may not turn into a jaguar, but he could still fire a gun.”

I yanked my keys out of my pocket as I walked toward my Jeep. “I’ll call you once I track the guy down, okay?”

Aren stepped in front of me, blocking my path, his gaze searching, judging my own.

“I know you’re hiding something, Adam.” Aren kept his voice low. “Whatever it is, you can’t shut us out. Family comes first.”

I clenched my jaw and nodded. “I know.”

“But you’re still not going to tell me what’s going on?”

“Nothing’s going on.” I moved around Aren to the driver’s side.

I jumped into the driver’s seat and Chaney’s engine fired to life. I drove up the road, but my eyes were on my rearview mirror. Aren never moved. I watched my twin get smaller and smaller as the distance between us grew.

Chapter Seven

LANA

I stayed inside the Starbucks for at least a half hour, sipping coffee and hoping Gabe's killer was long gone. Adam still hadn't called, but I understood. His friend died in his arms today. It didn't stop me from wishing I knew when he'd be meeting me back at the hotel though.

At this rate, I had to make my own plan. There was no one to rely on but myself, and being on my own was my way of life. I could figure something out.

Creepy cat man's threat to track me down echoed through my mind, and a chill crept down my back. I'd never been on the run from an actual *murderer* before. I'd been on the lookout for the gray riot gear, sure, and they definitely weren't thrilled with me, but a tall, exotic-looking man with heightened senses who killed in cold blood? That added a whole dimension I wish I'd never confronted.

Actually he confronted me, but either way, now that I knew he was out there, waiting for me, it made it much tougher to devise a plan and force myself to go outside again. Knowing the Starbucks was about to close was an effective impetus though. I needed to get back to the hotel.

I wasn't sure if Gabe's killer knew which hotel I was staying in. He'd caught up with me at the library, but I didn't have a clue how long he'd been following me. What if he was back at the hotel waiting for me to arrive? Adrenaline lit up my bloodstream.

When my cell phone rang I almost fell off my chair. Yeah, I was the picture of calm and cool.

I flipped open my phone, grateful to hear Adam's voice. "Lana? Tell me how you found this guy. Are you all right?"

"I'm okay, but don't go to the hotel. I'm not sure it's safe."

I could almost hear him frowning through the phone. "Where are you?"

"I'm at the downtown Starbucks on Virginia Street."

"Good. Stay there. It's well-lit and public."

I rolled my eyes. Why did he think I came in here in the first place?

"They're about to close, so hurry."

"I'll be there in ten minutes," he said.

I closed my phone and got up to throw away my cup when a thought struck me. If the creepy cat man was the one who attacked Gabe and then dumped him at the lake so we would find him, just how long had he been following me? What did he know of Adam?

A cold chill shot down my spine.

I collapsed back onto my chair, trying to make some sense of the jumbled facts floating around inside of my head. By the time the door opened, I'd lost all track of time. My gaze shot to the entrance, and my heart jumped at the sight of Adam. It was like all the problems plaguing me vanished for a split second when I saw him walking toward me. At that moment, I was incredibly grateful he couldn't read my mind.

Adam came to the table, walked right past the other chair, took my hand, and tugged me straight up into his arms. Instinctively, my own slid around him and my hands grazed up his back. While my brain was reprimanding me that I was already getting way too attached to this man, I couldn't stop myself from accepting his comfort. Knowing I had someone in my corner was a new sensation. When he finally drew back, his voice was rough with emotion, and his gaze burned into mine. "I'm glad you're all right. I shouldn't have left you alone."

My hold on him loosened as I took a step back. "I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself. I didn't realize this guy was following me or I wouldn't have left the hotel."

"We knew someone dumped Gabe off at the lake so we would find him,"

he said. "I should've realized he'd still be following." His hands clenched into fists at his side. "So who is he? Do you know—"

"I'll tell you everything I know," I said as I grabbed my cell from the table and slid it into my pocket. I scanned the coffee shop. "But let's get someplace safe so we can make a plan."

He nodded. "First we'll find another hotel where he won't find you."

"He claims he can track me anywhere."

Adam's brow shot up. "I can track you too, but it's tougher if we stay in crowded places. Too many scents to isolate a trail."

"I need to go back for my bag and my laptop." Adam's shoulders tensed up. I shook my head. "Don't start. I need my laptop. All my work is in it. No laptop, no money. I have to go get it, creepy cat man or not."

"All right." He held his hands up in mock surrender and nodded. "But I'm going with you."

"Actually, you're not."

His hands dropped and his brow furrowed. "Oh, yes, I am."

"I don't think he knows what you look like, Adam. I don't think he knew what I looked like either. He bumped into me at the library, and let me go. It was like he needed to match a face with the scent he'd been tracking. That could be our only advantage in this. He knows I knew who Gabe was, and he mentioned I should stay away from wolves, but I'm pretty sure he tracked me to the lake by scent. He didn't actually see us on the rock."

He thought about it for a minute and met my eyes again. "Why would he leave Gabe at your feet?"

"I have some hunches, but we need to go get my stuff first."

"I'll drive you back to the hotel, and you get security to take you up to your room to collect your things. Don't go up there alone, got it?"

"Got it."

Adam dropped me off at the back entrance to the hotel, and then drove away to park at the rear of the lot. While he watched the doors for any sign of a certain someone following me, I went to the front desk to check out and to ask security to escort me up. Being in the heart of Reno's downtown

gambling district, most of the hotels kept armed security on staff, and within five minutes I had a tall security officer walking me to the elevators. His badge read “Joe”—seemed like a perfect security name to me.

“Which floor, ma’am?”

Cringing inwardly over the *ma’am*, I answered. “Fifth floor.”

He pressed the button and stepped back from the elevator panel. Awkward silence descended as I watched the floor numbers light up. The elevator lurched to a stop at the third floor. I held my breath and waited.

When the doors opened to reveal a couple with their young son, I let out a sigh of relief. Joe and I stepped off the elevator on the fifth floor, and he followed me to my door. I slid the key card in, waited for the green light to flash, and then twisted the knob. As soon as the door opened, I caught his scent.

“Wait.” I stopped Joe the security officer. “Someone’s been in here.”

“How can you tell?” His hand hovered over his Taser.

I peered inside trying to see if anyone was hiding in my hotel room, but it looked empty.

Except for a note on top of my computer: *You cannot run, Little One.*

I crumpled the paper and packed up my laptop, trying not to let it affect me. He could be watching me right now.

Why was this “Organization” even fixated on me? They were sparing no expense, sending in a team and now some kind of lone agent to bring me in. And what did he mean about me being a treasure to their kind?

I had no idea.

Frustrated and scared, I headed out the back door, relieved to see Adam waiting right at the curb. I tossed my duffel in the backseat before I remembered a bloody body had been back there. I didn’t want to reopen a wound with Adam, so as I climbed into the passenger seat, I glanced over into the back.

His voice was quiet. “I cleaned out the Jeep while I was at the ranch.”

I turned around and slid down into my seat. “Sorry. I didn’t think about it when I tossed my bag back there.”

“It’s fine.”

But nothing seemed fine about Adam tonight. He drove cautiously through downtown Reno, circling around until I wasn’t sure where we were headed anymore.

“Are we lost?” I asked.

“No. But if this guy’s a tracker, I want your scent everywhere. Too many trails for him to follow.”

“He could be following us right now.”

“I’ve been watching for that. Unless he can fly, he’s not behind us.”

Adam finally slowed and pulled into a driveway. A pink driveway.

“You’re kidding right?” I was looking up at the bright pink towers with neon letters spelling Circus Circus down the sides. “Nothing about this place says ‘Don’t notice me.’ It’s like a big, pink, neon nightmare.”

Adam started to smile, but it faded away before it ever reached his eyes. “Sometimes the best place to hide is in plain sight, right? Plus, this is one of the busiest tourist hotels in Reno. It’ll be tough for him to find your scent here.”

I peered up at the pink tower one last time and sighed. “All right.”

Adam grabbed my duffel, and I slung my laptop bag over my shoulder to go check in. The good news was the pink hotel was half the price of my previous home base. The bad news? Screaming kids were *everywhere*.

It was like Las Vegas and Ringling Brothers all baked into one so-sweet-you’re-going-to-be-sick cake with pink neon frosting. Lights flashed, slot machines chimed, and trapeze artists performed overhead. We followed the psychedelic-patterned carpet to the tower elevators and headed up to my new accommodations.

Once we were safely inside, Adam sat on the bed and watched me set up my laptop at the small desk by the television.

“So, who killed Gabe, and how do you know he did it?”

I sat in the chair and turned to face him. Raw emotion burned in his gaze and rippled through his tense shoulders. I thought after the memorial for his friend, he might need a shoulder to lean on. Apparently Adam wasn’t much

of a leaner. “Okay, I guess we’ll get right to it.”

“It’s been a long day. I need to go make things right.” He ran his fingers back through his hair.

I started to frown a little. “And how exactly will things be made right?”

“Lana please...” He broke eye contact and went to the window. “Just bring me up to speed.”

“First off, this guy is dangerous, okay?” I crossed my arms, remembering the way Gabe’s killer gripped my throat. “Second, revenge isn’t going to make anything *right*.” Flashes of Gabe’s wounds filled my head. The weight of the danger around me settled onto my shoulders, and Adam seemed hell-bent to run right into its arms. “If he didn’t see our faces up on the rock, then we could use that to our advantage. He won’t recognize you until he’s close enough to catch your scent, right?”

He snapped around so fast I almost flinched. “I don’t want to talk strategy. I want to know who he is.”

I stared at the silver bullet hanging from Adam’s neck. “I don’t know. He didn’t tell me his name. His hair was black, his eyes were dark brown, and he seemed very well educated. I think he was quoting poetry at some point. Hold on.”

I turned around in the chair and quickly typed out the few words I could remember the creepy cat man saying. I could look them up later. Maybe it would be a clue. Hard to tell, but every little bit was worth a try at this point. I twisted in my chair toward Adam again.

“He also mentioned something about an organization that sent him to track me. It all still sounds nuts to me, but he said he knew what I was and that he was ‘like me.’ He’s also very strong and moves silently.”

“How do you know he’s the jaguar that killed Gabe?”

“Because he mentioned that I didn’t catch his scent at the lake today. And when I accused him of killing Gabe he didn’t deny it. He seemed...” I pressed my lips together, searching for the right words. “He seemed pleased. I know he’s the one who dumped him there, but I’m not sure why yet.”

Adam rubbed his forehead. “Maybe he’s been tracking you and found out

you were in contact with werewolves. Maybe he left Gabe for you like some sort of warning.”

“Maybe.”

“Or he was setting you up.” Adam grabbed one of the chairs at the tiny hotel table, flipped it around backward, and sat straddling it, resting his forearms on the back. “Our Pack isn’t a secret to the Jaguars. They know we protect our territory. If he thought you were getting friendly with wolves, what better way to turn them against you than to dump one of their Pack members at your feet, right?”

“I’d lose any potential protection from the Pack.”

Adam nodded slowly. “Exactly.”

“Could this *organization* he talked about know about my CAT scan from Bellevue? Could they tell I was a jaguar? Maybe that’s why they sent one after me, to confirm their suspicions?”

“I don’t know,” Adam said. “But we need to find him to get answers.”

“Maybe so, but ever since you mentioned my real parents and how they should have showed me how to use my...powers? What did you call them?”

Adam smiled. “We call them instincts.”

“That sounds better. Less superhero-ey.” I cleared my throat, crossing my arms even tighter. “Since my parents never wanted me, I’ve spent my whole life not wanting them right back.” I stood up. I felt a little less vulnerable being taller than Adam for the moment. “If I had found them and they rejected me again...” I shook my head, unable to finish. I cleared my throat. “But now...” I caught myself biting at my lower lip again. “If this is genetic, what happens to me, I need to know what happened. Why did they give me up to the state? That guy told me they sent him to ‘bring me back,’ but I’ve never been there before. Maybe my parents were involved.”

A rock settled in my stomach. Already I wanted to believe they gave me up to save me. I was setting myself up for heartbreak. “Tonight I walked to the downtown library to see about finding the San Antonio Yellow Pages so I could find a PI to go to the county records department. That’s when I ran into Gabe’s killer.”

“Do you think he knew why you were there?”

“I don’t think so.” I shrugged, forcing my arms to my sides. “I didn’t say anything about it.”

“Hmm” was all Adam said in response.

“Anything’s possible at this point, so it’s at least a place to start. He also mentioned I’m a *treasure to my kind*. What do you think that meant?”

Adam shrugged his shoulders slightly and met my eyes. “I don’t know about jaguars, but with us, only males can carry the werewolf genes. No females are actually born as wolves.”

“What?” I could feel the confusion written all over my face. “Then how do you... Wouldn’t you be extinct by now?”

“No. We have to convert our mates.”

“Convert as in...”

“We have to bite them. They go through a change and become werewolves like us. Then we can have a family.”

“You’re kidding.” I shook my head. “So if you like someone you turn them into a werewolf?”

“It’s not like that, Lana.”

“Have you ever bitten anyone?”

“No.” He got up and walked toward the window. “Never mind. I’m guessing that females are rare for jaguars too, especially if he said that.”

I stared at his back and the set of his broad shoulders. And realized I felt relieved that he’d never converted anyone. My eyes drifted a little lower to his trim waist and the way his jeans fit him just right. If I wasn’t careful I’d be fantasizing about mating with him myself in no time.

Rolling my eyes, I walked over to the bed and flopped backward on the mattress, staring at the ceiling. “I guess we need to lay low and figure out who the Organization is that sent him first.”

“For the past few months, jaguar shifters have wandered through Reno. Hired killers. But we’ve never interrogated any of them. When we caught them, we eradicated the threat, but usually once they realized this is our territory they moved on. If this guy works for the Organization, maybe the

others did too.”

“But this guy could’ve killed me tonight and he didn’t. Murdering me wasn’t his mission.”

“What?” Adam spun around and came to the bedside so quickly I barely saw him move.

“What are you talking about he could have killed you? You told me he bumped into you at the library and that he told you he needed to take you back. What else happened?”

“He followed me.” I could feel the waves of aggression pouring off of Adam, so I did my best to think before I spoke. “After I ate dinner, I went outside. He waited for me. I never heard him coming. He’s fast and very strong. We were in a dark alley before I could scream.”

“Did he hurt you?”

The million-dollar question. He did pull my hair, squeezed my neck, and dropped me on the ground, but only after I sprayed him with pepper spray and kicked him in the groin trying to break free. Now that I thought about it, he didn’t instigate anything painful.

I rubbed at the base of my neck. “He threatened me, and I’m sure he could’ve hurt me, but he didn’t.”

“He won’t be able to touch anyone when I’m finished with him.” His eyes flashed with violence as he turned back toward the window.

I sighed. “Look, Adam, I know you want to get even for Gabe, but it won’t change anything. It won’t bring Gabe back. We need to find out who sent him and why, or they’ll just send others and possibly kill more.”

Adam glanced back over his shoulder, his green eyes were cold and hard. Adam was once again the hunter I met last night in the café. The wolf.

“I can’t lay low and wait, Lana. You don’t get it.” He raked his fingers back through his hair. “I can’t leave you alone knowing he’s out there, and I can’t bring you back with me either. Until I get this guy, I don’t know how I can protect you and hide you from the Pack at the same time.”

“Since when did you become my babysitter?” There went the filter between my mouth and brain again. I raised my chin a little, trying to put on

a more courageous face than I felt. “I can take care of myself.”

He lowered his voice. “You saw what he did to Gabe.”

“I did. He attacked him while he was a jaguar. He won’t be able to do it again for a few weeks.” When did I suddenly become an expert on jaguars?

“He doesn’t need to shift into a jaguar to hurt you.” He knelt down, his eyes level with mine. “I’ve fought his kind before. He’s a dangerous killer.”

“So are you.” My words hit him square in the chest. His shoulders dropped a little, and regret shot through me. I sat up and shook my head. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean you were like him.”

“Yes, you did. And you’re right.” He straightened and headed for the door. “I’m going to get this guy. Keep your door locked and your phone nearby.” He slipped the second key out of the room key sleeve and into his pocket. “I’ve got a key, so no one should knock on the door. Don’t open it, no matter who they say they are.”

I swallowed the urge to ask him not to go. Instead I only nodded. “I’ll run some internet searches and give you a call if I find out anything about this organization of his.” My breath caught. “I forgot to tell you something...”

Adam looked at me expectantly.

“He had the same lion tattoo with an ‘N’ in the center on his wrist that the team leader in the café had.” That was it. “Nero. They both must be working for Nero.” It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him about my sweatshirt, but I let the moment pass.

Adam let loose a deep sigh. “It sounds that way... Okay, I’m going to run a sweep around the hotel to be sure he’s not around.” He opened the door and turned back. I could feel the weight of his stare and tipped my head back to meet his eyes. “Please stay here. I know you don’t understand—I’m not sure I do either, but I can’t let anything happen to you.”

Before I could even open my mouth to respond, he turned and walked out the door.

Chapter Eight

ADAM

The tighter my chest got, the faster I forced my legs to move until I was jogging down the hallway. Screw the elevator; I had enough pent-up rage and frustration to take the ten flights of stairs.

I hit the next stairwell, picking up speed. That jaguar bastard was with Lana. He'd touched her. He could've hurt her. *Fuck*. Taking the stairs wasn't scratching the surface of the storm brewing inside of me. My trouble with the Pack was only part of the mess. While I felt this overwhelming need to be near her, Lana wasn't a werewolf. She wasn't bonded to me, and she had no clue what was happening inside of me.

What if Lana didn't ever love me back? I almost laughed. What the hell did I know about love?

I used to consider myself a prize. Any woman was lucky to have me. But Lana wasn't *any* woman. She knew what I was. I'd never shared my true nature with anyone outside the Pack. It was easy to open up to her. For the first time, I could see a partner in my life.

None of my generation had found their mate yet, but we'd never heard stories of any women rejecting their mates. Of course, their mates had been human women. Lana was a wildcard. What would happen if your mate didn't feel the same way? Maybe that was why we bit our mates to convert them before they could conceive children.

Until now, I'd always considered it convenient birth control.

I shook my head. What was I thinking? None of this mattered. She was right on target about me being a killer. I'd killed at least four jaguars that had

threatened my Pack. We were a close-knit group, a family, and no one came into our territory to cause trouble. No one.

Until Lana.

Now there was more trouble than I could handle, and no one I could turn to. For all I knew, Lana would be gone in the morning. I'd told her to stay in her room, but in the short time I'd known her, I'd learned that she lived by her own rules and bristled when I tried to give her advice, even if it was sound.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I felt my mood lift a little in spite of myself. Maybe Lana was calling to ask me to come back up.

I put it to my ear without glancing at the screen. "Yeah?"

"Adam?"

It wasn't Lana. "Yeah, Aren, what's up?"

"It's late and you're not back at the ranch yet. I wanted to be sure you hadn't run into trouble tracking the jaguar."

There was so much I wanted to tell my brother, but instead I said, "I haven't found a trail yet, so no trouble. You can go home. I'll be back by morning."

"Don't forget the Greene's are bringing their broodmare over in the morning for her date with Bruce."

Crap. I'd forgotten all about it. "Yeah, I remember," I lied. "I'll be sure I'm home before nine a.m."

"You might need to sleep at some point, too, right?"

I rolled my eyes. When did my brother become my mother? "I will."

Aren hesitated, and my shoulders tensed up. "You're sure you're all right?"

"I am." I nodded even though I knew he couldn't see me. "Still shaken up about Gabe, but I'll be okay. I'll call you tomorrow."

"You better. Bye, bro."

Aren hung up, and I slid my phone back in my pocket. I jerked open the lobby door and headed for the parking lot, feeling even worse about myself, if that were possible. All the upheaval with Gabe and Lana had me way off-balance. I couldn't allow myself to forget my responsibilities to the horses,

my clients, or my Pack.

But Lana was in danger, and I couldn't ignore her either. My instinct was to be sure she was safe, but I also knew I was putting her in danger by loving her. *Fuck*. How could I love her already? But there it was. Despite what my head said about barely knowing her, my heart recognized her in an instant.

Maybe I should ask her on a date.

Oh, that's perfect. A killer is stalking her, and I'm hiding the truth from my family and my Pack. Sounds like a perfect time for dating.

In an effort to silence my inner argument, I forced myself to focus on something tangible: finding the jaguar that killed Gabe and threatened Lana. Jumping behind the wheel, I fired up Chaney's engine. Lana said she'd been at the library when she first saw her stalker, so I'd start there. If I could catch the man's scent, it'd be easier to track him if he came close again.

Once I got to the brick building, I pulled over and got out. Near the glass doors of the main entrance, Lana's scent lingered and heat shot through my veins. She was definitely under my skin. Way under. I rolled my shoulders back a little, trying to loosen up as I paced around the entryway.

When I caught the scent of the male jaguar I stopped in my tracks. Instead of heat, bitter jealousy triggered my pulse to race. This bastard touched Lana. He was a jaguar like her. The same as her. Would she find him more attractive?

Holy shit. What was that? I was not a jealous and insecure guy. This sucked.

I knelt down. Closer to the ground I could get a stronger scent and log the sensation so I could track it later. It was the same scent I found around Gabe at the lake. I was sure of it.

Clenching my fists, I straightened up and followed the trail back toward the heart of downtown.

"I'm coming for you, bastard," I growled as I slipped into the shadows.

Chapter Nine

LANA

I fought the urge to cry after Adam left. He'd been nothing but kind to me, and all I'd given in return was... Well, I was a pain in the ass. But it wasn't like I'd ever asked for his help. In fact, I wasn't sure why he cared at all. I guess he wasn't either though.

I got up to grab a glass that sat beside the empty ice bucket and headed for the bathroom. Tap water wasn't my favorite, but after Adam's warning, I wasn't about to venture out in search of bottled water. In my head, I felt like I was some sort of fresh baked pie, leaving my scent trailing out behind me everywhere I went.

Unsettling to say the least.

Gulping down the chlorinated water, I stared at myself in the mirror. I looked normal. No one would ever guess I was some sort of black jaguar when the moon went dark in the sky. Grabbing a washcloth from the rack, I soaked it in warm water and washed my face. It felt good. Normal. My life suddenly felt so out of control and impossible.

But it was real. I had seen the picture of a snarling jungle cat on Adam's cell phone. Earlier today I had jumped over eight feet and landed without a sound on top of a boulder. They hadn't taught me that in gymnastics class. I couldn't just claim it was impossible anymore and have it be the truth.

Opening my laptop, I started searching for clues and jotting down notes. I didn't have much to go on, especially since I'd already done as much searching on Nero as I could back when I first saw the doctor's transfer request, but I needed to do something. Keep busy. First I started looking up

animal attacks, then narrowing it down to attacks by large cats. After pages and pages of mountain lion attacks, I finally found something that stood out. A news article out of a small-town paper in Southern California interviewed a survivor of an attack.

An attack he swore came from a black jaguar.

A few more searches later, I had an email address for the man. His name was Chuck Seefut, and he lived in Temecula, a few miles north of San Diego County. Jaguars were rare in the wild, and non-existent in the U.S., and judging by all the stories I could find, no one believed it was really a jaguar. Doctors stated that his perception of the creature was distorted due to his brutal attack.

The Yucatan jungles were the home of the last remaining jaguars in the wild, and the chances of one traveling all the way Northwest to California were minuscule. It must have been a mountain lion that bit off chunks of his abdomen. Chuck had had the foresight to play dead when the attack began, which probably saved his life. The cat tired of him and disappeared into the night. Chuck dialed 911 on his cell phone before he lost consciousness. He was lucky to be alive.

I quickly sent him an email, requesting an interview about his attack. I mentioned I was a freelance writer and that I thought I could sell his story to some outdoor magazines and give him a percentage of the money. I hoped I'd hear from him in the morning.

Morning. I glanced over at the clock. It was almost four a.m. Closing my laptop, I set it aside and fell back onto the bed. Maybe everything would look brighter when the sun came up.

Chapter Ten

ADAM

Dawn began to light up the sky when I finally gave up the search. I decided to go check on Lana before heading back to the barn. I'd never be able to sleep unless I was sure she was safe, and I only had a few hours before Bruce's "date." I quietly slid the card into the lock and opened the door to her room. The desk lamp was still on, and Lana lay sprawled out on the king-size bed sound asleep. In spite of myself, I smiled. I couldn't help it. She looked so peaceful.

My mate.

Those were two words I never thought I'd be saying. In fact, as women came and went from my life, I always thought of myself as happy. The elders' stories about mating for life were a bunch of legends to try and scare the younger wolves into settling down.

But the moment I stared into Lana's eyes, I was lost. And the moment I touched her skin something inside of me recognized her.

It didn't make any sense. Maybe my instincts were off. Human women who could be converted into wolves, those were our mates. This was a woman born a shifter. A jaguar shifter. I'd never even heard of any shifters born female, and certainly there was no record of a wolf mating to one. And yet here she was.

In the end, if I wanted to be with her, I'd have to leave the Pack behind. They killed jaguars. They didn't welcome them into our Pack. They'd never accept Lana. And what if they found her now? They'd think she killed Gabe. It wouldn't matter that she was a woman or that I recognized her as my mate.

She was a jaguar.

I passed my fingers through my hair as exhaustion settled onto my shoulders with a vengeance. Seeing her sleeping, breathing in her scent. This was where I belonged. I set the deadbolt latch on the door and took off my jacket. Draping it over the back of the desk chair, I clicked off the light and walked over to the bed. I should go home. I had appointments to keep at the barn in a few hours. But instead I lay down beside her.

Lana moaned softly and rolled over, snuggling against my chest, and the anger and jealousy that had poisoned me earlier lifted, clearing away the shadows. I slid my arm around her, holding her close as I bent to kiss her hair. Even after the rough day we had, she still smelled like sunshine.

And she fit in my arms like she was made for me to hold her.

My wolf had staked its claim on this beautiful, intelligent woman, and somehow I had to figure out how make it work.

Chapter Eleven

LANA

I opened my eyes to find myself nuzzled against a gorgeous chiseled chest. Maybe I was still dreaming. Taking in a deep breath, I realized pretty fast it wasn't a dream. It was Adam.

I shifted a little so I could see his face. His hair was mussed up and his face was pale. Even with his eyes closed, they were puffy and red. I knew I hadn't dozed off until around four a.m. What time did he come back to my room?

Without waking him, I shimmied out from under his arm, holding my breath when he started to stir. Once he settled again, I got up and opened my laptop. While it booted up, I headed into the bathroom area and started up the coffeemaker by the sink. I hated coffee, but figured Adam might like it, and he'd probably need it after yesterday.

When I came back around the corner he was looking right at me. A squeak escaped me as I jumped back.

He smiled. "Jumpy much?"

"I thought you were still sleeping."

"I was, but someone else got up." He sat and stretched. "I've gotta get back to the barn anyway. We've got a broodmare coming out this morning to see Bruce."

I raised a brow. "A broodmare? Okay, you lost me."

He bent over to pull on his hiking boots. "I'm a horse trainer. Bruce is a stallion I train, and his stud fees pay for his training."

"You really do ride horses for a living." I didn't know anyone could still make a living at horses unless they were racehorses. As far as I knew

cowboys were long gone.

“Sure do.” He nodded. “I’m not independently wealthy, Lana. I’ve gotta work just like everyone else.” He laced up his boots.

“I guess I really don’t know very much about you.”

“I wish I could take you to the ranch.”

“I love horses. I used to wish for a pony when I was little.” My lips curved in a bittersweet smile. “Santa never did bring me one, though.”

He stood up, sniffed the air, and peered over at me with a cocked brow. “Did you make coffee?”

“Oh, yeah.” I glanced at the tiny coffeemaker. “It’s almost done if you want some before you go.”

“Nah, I don’t like coffee much.”

“Me neither,” I replied. He laughed. *What a great sound.* I couldn’t help but smile.

He walked over and pulled me into his arms like it was the most natural thing in the world, like we’d been together for years instead of days. I returned the embrace, enjoying the warmth of his body.

“I’m sorry about being so stubborn last night,” I said against his chest.

“I don’t want anything to happen to you.” He stepped back and met my eyes. “I found his trail last night, but I lost him downtown. Did you find anything?”

“I may have. I’m not sure yet.” I took his hand, trying to ignore the sparks that slid up my arm from the contact as I pulled him over to my laptop. “I found a news story about a man in Temecula who survived what he claims was a jaguar attack. ’Course there aren’t any jaguars in California, so no one believes him. I emailed him. We’ll see what happens. Beyond that, I couldn’t find any links between jaguars and business organizations, Nero or otherwise, but...” I hesitated, ratcheting up my courage to share a little more of myself with him, and hating how insecure it made me feel. “There’s something else.”

Adam sat down, resting his elbows on his knees. “What is it?”

“That tattoo I told you about? The one of the lion head... I’ve seen it before.”

He frowned leaning back in the chair. “What?”

“Yeah, it’s the same emblem that’s on the sweatshirt I was wrapped in when Texas social services took me in as a baby.”

“Holy shit.” He rocked back in the chair, crossing his arms over his chest while he mulled over the new information. I could almost see the cogs turning. Finally, he met my gaze again. “This is big. How come you didn’t say anything before?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Between learning I’m not who or what I thought I was, and constantly having to watch over my shoulder for trouble, I didn’t want to add this to the mix.”

I dropped my gaze to my laptop, feeling a wave of tears lurking. I willed them back, but Adam reached forward, catching my chin. When I met his eyes, I didn’t see the pity I expected. Only kindness reflected back at me.

“What is it? Your secret is safe with me.”

A huge lump of emotion filled my chest, pressing against my heart. I swiped a stray tear, rolling my eyes. “You’d think I’d be over all this by now, but the mental image of me being given up to the state in only a diaper and a big sweatshirt is like the ultimate reminder that no one wanted me.”

Adam pulled me into his arms, and I didn’t fight the comfort. Sitting on his knee, I breathed him in while he kissed my hair.

“We’re going to figure out what happened to them.” He pulled back enough to see my face. “I don’t know why you ended up where you did, but it is not because you didn’t deserve a family.” He bent closer to me, and I tipped my chin up, feeling his breath on my skin. His lips brushed mine so slow and tender that my breath caught in my throat. He rested his forehead against mine. “You deserve to be loved.”

My heart lurched at his words, and I settled my head against his chest. They were kind words, I reminded myself. That was all. I’d heard kind words before, and they usually came before someone walked out the door. And the kiss...that kiss. My lips still tingled, wanting more of his attention.

I wiped my eyes, collecting myself. Clearing my throat, I got up and sat on the bed, facing him again. I needed a little distance from him and all the

emotions he stirred within me. Keeping the walls secure around my heart was my self-preservation, my only defense.

“So, I guess I better get started tracking down my records to see if they lead me any closer to my parents.” I rubbed my hands on my jeans and glanced over at him.

“You’re going back to the library?” I could see the tension building in his shoulders. “He’ll be watching for you.”

“I know.” I sat up straighter, welcoming the building frustration from his over-protective tendencies. Anything to escape his tenderness. “Believe it or not, I really did survive on my own before we met, Adam.” He shot me a cold look, but I went on. “I found a private investigator I have a connection to in Dallas. I’m going to call him and see if he can recommend anyone in San Antonio who does work inside the Children and Family Services Department over there. I can do it all from here in my room. No library.”

“All right.” He bent down to kiss me again, and without thinking, I kissed him right back. We both stared at each other, and my face flushed. Kissing men I hardly knew was miles out of my comfort zone, but with Adam it felt natural. Right.

He started to smile and my heart raced. I was definitely in trouble here. Adam had been kind to me and stood up for me more than once, but this was the same cocky man who sat in my booth at the diner and told me point blank that if he wanted to sweep me off my feet, I’d be swept. Once the chase was over and he had me, he’d be moving on. I knew this lesson well, and it was wise to remember it.

Adam whispered softly as he kissed me again, “I wish I could stay.”

He pulled me to my feet and into his arms as his tongue parted my lips. I moaned softly into his mouth, ignoring the voice in my head, the one I knew was right, and my fingers tightened in the back of his hair. Our lips brushed over and over, his teeth tugging gently at my lower lip. My body was on fire, aching for more. When he sat me back down on my feet, I was breathless. I wanted him anyway.

He stared at me with hungry, demanding eyes. “I’m not sorry about that.”

I started to smile. “No one said you should be.”

“Would you like to see the horses tonight? I could barbeque steaks.”

“I’d love to,” I started, “but what about...you know. The whole your-family-hates-jaguars-and-will-be-able-to-smell-me thing?”

“I’ll figure it out,” he growled sending shivers down my spine. His voice was like a dangerous promise. Part of me tried to reach for rational thought. I couldn’t get in too deep with Adam. He’d already explained about his Pack. They’d kill first and ask questions later. But he had done everything he could to keep me safe...

I stared into his eyes, my skin still hot and hungry for more time alone with him, even if it didn’t make sense. “I’d like that,” I whispered before I realized I was going to speak.

His lips curled into a sensual smile. “Me too. Stay inside. I’ll call you later today.”

He reached out to touch my cheek, his fingertips sliding along my skin as he tipped my chin up toward his mouth. This time my lips were already parted, anxious for his affection. When he drew back, my heart pounded.

“I’ll see you soon, Lana.”

He slipped out the door, and I engaged the deadbolt. When I stepped back, I shook my head. I was in so much trouble.

And it felt amazing.

Chapter Twelve

ADAM

I jumped into the driver's seat and fired up Chaney's engine. I hadn't gotten much sleep, but I didn't give a shit. I felt better than I had in who knew how long. Just thinking about the way Lana's body felt pressed against me when we kissed made me shift in my seat.

Maybe my instincts weren't as far off as I worried they might be.

She was still a jaguar, but everything about her spoke to me. The way her large, almond eyes stared up at me with her full lips parted enough for me to catch the spicy scent of her mouth, and how her black hair felt like strands of silk sliding through my fingers made it impossible for me to think clearly. She was curvy and soft, and I wanted to explore every inch of her body and know every part of her soul.

I howled up into the hot wind as I raced toward the ranch. Had I ever felt more alive?

When I pulled into the barn, Luke was busy filling up water buckets. "Out with one of your ladies again?" He shot me a glare. "Nice of you to show up."

Luke had turned twenty last month and still had a tough time hiding his wolf abilities and his temper. Until he could control them and pass himself off as a normal man, he needed to stay close to the Pack. My ranch was the natural choice, but it wasn't always where Luke wanted to be.

"Sorry, Luke. I was tracking the jaguar who got Gabe."

"All night?" He shook his head as he kinked the hose and jammed it into the next water bucket. "Yeah, right. You could've called."

I knew I had a well-deserved reputation for being a player, but Luke's sour attitude was uncalled for. "Look, believe whatever you want, Luke, but keep it to yourself, okay? I don't want to hear it."

"No shock there. I'm just supposed to believe whatever bullshit you're shoveling." He grumbled under his breath. "I'm not a kid anymore."

"You sure as hell are acting like one." I walked over and snagged the hose from him. "I pay you to be here so I can take care of other things when I need to, like jaguars who attack our Pack. Can the attitude."

His brow furrowed, and he clenched his jaw. Then without a word he stormed off to the tack room. I watched him go while I topped off the last water bucket. He'd be all right. Once Luke cooled off, I figured I could find out what was really going on with him. Luke was like an onion in a lot of ways. You had to go through a lot of layers to find out what was really inside.

As I turned off the water, a horse trailer pulled down the drive. The barn broke into chaos with some of the horses pacing in their stalls, while others neighed and pawed at their doors, flipping their heads in anticipation of the visitor. I walked down the barn aisle and greeted the owners with a handshake. After they got Sabrina settled into a stall, I gave them the boarding contract to fill out and sign. The mare was a well-muscled blood bay with dark dappled color on her hindquarters. She was a west coast western pleasure champion, and her owners were hoping that crossing her with Bruce would give them a black colt or filly.

I figured a healthy foal would be good enough.

With paperwork in hand, I watched the empty trailer pull out and walked over to Bruce's stall. I gave his neck a good scratch, chuckling as the stallion's upper lip stretched out and quivered. I shook my head. "What a life. Did you see the way that mare was flirting with you? You're a lucky horse, Bruce."

Luke finally resurfaced as I saddled up the three-year-old filly at the end of the barn.

"Sorry, Adam."

"It's okay," I said, meaning it. "We're all a little tense after what happened

to Gabe.”

“That’s probably it.” He shrugged. “I’m glad you didn’t find that guy who did it.”

“What?” I stopped walking, my brow furrowed. “Why?”

“Gabe was by himself, and now Gabe’s dead. I didn’t want that to happen to you too.”

I closed my eyes for a second as the puzzle pieces came together in my mind, then I looked over at Luke. “So when I wasn’t here this morning you thought...” He thought I was dead. I felt like a big asshole. “I’m sorry, Luke. I should’ve called you.”

He shrugged it off. “No big deal. But you shouldn’t go looking for this guy alone.”

“Now that the new moon is over he won’t be so dangerous.” I saw the frustration in Luke’s eyes and put my hands up a little. “I won’t go look for him alone, okay?”

“Good.” Luke smiled. I felt bad for lying to him, but at least it brought him some peace of mind.

On to the barn full of horses that needed to be worked. *Time to focus.* Luke already had Bubbles all saddled up, so I led her out to the ring. Like Bruce, she had a registered name, Seaswept Ladyhawke, but she also blew bubbles in her water bucket so her nickname stuck. In the center of the ring I tightened the cinch a little more and flipped the reins up over her head. She’d only been ridden a few times, but she was a good-hearted mare. I was still careful with her, but so far she’d been pretty eager to learn.

With my left boot in the stirrup, I stroked her neck. “Ready, Bub?”

She seemed steady, so I grabbed the front and back of the saddle and pulled myself up, swinging my right leg over to the other side. I slid my foot into the stirrup and adjusted the reins. With a little click of my tongue, Bubbles stepped forward and we worked as a team practicing turns and moving her through her gaits.

I smiled, stroking her mane as we loped along the rail of the ring. Riding horses brought me peace like nothing else. Having an animal nature myself,

we shared an unspoken communication. The horses trusted me and usually tried everything I asked of them. Rarely did any of them give me any trouble.

Not like Lana. I smirked. She definitely excelled at trouble. It seemed to follow her around like a puppy.

I rode Bubbles back to the barn and slid down from the saddle. Luke grabbed the reins and walked her back toward the crossties to pull the saddle off and cool her out. Once I found a chair in a shady spot, I pulled out my cell phone and dialed Lana's number.

No answer. Frowning, I left a voicemail. She was probably just in the shower, I told myself. But rationalizations or not, my animal instincts were on alert. I needed to hear her voice and know she was safe. But before I could race over to her hotel to check on her, Aren pulled up.

And he didn't look happy.

Chapter Thirteen

LANA

My PI contact in Dallas had assured me he'd call a few people he knew in San Antonio and hook me up with someone who had a Children and Family Services background. Waiting for my phone to ring, though, knowing Gabe's killer was out there looking for me, made me tense and claustrophobic. Especially since I knew he was the only one who really could give me the answers I needed.

If he really could track my scent, he'd find my new hotel eventually. If he found me there, alone in my room, even with pepper spray, I would be vulnerable. If I lured him out, instead, I'd have the home field advantage. I'd see him coming. No surprises. It seemed like a no brainer.

I wandered around the casino for most of the morning, staying in very public places where kids ran by every few seconds begging their moms and dads for "just five more dollars."

He finally entered by the slot machines. His dark eyes caught mine, his jaw set. I made a beeline to the restaurant and sat at a table near the buffet. He couldn't kill me in the middle of a busy restaurant, and with casino security guards hovering around the exits, he wouldn't be able to carry me out without my consent. And I wasn't consenting to anything but talking.

Besides, he hadn't *really* tried to hurt me. Not yet anyway.

We both watched my cell phone ring and then stop. "If I don't call him back, he'll come looking for me." I reached for my cell phone in my purse, but creepy cat man stretched across the table in the restaurant and caught my wrist before I could grab it.

He flashed me a slick smile. "Your wolf is no match for me, Little One."

"My name is Lana, so you can drop the gross pet name."

He released my wrist. "I don't have time for name games. Your scent is all over this casino. You brought me here. I know this was not an accident."

"I want information."

"I will take you back to the Organization, and they can give you all the information you require."

"Why don't you start by telling me who the Organization is?"

"So now we play twenty questions? I don't think so." He grabbed my upper arm, hard, and started to tug me out of the booth. Using my free hand, I smacked him hard across the face. It felt like everyone in the buffet dining room froze and turned to look at us.

"Let go of me, or I start screaming," I whispered.

He nodded and let go of my arm.

"I'm okay," I said to the gawkers. "Sorry about that."

Creepy cat man didn't look as okay. My handprint rose up in red across his face. His eyes narrowed. I may have taken this meeting further than I should have. My plan hadn't been to get physical. I only wanted to ask him some questions. I clung to my theory that he couldn't murder me in front of witnesses.

Now I just needed to get him to talk. "Look, I'm not going anywhere with you, but I am willing to talk." I let my back rest against the booth, hoping I looked more confident and relaxed than I felt. My thumb toyed with the bump of the pepper spray canister in the pocket of my jeans. "Why don't we swap information?"

"Because I don't need information from you."

"Then what exactly *do* you need me for?"

He wet his lips with a menacing glare. "In case Cyrus and his team failed in their mission, I was sent to find you and bring you back. Nothing more."

"Why would anyone want to kidnap me?"

"Not kidnap." The corner of his mouth quirked up into a crooked smile. "Retrieve."

“You can’t retrieve something that was never yours to begin with.”

He seemed to ponder that for a moment. “You puzzle me. You do not know the Organization?”

“No. The Nero Organization is nowhere to be found.”

This made him grin. “Ahh, so you do know something.”

I hadn’t wanted to be right about Nero, but I was. I tried not to let him see the red warning lights going off in my head and rolled my eyes. “Why are they so secretive?”

“We are elite, not secretive.” He crossed his arms. “You should be honored they are welcoming you back.”

“You don’t get it. I’ve never been there. I don’t know who they are, and I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He frowned slightly. “You are lying.”

“No I’m not.” I leaned in closer to him, lowering my voice. “I only lured you here to find out why you were stalking me. If I was from your Organization, wouldn’t I already know?”

“Perhaps.”

“Are there other...people like us in the Nero Organization?”

He nodded, but seemed like he was miles away.

I sighed. “Can you at least tell me your name?”

He stood up from the table and stared down at me. “You can call me Sebastian.”

“You’re leaving?” I felt like I was in the Twilight Zone. Why was my stalker running away from me? Not that I was complaining, but nothing was making sense.

“Yes, we are finished for now.” He met my eyes with a chilling stare. “Stay away from the wolves, Lana. They are killers.”

“No different from you.”

He raised a brow. “I was after *you*. The wolf was in my way.”

“Then why did you dump him at the lake?” Then it dawned on me. “You knew I wasn’t alone.”

He raised a brow. “It would be difficult not to notice a filthy wolf scent

while I tracked yours.”

Did he see Adam or just smell him? “You wanted me to be blamed for that.”

“I wanted you away from the wolf.”

“He knew I didn’t kill Gabe.”

“His pack does not.”

With that, Sebastian was gone.

I was surprised how quickly he disappeared into the crowd. I pulled out my cell phone and called Adam back, but it rang and went to voicemail. Strange. He’d just called me a few minutes ago. I left a message, polished off my iced tea, and headed back up to my room.

I was new to recognizing scents, but I was pretty sure I covered my tracks with a couple puffs of pepper spray in the hall as I came out of my room earlier. Surely that reeked much more than I did. At least I hoped so. I wanted my stalker to find me in the restaurant, but I didn’t want him to know where I was hiding out. I was fairly certain he didn’t want to kill me, but he obviously worked with someone who had an agenda. Either way, I didn’t want him to know where I slept.

I went outside, and the doorman flagged down a cab for me. I wasn’t sure if Sebastian was still nearby. His scent wasn’t lingering in the area, but trusting these animal instincts didn’t come naturally to me, so just in case, I climbed in a cab and told him I’d like to drive down Virginia Street and take a picture of the big Reno arch.

We made the loop, and I was back at the hotel. Glancing around, I didn’t see or smell any sign of Sebastian, so I slipped back through the glass doors and up to my room.

Chapter Fourteen

ADAM

“Luke called me. He was worried when you weren’t here this morning.” Aren locked his car and turned to face me.

“Yeah, I know.” I hooked my thumb in the pocket of my jeans. “I got caught up in what I was doing. I should’ve called.”

“What were you doing out all night?”

I ground my teeth as I glared at Aren. He was really starting to piss me off for grilling me like I was a guilty little kid. But all I saw was the memory of Gareth’s eyes—the eyes of the remaining twin. My anger fizzled.

“I was looking for Gabe’s killer. I told you that. I found his trail, and I know his scent now, but it was too old for me to track him very far.”

“I’ll go with you next time.”

“I’m capable of handling myself.”

“Dammit, Adam, I won’t lose you, too!” Aren shook his head and sighed. It wasn’t like him to have an emotional outburst. He was the levelheaded one of us. “This isn’t an inexperienced jaguar who wandered into our territory. This is someone who knew who we were, attacked one of our Pack, and then was ballsy enough to dump him right at our feet. This is a trained killer, Adam.”

“And we’re taught from birth how to hunt.”

“But we don’t do it for sport or to send a message. This guy did. He may already know you’re the Pack leader’s eldest son. If so, you might as well have a big target painted on your chest.”

I nodded. I couldn’t tell Aren that the jaguar wasn’t after us. He was after

Lana. I didn't know why yet, but the "message" was definitely meant for her.

"I know. I'll stay in tonight. Okay?"

Aren nodded and seemed to relax a little. "We're all wound a little tight over this. Losing Gabe was a blow to all of us." He started back toward his car but stopped to look back over his shoulder. "Dad's probably coming by soon."

"Malcolm?" My brow furrowed. "Oh God, Luke didn't call him too, did he?"

Aren shrugged with a little grin. "You should've called someone to tell them where you were."

I worked one more horse before my father pulled up in his sleek black Chrysler 300C. Being the Alpha of our Pack made our family relationship complicated. We never had the father-son relationship I'd seen the other Pack members enjoy with their dads. It wasn't that my father was stern or abusive, but he was more than just my father. He was my leader, and I was his heir. It was difficult for me to see him as my "Dad" rather than Malcolm, our Alpha. It felt too casual to me.

Malcolm got out of his car and straightened up to his full six-foot-three-inch height. Even in jeans and a polo, he turned heads and commanded attention, but attention was the last thing he wanted since my mother died.

I walked over to greet him and shared a firm embrace. Malcolm drew back. "I'm glad you're all right. Last night was tough. Everyone was worried when you never came back."

"Aren told me. I'm sorry." I broke eye contact. The scrutiny of his gaze was too heavy for me. "I should've called."

"That's not what I wanted to discuss."

"No?" Puzzled, I glanced back over at him.

"Not really. Can we go inside and speak privately?"

"Yeah, sure. Luke can finish up here."

I let Luke know what still needed to be done, and then we headed up to the house. Once we were inside, Malcolm sat at the head of the kitchen table. I

brought him a glass of water and took a seat.

“So, what’s up?”

“With Gabe’s passing, the elders and I were forced to look at the future of our Pack, and we’re concerned.”

“I’m going to find this guy, and he’ll pay for what he did to Gabe.”

He shook his head. “That’s not what we’re concerned about.”

I frowned. “Then what’s bothering you?”

“We’re getting older, Adam. None of us can conceive children anymore. You’re my eldest son. I know you’re not inclined to take a mate, but it’s your responsibility to keep our bloodline going.”

I rolled my eyes and tried not to crack a smile. “Do you have any idea how...medieval that sounds?”

“Laugh all you want. It won’t change the fact that you are not a rebellious teen anymore. You need to settle down. Find your mate, Adam.” His expression was stern and unreadable.

I stared at my father. What could I say? I wanted to tell him that I’d already found her. I wanted to tell him she was beautiful and brave and funny and intelligent. But then I’d also have to tell him she was a jaguar. I knew my father loved me, but he wouldn’t accept Lana as my mate.

How could we keep the bloodline going anyway? We both needed to be wolves to have children. She was a jaguar—I didn’t know if I could even convert her. Or if she’d let me.

These were all questions I couldn’t face. Not yet.

Malcolm reached across the table and gripped my hand. “I’m not asking you to convert someone tomorrow, Adam. But I need you to stop staying out all night with girls who mean nothing. The rest of your generation looks to you. None of them has found their mate yet either. I want that to change.”

I nodded, but I had no clue what to say.

Malcolm got up. “I’m not asking for miracles, Adam. I’m only asking that you slow down and really look. When I met your mother, I knew from the moment my eyes met hers that she was my other half, and when we touched I felt recognition, like a web binding us together. The wolf inside of me

howled, knowing her as my mate. I never doubted it or tried to run from it. Trust your instincts.” He got up. “I’m counting on you, Adam.”

He walked out and left me staring at his empty chair. My head pounded. My instincts were leading me down an unknown path. I didn’t like where I was heading.

Chapter Fifteen

LANA

After a few hours on the internet I'd still turned up nothing on the Nero Organization, and all I had was Sebastian's first name so that didn't help me pick up any leads either. But there was a little progress somewhere. My contact came through with a PI in San Antonio. After a few emails and a phone call, he'd be sifting through the red tape at Children and Family Services.

I tried to be patient while I waited and started searching through pages of web images for any sign of the Nero emblem. Similar lion heads adorned Roman breastplates, but so far nothing with an "N," and nothing I could connect to me. Before I gave up my search for the night, I heard back from Chuck Seefut about his jaguar attack. The details in his email sounded like a shifter attack was highly possible. It happened during a new moon, and he hadn't heard the big black cat coming before it was on top of him.

How many other people out in the world were like me?

Checking the clock, I closed up my laptop. Adam was supposed to pick me up at six p.m. for dinner and more investigating. Even though I shouldn't, I wanted to know more about him. I wanted to see his barn, the horses, and pretend I had a normal life, whatever that was. Even if it was only temporary.

I had to keep reminding myself I couldn't stay in Reno. As much as we liked each other, the truth was his Pack would never accept me. And I would never ask Adam to leave his family. If anyone understood how precious a family was, it was me. I'd lost mine before I was a week old. Over the years, I would have given anything to have a family. I wouldn't take that away from

Adam.

I got into the shower and shampooed, conditioned, and shaved. I got out feeling clean and quickly slathered on lotion. Just in case something happened with Adam, I wanted my skin soft and smooth. I couldn't stay with him and live happily ever after, but I could enjoy what was left of our time together. That was my plan anyway.

When I finished my hair and makeup, I dug around in my bag and sighed. I hadn't been on a date since before my run-in with Bellevue. Living on the run left my apparel choices extremely limited, too. I finally decided on a pair of jeans and a clean pink T-shirt. Clean being the big selling point.

I headed back into the bathroom for a final look-over in the mirror when I heard the lock disengaging. I turned around to see Adam in my doorway. My breath caught in my throat. He had on black jeans and a form-fitting, green T-shirt that made his eyes stand out even more than usual.

He smiled. "You look amazing."

I started to make an excuse for my lack of a hot outfit, but his smile was gone in an instant. I followed Adam over to the bed. He stopped by my discarded clothes and spun around.

"He was here. I smell him. What happened today? Why didn't you tell me he was here? Are you okay?"

I held my hand up shaking my head. "Slow down. He wasn't in here. I met him down at the buffet."

"You what?" I could see the muscles in his arms tense, and he was staring at me like I was insane.

"It sounds worse than it was. I found out his name is Sebastian and I confirmed that the Nero Organization sent him after me."

Adam shook his head. "What part of *stay in your room* did you miss?"

Okay, now my smile was gone too. "I didn't miss anything except maybe your new job title as my jail warden."

He shook off my verbal jab. "Why did you go downstairs to eat in the first place? You could have gotten room service."

"I knew what I was doing. If I could get him to come find me, then our

meeting could be on my terms. I was ready for him this time.” His jaw dropped a little so I jumped back in before he could interrupt. “He doesn’t know I’m staying in this hotel. He thinks he tracked me to the restaurant. Besides, he couldn’t get me out of there or hurt me in such a public place. I just wanted to talk to him.”

“Jesus, Lana.” He raked his fingers back through his hair. “Do you know how dangerous that was?”

“He doesn’t want to hurt me.”

“No?” He let out a sarcastic laugh. “Then why did he kill Gabe and leave him dying at your feet?”

“Because he wants me to stay away from you and the Pack. He figured Gabe dying from a jaguar attack would make it impossible for me to stay in town.”

“He knows I’m protecting you.”

“He knows some wolf is. He caught the scent while he tracked me. I don’t know if he ever saw your face.”

Adam nodded slowly and blew out a pent-up breath of frustration and maybe a little relief. He shook his head and held his hand out toward me. I took it without thinking, and he pulled me another step closer. His stare was intense and demanding as he lifted my hand and pressed a kiss to the back of my fingers.

“I’m glad you’re all right. I’m sorry if I jumped all over you, it’s just that...”

“You need to keep me safe.”

He nodded, lowering my hand, but not releasing it. “Yeah. It’s the wolf in me. I can’t help it.”

“Can we call a truce and go see the horses now?” I gnawed at my lower lip. “I promise I’ll tell you everything I’ve found out so far.”

He finally smiled, and my heart skipped like I was a teenager again. No one should be allowed to be that cute, angry, and sexy all at the same time.

Can’t stay in Reno. I reminded myself for the millionth time.

But my heart was deaf to my head’s warnings. Instead, I grabbed my jacket

and leaned up for a quick kiss before I even realized what I was doing.
“Let’s go.”

Chapter Sixteen

ADAM

Bruce and Lana hit it off instantly. He nickered and shook his head every time I started to pull Lana away to meet the other horses. She laughed, holding out her empty palm while the stallion's upper lip twitched back and forth against her skin.

"That tickles!"

"Bruce is definitely a ladies' man." I grinned.

Lana looked over at me with a playful sparkle in her dark brown eyes. "Just like his trainer, huh?"

"Me?" I pointed at my chest, doing my best to look shocked by her accusation. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh please." She rolled her eyes. "You have ladies' man written all over you. I knew it from the second you walked in that café. You were hot, and you knew it."

I laughed. "Is that what you thought?" She walked toward me, and I stared down at her with a crooked smile. "Because I thought I was hunting."

"For dates or jaguars?" She grinned.

I raised a brow slightly. "Maybe both."

She tipped her chin up. "No wonder you were so pushy."

"I was not pushy." I gave her a little wink. "Just tenacious."

"Oh, is that what you call it?"

She walked farther down the barn aisle, and my gaze slid along her back, taking in all her curves. Deep inside I could feel the wolf in me growling, needing to claim her in a very primal sense. My voice was low when I

replied. “When I know what I want, I go after it.”

I watched her in front of Bubbles’s stall, her slender fingers sliding down the mare’s satin coat, and my heart twisted in my chest. Seeing her with the horses—my horses—only made the bindings of the inexplicable connection between us that much stronger. She reached up under Bubbles’s forelock to stroke her forehead and leaned in close to the bay mare, whispering to her.

My keen wolf senses could pick up every word as she told the mare that she was lucky to have such a cute trainer, although she also mentioned he could be stubborn and cocky.

I started to respond when Lana looked over at me and grinned. “You could hear every word, couldn’t you?”

I shrugged with a smile.

“Good. That last little bit was just a test.” She turned back to Bubbles, kissing her soft muzzle. “No telling secrets around Adam. He hears everything.”

The bay nickered in answer, and Lana strode back over to my side. Something about the way she looked up at me, how her full lips parted as she smiled, made the animal inside of me howl with desire. I wanted her, but more than that, I needed her. The wolf had never reacted to a woman like this before. Just like Malcolm had described. It was unsettling and damned distracting.

“Thanks for introducing me to everyone.”

I nodded and took her hand, my fingers twining with hers as we started up toward the house. “I’m pretty sure the pleasure was all theirs.”

When I opened the door for her, the smell of fresh spaghetti sauce wafted out to greet us.

“Wow! It smells great. I didn’t know you could cook.”

I chuckled. “I brought you here for dinner, remember?”

“I know, but I figured you’d just grab pizza or something.”

“I don’t mind cooking.” I passed by her to enter the kitchen and lifted the cover of the Crock-Pot. Grabbing a wooden spoon to stir the bubbling sauce, I smiled over at her. “Just need to boil some spaghetti, and we’ll be ready.”

Chapter Seventeen

LANA

While Adam cooked the pasta, I wandered around his living room. One entire wall was full of championship ribbons, photos of winning rides, and plaques. I guess it was like a resume for a horse trainer. When I took a closer look, I could feel the corners of my lips start to curl. Adam looked really good in a cowboy hat and chaps. Who knew?

I glanced back over my shoulder at him. He was busy putting Italian bread in the oven. How did I manage to run into a hot guy who could cook *and* ride a horse? Was there nothing wrong with him?

I turned back toward the photos and sighed. Well, during a full moon he did shift into a wolf, not to mention the fact that his family would kill me if they knew I was anywhere near him.

Okay, maybe he wasn't so perfect.

I kept moving around the room, enjoying the peek at the real Adam, the one tucked under all the bravado that I met that first night at the café. His coffee table was home to five different remote controls, which made me smile. Even werewolf guys were freaks for technology.

He had a big flat-screen television and surround sound, a Blu-Ray player and a few other gadgets I couldn't identify. Beside the TV was a shelf stuffed with CDs, DVDs, and pictures. I couldn't stop myself from looking at them. Mostly of horses, and one picture of Adam with shorter hair in a college cap and gown. Strange. You didn't need a college degree to run a horse ranch, did you? Then I noticed a younger Adam, grinning with a missing front tooth. He held up a string of fish beside an older version of himself. The resemblance

was uncanny.

“Is this your Dad?” I called pointing to the photo.

He looked over and then came out of the kitchen. “Yeah, that’s him. His name is Malcolm. He’s our Alpha, the leader of our Pack, and also runs an investment company in the city.”

“You look a lot like him.”

He stared at the photo and then smiled at me. “I’ve heard that before. We do have the same color eyes.”

I’d never meet his father. Or anyone else he knew.

I moved away from the pictures. “Is dinner ready yet? I’m starving.”

He met my eyes. His expression made it clear he knew I was changing the subject. “Yeah, just about.”

“Perfect.”

I walked over to the dining room table and smiled. He had it set for two, complete with placemats and cloth napkins. Adam stood behind me, reaching over to light the candles. I closed my eyes, feeling his body pressed against my back. He smelled good, too, I realized. Not like cologne but clean, with a slight musky scent that was just pure Adam. Maybe all werewolves had it. Gabe had been too covered in blood for me to really pick up his scent.

Gabe.

I opened my eyes again, hoping to avoid seeing his mauled body flash through my mind. Gabe would still be alive if I had never stopped in Reno. Sebastian was tracking *me*. I’d brought him here. Not on purpose, but that didn’t change the outcome.

“Are you all right?”

The sound of Adam’s voice broke through my thoughts. I nodded. “I’m fine.”

He rested his hands on my shoulders gently and turned me toward him. His fingers slid across my skin, along my collarbone and up the curve of my neck until he lifted my chin. I stared into his eyes, and for a rare moment, I felt complete, accepted. I didn’t need to pretend to fit in or be someone else. He knew my parents abandoned me, that I had no family. All the secrets I

usually did my best to hide from the world. But none of that was reflected in his eyes. All I could see was acceptance.

And, God, I never realized it could feel so good.

But I wasn't worthy of it.

"You look sad." His voice was low and intimate like his touch.

"I just realized it's my fault Sebastian came to Reno." My vision blurred as tears filled my eyes. "Your friend Gabe is dead because of me."

I fought to blink them back, but a single tear escaped down my cheek anyway. Adam caught it with his thumb and brushed it away. His lips pressed against mine, hard. I skimmed my arms up his chiseled chest and around his neck, and he pulled me in closer until my body molded against his.

His hands roamed over me, one moving up between my shoulder blades while the other gripped the curve of my buttocks. Our tongues wrestled, tangling together with a passion I never knew I had inside of me. I couldn't get close enough to him. Adam caught the back of my leg, pulling my knee up along his hip. I could feel him, rock hard against me, rubbing until my body was on fire.

I lifted his shirt, moaning when my fingers touched his bare chest. He growled into the kiss, his hips thrusting harder against me. If I could have made our pants vanish, I would have. I'd never wanted a man so urgently in my life.

His other hand roamed up underneath my shirt until he cupped my breast, kneading it in his large palm until my knees went weak with desire. My back arched into his touch, and I gasped as he kissed and nipped at my neck.

"Lana, I need you," he whispered as my fingers tangled in the back of his hair.

"Yes," was the only word I could find to reply.

He lifted me off the ground in an instant, and our lips were fused together once again. I wrapped my legs around his waist as he carried me through his house. He laid me down on his large bed, and I moaned into his kiss when I felt his weight resting over me. My skin tingled, hot, eager, and aching for his attention. When he finally pulled back from the kiss, his hungry eyes met

mine with an unspoken question.

“I want you,” I said, and the corner of his mouth curved up.

God, he was too sexy.

I smiled back at him, my lips pleasantly sore from the urgent kisses. He sat up and pulled his shirt over his head. His stomach rippled with chiseled muscles that dared me to touch them. I reached up to run my fingertips down his skin, tracing the fine trail of hair leading down past the button of his jeans.

He caught my fingers.

“Not yet,” he whispered, pinning my hands over my head as his lips claimed mine over and over, slowly lingering, tasting. Hot kisses melted along my neck, sending electricity all the way down to my toes. He slid his hands down my arms, my sides, and under my shirt again, pushing it up until he finally removed it. His eyes moved over me, and instead of feeling awkward or exposed, I felt sexy. Wanted.

Without a word, his arms moved around me, unclasping my bra as our lips brushed. He pulled back from the kiss, eased my bra free, and dropped it off the side of the bed. His chest felt hot against my mine, sending flares of desire licking through my entire body. My back arched as his hands moved to knead my breasts, his fingers sliding over my taut nipples. His mouth devoured my skin, moving along my neck and collarbone until I gasped his name.

Adam looked up at me from beneath his thick lashes, his eyes heavy with desire as he slowly licked across my nipple. My heart raced, my fingers tightening in his hair.

He nibbled his way across my skin, taking my other breast into his mouth while his free hand moved lower, unfastening my jeans. He wiggled his fingers inside my pants, gliding underneath the lace, until his fingertips were exploring past my curls to the heat of my core. My hips writhed, and I pulled him back up to my lips, kissing him with all the urgency my body demanded, my teeth nipping at his lower lip until he growled against my mouth.

Adam brought his other hand down and pushed my jeans and underwear

lower, sliding them free of my legs until I was naked on the bed. He stood up, his eyes feeding on me while he got rid of his pants. I stared up at him, drinking in every inch of his naked flesh.

His legs were tanned and muscular, matching his chiseled torso, and now that he was naked, there was no hiding how badly he wanted me. My gaze moved farther up and my lips parted slightly as our eyes met. I couldn't look away. His hungry stare possessed me. I'd been with other men before, but this intense desire and palpable need was completely new.

He positioned his body over me, and my legs parted instinctively, my hips tilting up toward him as I felt his body sink even closer. I could feel the tip of him, teasing me, pulsing against me. I'd never ached for someone like this.

I moaned and my fingers moved up his torso. "Take me, Adam."

He growled against my lips and plunged into me, sliding so deep that I cried out, my nails digging into his back. Breaking the kiss, his lips brushed my cheek until they were right against my ear. "Put your legs around me."

I wrapped my legs around his waist as he rose up from the bed, our bodies never separating. His hands gripped my buttocks as he turned and pressed my back against the wall.

The coolness of the drywall surprised me, and I gasped as his hips slammed into me harder. Adam bent his head to take my hardened nipple into his mouth. My back arched, offering myself to the heat of his mouth while I tangled my fingers in the back of his hair. Our bodies were slick with sweat when he finally held me tight and turned so we were back on the bed. His hand slid down between us and found a perfect spot inside my wet folds.

"Oh, yes, right there," I gasped.

His hips thrust deeper and faster, as his fingertips massaged until I was writhing underneath him. My fingernails scratched down his back, gripping him harder as my muscles started to clench.

He growled against my ear. "Give me what I want, Lana."

And in that instant my body gave him everything. Every muscle tightened, and my inner core spasmed around him so tightly that I felt him explode inside of me. Adam's hips kept grinding against mine as he moaned my name

until our aftershocks quieted, and we finally lay tangled up in an exhausted heap.

My fingers stroked though his hair slowly. Blood flow gradually returned to my brain, and with it, rational thought.

Oh, shit. No condom. My brain had disengaged the moment his hand slid under my shirt. “Adam?”

“Yeah?” His voice was soft and deep, warming my blood all over again.

“We forgot a condom.”

I expected him to leap back like I might have the pregnancy plague or something, but instead he tightened his hold on me, his head still resting over my heart. “We’re safe. I haven’t bitten you, so we can’t have a baby, remember?” He lifted his head to meet my eyes. “I’m also clean. I get tested every six months. Jason insists on it.”

Now I remembered. No conversion, no werewolf, no baby. “I’m clean too.” I breathed out my concern and stared at the ceiling.

This didn’t have to change anything. I wanted him, but it didn’t make the situation any different. Passions ran high during life and death situations. We were struggling for someone to hold onto, to remind ourselves we were still alive. Acting on the attraction between us didn’t mean the situation had changed.

So why did everything feel different?

Adam lifted his head and leaned up on his elbow. A tender smile curved his lips as his thumb brushed my hair back at my temple. “I don’t know what you’re thinking,” he whispered, “but I’m not sorry about any of this.”

I searched his eyes. “I’m not sorry either. Just not sure what happens next.”

Adam smiled. “Spaghetti.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. And inside of me somewhere, I felt a very dangerous part of the wall around my heart started to crumble.

I had to keep my distance. Everyone walked out eventually, and it was going to hurt like hell when Adam was gone. He’d warned me himself the first night I met him.

But when he bent to kiss me one more time, I ignored my inner voice and

wrapped my arms around him instead.

We ate our candlelight dinner in our underwear. I moaned when I tasted the homemade meat sauce Adam had in the Crock-Pot for a few hours. The cheesy garlic bread was pretty amazing, too.

“I had no idea wolves could cook.” He threw a piece of the bread at me. “Hey! I was giving you a compliment.” I grinned.

He raised a brow with a, for lack of a better word, wolfish grin. “Wolves can do all sorts of things.”

He lifted his frosty beer mug to his lips slowly, his eyes never leaving mine, and my body reacted. Just a look. Damn him. I was in so much trouble.

“So are you going to let me ride a horse?”

“Do you want to ride sometime?”

“I’d love to.” I smiled. “But I’ll need a horse who understands I’ve never ridden before.”

Adam laughed. “I think that could be arranged.”

I didn’t ask him when. We both knew it would be tricky to actually make happen. He could only have me over when no one else was around, or even coming over soon so my scent could fade. He was probably thinking the same thing. It was hard not to feel sorry for myself. It wasn’t my fault I was a jaguar. I hadn’t done anything wrong, and yet, I needed to be a secret.

We ate the rest of our food in silence.

When I set down my fork and looked up, Adam was staring at me. “Is something wrong?”

“No,” he said. “For once, everything’s right.”

My brow furrowed a little. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“I mean, I want my life to be like this. I want to laugh and eat dinner together and not be worried about the Pack finding out, or the Organization finding you.” He paused, his lips pressing together for a second. “But I know this isn’t real. I know that I need to take you back to the hotel tonight and open all my windows so your scent will be gone by morning. I know we still need to find out who the Nero Organization is and what they want with you.”

He reached across the table and took my hand. “And I already know I don’t want you to go.”

More of the wall protecting my heart cracked. “I don’t want to go either, Adam, but we’ve known from the first night that I can’t stay here. And that was before we knew Sebastian was tracking me. I care about you, but if I stayed I would only be hurting you and your family. I don’t know who I really am or where I come from, but you do. Your family is right here. You need to hang on to that.”

He let go of my hand and stood up, raking his fingers back through his hair. “There’s gotta be a way to make this work. We’re just not seeing it.”

I looked up at him, watching him pace back and forth. After all my worry that he would leave me, all I could see now was how much it was going to hurt when I had to be the one to walk away.

Chapter Eighteen

ADAM

I tossed and turned until the damned sheets were tethered around my legs. Lana's scent lingered on my pillows, reminding me of the spicy taste of her lips, the way her nails raked down my back, the way our bodies rocked together. I groaned and sat up, rubbing my hands down my face. I knew I needed to change the sheets. If one of the Pack wandered in here I'd be fucked, and not in a good way.

But I wasn't ready.

Having her scent around me made it easier to imagine she was still in my bed, not miles away in her hotel room. I didn't want to forget how perfectly she fit in my arms, the way our bodies had joined together. Seeing her eyes full of passion, hearing her moaning my name, it cemented her into my soul.

She was mine. I had claimed her.

But she had no idea.

How could I tell her? The wolf inside of me stated it as fact, but the human part of me knew nothing in life was black and white. Lana had been right about my family. If I introduced her as my mate, I couldn't stay here any longer. They wouldn't accept her into the Pack. I might be able to keep them from physically hurting her, to protect her, but I wouldn't be able to stand by and watch them treat her like an outcast. A trespasser who shouldn't be trusted.

No, I would have to leave the Pack behind.

I shook my head with a bitter chuckle. It wasn't like I really had a choice. Fate was one heartless bitch.

Malcolm had been right. My instincts knew in an instant that Lana was the other half of my soul. When we made love, it wasn't just a physical need to scratch an itch, at least not for me. My soul reached out to hers, and I felt her love in return. Or I thought I did.

Reality stole that moment from me when I drove her back to her hotel like it had all been a one-night stand. I tried to talk to her, but what could I say? This wasn't what I wanted. I wanted to wake up in the morning and feel her naked body beside me. I needed to reach out and touch her.

Fuck. I couldn't take it anymore.

I got up and stripped my sheets from the bed and opened the windows to air out the room. Once I had everything stuffed into the washing machine, I yanked on my jeans. I was a grown man, goddammit. I finally found my mate. I wasn't going to pretend like I hadn't. Lana was my future.

Before I could grab a shirt, my cell phone rang. The clock said it was after three a.m. I frowned. No good news ever came this late at night. Snagging my phone off the nightstand, my heart sank when I saw Aren's number flashing.

"Hey, Aren." I frowned. "Everything okay?"

My brother's voice sounded sleepy. "Yeah. I was calling to see if you were all right."

"Me?" My brow furrowed. "Yeah, I'm fine. Why?"

"I was sound asleep, and then I woke up in a hurry to get out of here. Since I've been zonked out for a few hours now, I figured *you* must be the one in a hurry to go someplace."

Maybe it was a twin thing, but if one of us was feeling strong emotions, sometimes the other felt them too, like a residual echo of the emotion.

"I can't sleep." That much was true.

"Look," Aren replied. "I'll get dressed and come over. Maybe we can go out to the lake. The fish'll be biting in a couple hours."

I rubbed my forehead, trying to think. I knew Aren was worried about me, and it killed me to keep secrets from him. Normally I'd jump to go fishing with my brother.

“There’s no reason for you to give up your sleep just because I’ve got insomnia. You rest up. I’ll catch you next time for fishing, okay?”

“You sure?” Aren didn’t sound convinced.

“Yeah. I’m gonna try to sleep a little longer. Thanks for calling. I’m sorry things have been so...off lately.”

My brother was quiet for a moment. “You can tell me anything, Adam. We’re brothers, remember.”

“I know.” I nodded. “I’ll get through this.”

“You better.”

“I will. Night, Aren.”

“Night.”

The phone line went dead, and I sat on the edge of my bed. It was hard to believe how quickly my life turned upside down. I really wished I could confide in Aren. I was dying to tell someone about Lana. But I knew I couldn’t. Not now. Maybe not ever.

Chapter Nineteen

LANA

Once I was back in my room at the neon-pink Circus Circus hotel, I opened my laptop and got right to work. The more I worked, the less I would think about Adam, or at least that was the idea. But every time I shifted in my chair, parts of my body ached, reminding me of our lovemaking, which in turn led to remembering the way we shared a candlelight dinner in our underwear and snuggled together on his couch to watch late-night television.

Until he brought me back to the hotel.

I rolled my eyes at myself. No sense feeling bad now. I knew before I went to bed with Adam that we'd have to hide our relationship. But the harsh reality didn't really hit until we both got dressed again and he kissed me goodbye. He'd insisted on coming up to be sure my room was secure and untouched. After he was satisfied it was safe, I told him I was tired to save myself from awkward small talk. He was leaving. This was something I was used to.

Besides, now that I knew every inch of his body, I hungered for his attention even more than before. I could feel myself getting worked up just thinking about it. No way we could be trusted alone in my room. And he couldn't spend the night anyway. His business started with the sunrise.

I tried to silence my inner voice. I needed to find out about the Nero Organization and that damned lion head insignia. Sebastian would come for me again soon—I could feel it.

But instead of dreaming up new internet searches, there I was pining for a guy that I knew I couldn't have. Perfect.

Before I realized what I was doing, I started clicking through pictures of Adam. Lots of the horseshow photos I'd seen on his wall were right there in my Yahoo! image search. I enlarged one and stared at his smile, his green eyes looking right at me. My heart pounded and I shook my head, clicking to the next photo.

I was hopeless.

Then I found a picture of Adam and his father at Lake Tahoe in some fishing tournament together. My eyes welled up with tears. They were laughing at Malcolm's tiny excuse for a fish. I tried not to dwell on things I couldn't control. I didn't know why my parents gave me up, and wishing they hadn't wasn't going to change anything. But sitting alone in my hotel room, staring at photos of Adam with his dad made my chest ache.

I didn't fit in anywhere.

I closed my laptop and wiped my eyes. Hopefully I'd hear from the PI in San Antonio tomorrow. If I could get some information about my birth parents I might be able to find out a little more about their connection to Nero, and therefore my own.

Exhaustion gnawed on the edge of my nerves, but my mind was too active to sleep. I clicked on the television and started flipping channels when the phone in my room rang. I almost fell off the bed. Who would be calling at this time? Adam would've called my cell phone.

Frowning, I picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"I must speak with you."

Sebastian. I hung up and ran over to engage the security latch on the inside of my door.

The phone rang again. I stared at it, contemplating my options. He knew where I was staying and most likely knew my room number since he'd called again so quickly. He could already be inside by now. It rang again. Shit. Now, he also knew I was in my room. I glanced at the door and slid the pepper spray from my pocket. If I could keep him on the phone, it might keep him out of my room.

I snatched the receiver. "How did you find me?"

“I am a tracker, Little One. I watched you leave the hotel after me, but you returned again later. With the proper encouragement, the concierge was very helpful.”

“You murdered a man and tried to pin it on me. I have nothing to say to you.”

“I killed a wolf who would have killed me first if he had the chance. I need to talk to you.”

“Tough. Goodnight.”

“It’s about the Nero Organization. I cannot talk over the phone.”

I closed my eyes. I knew I should hang up. I shouldn’t meet with my stalker in the middle of the night. I could almost hear Adam screaming in my head telling me it was too reckless. But what came out of my mouth was, “I’ll meet you in the twenty-four-hour café downstairs in five minutes.”

I hung up the phone and shook my head. I knew I shouldn’t do it, but what choice did I have? Sebastian had my room number, he’d come up if I didn’t go down. At least this way we’d be in a public place. At this hour the café wouldn’t have many people inside, but there would be staff, so we could talk quickly, and then I’d get a security guard to walk me back up to my room. Simple.

I ran my fingers back through my hair, trying to tame it a little, and then opened the deadbolt and started to turn the knob when the door slammed into me, knocking me backwards into the room.

Sebastian was inside with the deadbolt set behind him before I could scream. I reached in my pocket for my cell phone, but he anticipated my movement and grabbed my wrist. Hard.

“Let go,” I gasped.

Instead of releasing his iron grip, he yanked me in closer to him, burrowing his face into my hair. He shoved me away just as suddenly. I fell onto the bed. My cell phone flew from my grip and slipped off the other side.

He looked disgusted as he surveyed me. “His scent is all over you.” Suddenly his eyes narrowed, lips pressed in a tight line as he approached me. I scrambled to get back onto my feet. “Did he hurt you?”

Now it was my turn to look disgusted. “You broke into my hotel room, jerked my wrist, and *now* you’re worried about me?”

“I am sorry for my entrance, but you are in danger, and I need to speak with you.”

“I think danger just walked through my door.”

Concern drained from his eyes and his expression hardened. “If I wanted to kill you, you would be dead.”

A chill shot down my spine and all my adrenaline-laced bravado drained from my bloodstream. “Can’t get much more dangerous than that, right?”

He shook off my comment. “I work for the Nero Organization. They raised me and trained me, and I do what must be done. Tracking is my specialty. They send me out to locate and eliminate targets.”

“Eliminate?” My heart was pounding again. If I could just get to my phone I could... I could what? Sebastian wasn’t going to let me dial 911, or anyone else for that matter. Instead I slipped a couple fingers in my pocket, praying I could reach my pepper spray.

“Yes,” he said. “But my instructions were to bring you back to our headquarters unharmed. Bring you *back*. They made it sound as if you had escaped. Since our recent meetings, I have come to realize that you have no memory of the Organization.”

He said our “meetings” like they were friendly lunches instead of the confrontational abduction and subsequent questioning sessions we’d been having.

“I don’t have any memories because I’ve never been there. I’ve never even heard of them. As far as I can tell no one has. It’s like the Nero Organization doesn’t exist.”

“We would be less effective if the Organization was a public entity. This way we can work under the cloak of anonymity. In fact, the employees of the Nero Organization are the only humans who know our kind exist.”

“You mean jaguars, right?” I was relieved when he sat in a chair across from me. Now, if I just happened to have a length of rope I could tie him to the chair. Sadly, I didn’t have rope and never learned to tie any knots that

would hold him anyway. My self-defense training and enhanced reflexes usually protected me from dirtbags, but this one was a jaguar like me. Every bit as strong. I didn't have an upper hand here. I gnawed at my lower lip, trying to think of a way to buy time.

"The werewolves already know about us." It felt odd associating myself with Sebastian, but the reality was, he was the only other person like me that I knew.

He frowned, his mouth pinching like he'd just caught a whiff of dirty sweat socks. "Yes, the wolves know, but they are of no consequence."

"Why do you do that?"

"What?"

"Make a face like they're gum on your brand new shoes."

His brow creased. "Gum?"

"The werewolves," I sighed. "Why do you treat them like a lower species? I know they don't think highly of us either. I just wonder why this feud is even going on."

"I don't have time to go into our race histories, but suffice it to say, the Nero Organization experimented with both races and determined that jaguars made better assassins. We're able to work alone. The wolves have a Pack mentality. When they were separated from their Pack they weakened in mind and spirit. Without his Pack, a wolf loses his strength."

"So that's why you think you're better than they are?"

"That is why I *know* we are better. It is also why one as precious as you has no business being near a wolf."

"Precious? What are you smoking?" Never in my life had I ever felt precious. Adam's smile after we made love popped in my head, warming me unexpectedly. Okay, so maybe he had made me feel special, but Sebastian didn't know anything about me. And his judgment of Adam as lesser dug at that chip on my shoulder.

I shook my head. "Bottom line: you don't have any right to tell me who I should be hanging out with. You killed a man and left me to take the blame."

His jaw clenched. "I did what was necessary. You are a female born into

your power. You should not be with wolves.”

“What do you mean born into my power?” I crossed my arms, remembering what Adam had said about wolves only being born in sets of male twins. “Maybe one of these nights I was bitten and I just don’t remember?”

“You would still have awakened with a wound.” He gestured toward me. “You would bear a scar when it healed.”

I had never woken up after a new moon with a bite of any kind, and definitely not a scar.

He got up from the chair, pacing as he spoke. “Only the Y chromosome carries the shifter gene. Women must be converted by a jaguar before she can shift her form and embrace our power.” Every move from him was fluid, powerful. He reminded me of the mobsters from old Godfather movies. Slick, smart, all business, and dangerous. He came to a stop and met my eyes. “And you haven’t been claimed.”

“How would you know without searching me for scars? I’d have to be bitten, right?” My fear started mutating into a journalistic curiosity.

“Because a converted female has a slightly different scent. There is still an undercurrent of humanity combined with the jaguar.” He recommenced his pacing of the hotel room like a jungle cat in a zoo. “There is only jaguar in your scent. You were born into your power. A treasure among our kind.”

“So I should be locked away in some top secret organization and experimented on?”

“That is why I needed to speak with you.”

Now we were getting somewhere. I waited for him to continue. He moved closer to me and reached for my hand with unheard-of speed. I tried not to look repulsed, but I’m pretty sure I was leaning away from him anyway. I guess looking scared was less likely to piss him off than looking disgusted. I hoped so anyway.

“Females who are born into their power are unheard of among our kind. If females could be born into their power instead of bitten and converted, it would eliminate many...issues for my race and our Organization.” Before I

could ask what the issues might be, he went on. “I have heard rumors of progress in research of non-converted females, but I’ve never seen one until I laid eyes on you. Your beauty and your scent caught me off-guard.”

Sebastian’s eyes were a brighter green than Adam’s, giving him a more inhuman stare. He was handsome, but there was an aura of danger, as if his looks were simply a mask to lure you in. He lifted my hand to his lips and pressed a calculated kiss to my knuckles.

“‘Like gentle streams beneath our feet, innocence and virtue meet.’” His voice was low and soft like a purr, and if he hadn’t nearly abducted me the first time we met, I might have been moved by his words. Instead, a chill shot through me and goose bumps rose on my arms. I retrieved my hand, forcing myself to keep control so I didn’t rip it free from his grasp. The last thing I needed was to offend a trained assassin.

I swallowed the lump in my throat and found my voice. “That’s from a poem, isn’t it?”

His lips curved up just slightly at the corners. “You recognize the words of William Blake. Do you study poetry?”

“Not really, but I’m a writer. It just sounded familiar.” He stood up, forcing me to tilt my head back to meet his eyes. “It seems odd to hear a trained killer talk about innocence and virtue.”

“I am good at what I do, but I am not defined by my occupation.” He paused, his eyes locked on mine until I finally broke the contact and stood up too. I took a step back, toward the hotel phone, but I didn’t make a move to pick it up. Not yet. At least I knew I was close enough to reach it.

“A wolf will never understand you the way I do. We are not like them. We need our independence, and we do not count on others for our strength.”

“Did you barge into my room tonight just to put down wolves?” I could feel a spark of anger starting to glow inside of me. “Or did you have something important to say?”

His eyes narrowed, and his hands balled into fists. Holding my breath, I waited him out.

“I came to tell you that I did some digging into the Organization’s records.

I have to be very careful—if I am caught, the punishment will be severe. When I realized you hadn't escaped, I wondered how and why I was sent for you. I found this." He handed me a flash drive. "The Organization touches many branches of government and has access to databases in many fields."

I looked at the flash drive and then back up at his unsettling green eyes. "Why are you helping me?"

"Are you surprised that I am not all I seem?"

"You didn't answer my question. A couple nights ago you were trying to kidnap me."

"I am sorry we couldn't meet under better circumstances."

"Yeah, me too, but helping me now doesn't change anything. I'm not interested in a relationship if that's what you're after."

"Have you told the wolf this, too?"

My brow furrowed. "I'm new to this whole animal instinct thing, but trying to push your male dominance and your racial prejudices isn't doing anything for me."

Sebastian rolled his eyes, pulling his black hair back from his tanned face. I could almost see the sinewy muscles ripple under his tight black shirt. "Read the information and then destroy it." He paused, then added, "Tell the wolf to ask his Alpha about Operation Moonlight. I will find you when I know more."

"Thank you for the intel, but this won't change my feelings."

"This has nothing to do with your feelings. I have to find out what they have planned for you now." He looked down at me again, but behind the cold, calculated smile, there was a light in his eyes. "I'm curious."

"Be careful." I raised a brow, unable to stop the words from falling out of my mouth. "You know what curiosity did to the cat."

He flashed me a dangerous smile. "I am hard to kill." Without another word, he turned and walked out of my room.

I leapt over the bed and landed silently at the door to throw the deadbolt latch. There were definitely some perks to being a feline. I was maybe even starting to like it. If I had realized what I was capable of earlier in life, I

might've done some things differently.

I took a deep breath, leaning back against the door, and looked down at the flash drive in my hand. A smile crept up on me. *Finally. I might actually learn who I am.*

Chapter Twenty

ADAM

My hackles started to rise as I neared Lana's door. That fucking cat had been there. The hallway reeked of him as soon as the elevator opened to her floor, and the closer I got to her, the stronger his scent became. By the time I reached her room, my entire body was tense, every muscle ready to attack.

Quietly I slipped the key in the door and as soon as the electric lock disengaged I burst into the room, popping the deadbolt right off the doorframe. "Lana are you—" I frowned, looking around her room. "You're alone."

She was on the bed, clutching her laptop with white knuckles. "Jesus! You scared the crap out of me."

"Sorry. I could smell the jaguar and..." I paused, processing the scents in her room. My sharp gaze cut over to meet her eyes. "He was in this room."

Lana nodded and set her laptop aside. "Before you get all Big Bad Wolf on me, sit down so I can fill you in."

Jealousy, anger, fear, and adrenaline all combined in my bloodstream at once. I crossed my arms over my chest to keep from taking my frustrations out on her hotel room.

"What the hell is going on, Lana? It's after four a.m. and not only are you not sleeping, but you're entertaining the jaguar who killed my friend. You do remember Gabe, right?"

The instant the words left my lips I saw the hurt in her eyes, and my heart constricted in my chest. "Yes, I remember Gabe." She wrapped her arms around her middle, raising her head a little. "It's good to see you too, by the

way. And I'm all right if you wondered."

Part of me wanted to rush to her side and pull her into my arms to apologize, but my pride demanded I stand my ground. What was I supposed to think? She had been naked in my arms a few hours ago, and now she had some jaguar up in her room in the middle of the night? Furious didn't begin to describe what I was feeling.

There wasn't another woman on earth that could replace Lana in my heart if something happened to her. It was a dizzying, terrifying realization, but it didn't make it any less true. Although my instincts screamed *mate*, the rest of me was just catching up. Uneven, unfamiliar territory.

For the first time in my life, I felt weak. Lana held all the power over me, and my future. And I hated it.

That fucking jaguar had been in her room. Had she touched him? I hadn't gotten close enough yet to see if his scent lingered on her skin. I almost didn't want to know, but at the same time, I had to know. The wolf inside of me howled, demanding her attention and her loyalty.

But Lana didn't have the same instincts I did. I crossed the distance between us and sat beside her on the bed. When I reached for her hand, she pulled it away and kept her arms crossed. "Don't touch me." Her eyes shone with tears, but she kept them back. "You don't get to burst into my room and accuse me of getting friendly with the guy who killed your friend."

My fingers clenched. "Did you let *him* touch you?"

"Really, Adam?" Lana's eyes narrowed. "Do you honestly believe that's who I am?"

I struggled with the primal rage of the wolf within. Lana didn't deserve it but catching the jaguar's scent in her room made my animal instincts nearly impossible to rein in. "You did touch him," I growled.

"God, what is it with you men?" She shot up from the bed and took a few steps away from me. "I'm not a trinket for anyone to claim, all right? Something big is happening in my life. Something I have to sort out. You can't do it for me, and you can't protect me from it. Neither can Sebastian."

I ground my teeth together hearing her use the jaguar's name, but I

managed to keep my mouth shut and let her finish.

“So the way I see it, you can either help me, or get the hell out of my room.” Her nostrils flared just slightly and her cheeks flushed with color. She was the most beautiful, impossible, amazing woman I’d ever met.

I stood up. I had to walk off the rage burning inside of me before I exploded. Lana watched me, glaring, every bit the wary cat ready to pounce. The animal in her made the wolf in me edgy and eager, but I made no move to touch her. It took all the control I had to keep the warring emotions inside of me at bay.

“I didn’t mean to be an asshole. I was worried about you.”

“You were not,” she snapped. “You were worried I was with some other guy.”

“You were,” I growled. I couldn’t help it.

“Not by choice.” Lana reached for her laptop. “Never mind. Can we forget the jealous boyfriend routine for a minute so I can show you what’s on this flash drive he gave me?”

I nodded, trying not to smile when she said the word “boyfriend.” I felt like I was back in high school. Love made me a goddamned idiot.

I sat beside her while she brought up the contents of the flash drive. It contained a folder labeled *Breeding Experiment #333* and another tagged *Unknown female sightings*.

“I already told you about the Nero Organization.” She stared at the screen. “He hasn’t told me much more about them except that they raised him and trained him to be an assassin. They sent him to find me and bring me back. But I’ve never been there. At least not that I remember.”

“Right.” I was trying to focus, but the male jaguar’s scent was making it difficult. I’d never wanted to beat the crap out of anyone so badly before. “The question is, how did they find out about you?”

“Exactly. That’s why Sebastian brought me these files.”

My shoulders tightened, and I shook my head. “That’s not why, Lana.”

“What?” She looked caught off guard. She was in the middle of deciphering information, but I was still stuck on figuring out what happened

in this room before I got here. I needed to know where I stood with her.

“He gave you this because he wants you to need him.”

Lana set her computer aside, and her eyes met mine. “Since when did what he wants start to matter?”

“The moment I came in your room and found his scent all over you.” The muscle in my cheek tightened, but I kept my voice low and controlled.

She reached up and cupped my cheek in her soft hand. I fought the urge to turn my head and kiss her palm. Instead, my gaze stayed locked with hers.

“Nothing happened with Sebastian. I know we don’t know each other very well yet, so you’ll just have to take my word for it, but tonight at your place meant something to me.”

I kissed her. I couldn’t stop myself, my lips slowly brushing, tasting, and silencing her before she started reminding me that she was leaving soon. I didn’t want to hear that. Not tonight.

When I drew back from her lips, she opened her eyes, smiling up at me from under her dark lashes. God, she was sexy.

“You made me forget what I was saying...”

I smiled, happy to feel some of the power shifting in our relationship. Nice to know I could have that effect on her. “You were telling me about what’s on the flash drive.”

She gave me a knowing grin and went on. “Well, apparently, when I first started to change with the new moon, there were some jaguar sightings that made small mentions in the local papers. No one believed it since they’re not indigenous to Texas, but there were theories about people illegally raising exotic animals. Anyway, the Nero Organization apparently has ties to the government, media, and healthcare because not only were they alerted about the newspaper articles with jaguar sightings”—she clicked open the next file to show some sort of X-ray photo—“but they also managed to get a copy of one of my CAT scans.”

I stared at the X-ray again, as if I might understand it better now that I knew it was Lana. “Did the CAT scan show anything about your nature to the doctors?”

“My nature? Like turning into a jaguar?” She tipped her head slightly and shrugged. “They saw an anomaly in one of the lobes of my brain, so someone must’ve noticed something, otherwise the Nero Organization wouldn’t have been alerted. It’s the CAT scan that made them send Sebastian out to find me.”

“So what’s breeding experiment #333?”

She met my eyes. “I think I am.”

I frowned, glancing over the text. Lana was right; this had to be about her. No other reason for the jaguar to lift sensitive documents. “I’m guessing male subject 505 and converted female subject 413 are your parents.”

Lana nodded, her face intent on the screen. “I think so.” She let out a long slow breath. “It would be really helpful if they had names.”

I brushed a kiss to her temple. “Then we’d probably think he was giving us a red herring to throw you off the trail.”

“Could be right about that.” She almost smiled. Scrolling deeper into the file she stopped, pointing at the screen. “They discovered my mother had psychic abilities. That’s why they chose her.”

“How could they know she was psychic?” I read further and frowned. “Nero runs a private school for girls?” Who the hell were these freaks?

Lana nodded. “Appears so, but of course no name here, just high school facility #12.” She met my eyes. “This says school facility #12 was for females exhibiting psychic gifts. My mother is referenced as a previous student.”

Every muscle in my shoulders tightened. “They use their school to find girls for their breeding program.”

Lana pressed her lips together and pointed at the screen again. “There’s more.”

I read, skimming notes about reproductive cycles and conversion dates.

And two fetal heartbeats. Twins.

I glanced at Lana. “Twins. Just like the Pack. Two shifters, but you were a girl.” The final notation in the file was a live birth of a single male. There was no mention of a second infant.

Lana's gaze met mine. Her eyes looked haunted. "There were two heartbeats, but only one birth recorded. What happened to the other baby?"

"Maybe he's trying to throw us off the trail."

Lana shook her head. "He asked me to destroy this after I looked at it. He said he'd be punished if anyone found the information outside of Nero's walls. He wouldn't have risked that to give me a red herring. This has to be my parents."

"Then you've gotta be the missing baby, right?"

Lana nodded and closed her laptop. "If this is all true, then somewhere I have a brother."

"And they know the other twin is missing...or was until they found you."

"Could be. There's no notation about a still birth. Nothing about that second heartbeat."

"Maybe your parents didn't want to leave you." I took her hand and held her gaze. "Maybe it was the only way to save you from a future with Nero. If Nero found out their experiment worked, they'd be testing you and trying to replicate you for the rest of your life."

"Probably." She nodded. "And there's one more thing." Lana glanced at her laptop, then back up at me. "Sebastian mentioned something about Operation Moonlight and testing Nero did on werewolves."

I frowned. "I've never heard anything about Nero until I found you."

"That's weird..." Her voice trailed off for a second. "It wasn't on the flash drive either, just something Sebastian mentioned when he gave it to me. He told me to have you ask your Alpha."

"I don't take orders from jaguars." Sebastian was full of shit. Or my father had some secrets the rest of us knew nothing about.

Chapter Twenty-One

LANA

I yawned and looked over at the clock. Adam wouldn't be here for another half hour, but I needed some caffeine. We'd stayed up most of the night going through the Nero flash drive, and then while he went back to the ranch, I'd made calls and worked on another article that was due next week.

I glanced out the window at the sunny street below. People walked on the sidewalks, cars drove by. It looked normal, and busy. I glanced at the door. Adam wouldn't like it, but I needed a little pick-me-up.

I'd only be gone for a few minutes, and if Sebastian didn't kidnap me last night from my private hotel room, I was pretty sure he wouldn't grab me from a busy street in broad daylight. With my cell phone in hand, and the room key and pepper spray in my pocket, I headed out to the Starbucks across the street. Coffee wasn't my thing, but chai tea and some sort of pastry sounded great.

Just getting out in the fresh air made me feel more alert. I focused on the different scents around me, half expecting Sebastian to jump out of the shadows. Instead, he walked right up to me in the sunshine.

"Did you review the files?"

"Hello to you too, Sebastian."

He rolled his eyes. "We don't have time for pleasantries. Did you look at the files?"

"Yes," I said as I crossed the intersection to the coffee shop. "And I have some questions." He followed me, his head swiveling with each step. I frowned. "Is someone following us?"

“You do not smell him?”

I shrugged and then inhaled deeply. The scent was faint and sort of familiar. It was probably Adam’s scent on my clothes. The more I consciously noticed smells the better I was at recognizing them, but I was nowhere near Adam’s or Sebastian’s skill level.

He stayed on alert as he pulled the door open for me. We ordered our drinks and headed for a private corner booth.

“So why did you give me the Breeding Experiment file?”

“Because when I found the files about the jaguar sightings, I saw an email referencing that breeding experiment.”

“So you think I was the missing twin?”

“I think it is possible.”

“If that’s true, did they just lose me then?” It didn’t make sense to me, but nothing did anymore.

He shrugged, his eyes searching the area again. “I think you were hidden.”

“How? By who?” My heart was in my throat, aching for answers, wishing that it meant maybe my parents did really leave me to protect me.

He finally met my eyes. “I’m not sure. I came to tell you that one of the goals of the Nero breeding program is to achieve live births of females born into their powers. It’s a liability to bring in human women. Some of them go mad with the conversion. But if females were born into their powers, we could continue our race without human interference.”

“That’s why they want you to bring me to them.”

“I believe so, yes.”

“If I really am the result of that experiment, then I have a brother somewhere?”

“Yes.” His eyes met mine.

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “And are my parents still at Nero?”

“Your father is.” He shifted in his chair a little, the only sign he might be uncomfortable. “Your mother was eliminated.”

The cold reality was like a sucker punch in the stomach. I’d spent much of my life hating her, but the moment I discovered she might have saved me,

she was gone.

“I cannot give you much more time.” Sebastian took a swallow of his black coffee. “If I do not complete my mission soon, they will send another in my place.”

I breathed deep. He seemed to really be trying to help me. Not that Sebastian was my friend. Half the time he was so imposing it was tough to think around him. I saw what he did to Gabe. I knew what he was capable of. So why was he not just taking me to Nero?

“I have some leads. Thanks for everything Sebastian.”

He took my hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. “I will do what I can.”

“What’s in it for you?” I asked before I could censor myself.

“My mission was not what I was told it would be. I don’t appreciate being deceived.” I expected some sort of come-on or another swipe at the werewolves, but his voice was soft and I couldn’t detect any sarcasm. “I need to know who I work for and why they’re lying to me.”

Without another word, Sebastian got up and left the Starbucks.

I stared at his empty cup, pondering what he’d said when I heard the door beep again. I glanced up, shocked to see Adam in the doorway. That had been his scent—just not on my clothes. He must’ve tracked me.

I raised my hand slightly to catch his attention. He nodded and walked over to my table. I expected him to kiss me hello since he’d given me such a nice kiss goodbye, but instead he just sat down across from me. His hair was wet and slicked back. I’d never seen it like that. It gave him a more sophisticated look. He took a whiff of Sebastian’s discarded cup and frowned.

I put my hands up and shook my head. “I swear he just showed up, okay?”

“Who showed up?”

My brow furrowed. “Sebastian. You remember. Creepy cat man?”

He nodded, but something was wrong. I couldn’t put my finger on it.

“Can we go someplace more private?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’m done here anyway.” I threw away the two cups and followed him out. He held the door for me, but he still didn’t smile. It didn’t make sense. He’d left in such a good mood...

It finally registered as I passed him going out the door. His scent. I recognized the natural earthy scent—maybe that was a base for all werewolves—but the musky, almost spicy smell that I associated with Adam wasn't there. This couldn't be Adam.

He let the door close behind us. I started to run, but he caught my wrist in a vise-like grip, walking me over to a bench outside and sitting us both down.

"Who are you?" I asked. "Where's Adam?"

"I should ask you those same questions." His voice sounded like Adam, too. But he most definitely was not Adam.

"You look just like him."

"Where is he?"

"You can let go of me. I won't run."

"Answer my question." His eyes narrowed and he lowered his voice. "I know you're a jaguar. Gabe is dead, and now I want to know how and why you know my brother."

Adam's twin. This was the man in the picture at a college graduation in Adam's house. I'd been staring at his brother and never knew it. My eyes widened at the realization, and at the same time, my heart clenched. This was Adam's twin brother, and I didn't even know his name.

"Adam didn't tell me your name."

The wrinkle between his eyebrows deepened. "You've been talking to Adam?"

I sighed. "Look, can we start at the beginning like human beings, okay? I'm Lana."

"I'm Aren," he replied. He also let go of my wrist.

I rubbed at my throbbing skin. "Adam is supposed to meet me at my hotel in a few minutes. I thought you were him. I guess he'll be here soon."

Aren let out a sigh of relief. "That must be why he didn't answer his cell phone. He's been acting strange. I was worried."

"How did you find me?"

"I followed Adam to your hotel last night. When you guys went up, I checked out his Jeep and caught your scent. I thought my brother might be in

trouble because you were a...”

He didn't finish the sentence, as if just saying the word out loud was distasteful. Great.

“Jaguar? Is that the word you can't bring yourself to say?”

Adam's twin raised a brow. “I'm just surprised you're still alive. Adam's been hunting for the jaguar that killed our friend Gabe. It's not like him to ask questions first.”

“Did it ever occur to you that I might not have had anything to do with Gabe, or that I'm a person just like you?”

“It's irrelevant now that one of my Pack is dead.”

“You just assume since a jaguar did it, I must be the one?” I didn't mean to raise my voice, but I couldn't help it. “We jaguars are all alike, right? Heartless killers who deserve to die.” I stood up from the bench, pointing at his chest as I went on. “How can you be so prejudiced? It's pissing me off.”

A hand touched my shoulder, and I flinched. When I turned, Adam was standing behind me, but his smile vanished when he saw who was sitting beside me.

“Aren? What are you doing here?”

“I might ask you the same thing,” his brother said.

Adam looked at me again. “Are you all right?”

“Shouldn't you be asking me that?” Aren stood up.

I wheeled on him. “Why? Because I'm a jaguar so I shouldn't matter?” Before Aren could respond I turned to Adam again. “I know you told me you were born in sets of twin males, but I stared at those pictures in your house and you never even told me his name.” Insecurity crept through me and that gross feeling of being an outcast thrummed in my veins. I sighed and shook my head. “I guess it doesn't matter anyway since you were never going to introduce me to your family.” I looked from one hot guy to the other. It really wasn't fair to have them both looking at me with their green eyes, muscles taunt. “Now, I just want to go back up to my room and sleep, okay? I'll talk to you later, Adam. And Aren”—I tipped my chin up toward his face—“I can't say it was a pleasure.”

I squared my shoulders and headed for the corner, clinging to my anger like a shield. Once I was across the street and in my hotel, I held myself together until the elevator doors closed. As the floor lifted, my spirits sank. It was all so unfair. When I slipped my room key into the door and it closed behind me, I fell onto the bed and a strangled sob escaped my throat.

Chapter Twenty-Two

ADAM

“What the hell is this?” my brother barked.

I watched Lana walk through the crosswalk and into the hotel. She never looked back.

I shook my head. “It’s complicated.”

“Complicated?” Aren crossed his arms over his chest. “Just because she’s got a nice body and a pretty face doesn’t change the fact that she’s a jaguar in our territory and Gabe is dead. Connect the dots, Adam.”

I’d never wanted to punch my brother as badly in my life. “I have connected them, Aren. I told you I know who killed Gabe, and it’s not Lana. A male jaguar dumped him at the lake to frame Lana for his murder.”

“Did she tell you that story?” Aren shook his head. “She’s a cat. She’ll tell you anything. You know how they operate.”

“She isn’t like that. She didn’t even know what she was when I met her.”

“How long have you known her?” Aren’s brow furrowed, and his arms slid back down to his sides. “I knew you were hiding something, but this is too much.”

“It wasn’t like I planned for any of this to happen.”

“Any of what exactly?”

I glanced over at the hotel. Lana was right—my family would never accept her. But she was also wrong; if they didn’t want her, I wouldn’t want to stay. I’d never be able to forgive them. I clenched my jaw as I faced Aren again.

“Look, I caught the scent of a jaguar on the night of the new moon near the Hot Rod Café. I went inside to deal with it, but the second I met Lana

something inside of me..." I shook my head. "I'm not sure how to describe it, but when I touched her I knew. I felt this tug inside, like she was bound to me. I didn't plan it, and I've been trying to deny it, but this feeling won't go away."

"What are you saying?"

"I love her, Aren. She's my mate. My instinct to protect her hit me like a Mack truck. I stayed with her through her change. She was scared and didn't know what was happening to her. She's not like the other jaguars who have come through here before."

Aren was speechless. That didn't happen very often. My brother always had something to say. I waited, but Aren just kept staring at me.

Finally he took a step back, his voice was low. "This is a mistake. You can't take a jaguar for your mate, Adam. This will kill Dad. You know it will."

"You can't tell Malcolm, or anyone. I haven't even told Lana yet."

"The Pack will never accept her."

I raked my hand back through my hair in frustration and growled. "You think I don't know that? I'm not stupid, all right? I realize this is hard for you to understand, but Lana is the most amazing woman I've ever known." I sighed and met his eyes again. "She's gutsy, smart, and beautiful. You've already seen that she's hardheaded enough to take on both of us at once. How many women have you ever met who could do that, huh?"

"So what are you going to do, leave the Pack?"

"I don't know." I couldn't tell my brother that the thought had crossed my mind more than once.

Aren's eyes widened. "You're actually thinking about leaving with her?" He shook his head slowly. "You barely know her, Adam."

"I know it sounds crazy. Malcolm came by the other day telling me that I needed to trust my instincts, and my instincts are screaming to be with her and keep her safe."

"Your instincts are wrong," Aren interrupted, raising his voice. "All of this is wrong. She's playing you. I can't believe you're willing to give up your

family and your Pack for a hot piece of tail.”

I hit Aren so hard that he fell backward onto the bench. Blood trickled down from his nose. He reached up, tentatively wiped at his face and saw the blood. Aren’s eyes cut back to me, and a heavy mantle of guilt settled on my shoulders. But right then the wolf inside of me was in control and he was pissed.

“Don’t ever talk about Lana like that,” I growled.

Aren stood up and took a step closer, encroaching on my personal space, but I didn’t retreat. For a moment we stood in silence, two immovable walls. So much had suddenly changed between us, but I couldn’t go back to the way things were.

Finally Aren broke the silence. “I won’t tell the Pack about this, but you should find out all you can about this girl before you abandon the people who *really* care about you.”

“I’m going to bring in the jaguar that killed Gabe, and when I do, you’ll owe Lana an apology.”

“She’ll still be a jaguar, Adam. It’s only a matter of time before she betrays you. It’s how they operate. And we can’t have treachery in the Pack. Our strength is being able to count on every member to watch each other’s back. I won’t depend on a jaguar when my life or my brother’s is on the line.”

My fists were clenched, but somehow I forced my voice to stay even. I’d done enough damage to my relationship with my brother today. “I just need some time to figure this out.”

Aren nodded and turned to leave. He stopped and looked back over his shoulder. “You better think long and hard. It almost killed Dad when we lost Mom. We can’t lose you too, Adam.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

LANA

I'm not sure when Adam came up to the room, but when I woke up I found his arm draped over me. I smiled in spite of myself. Through the sheer hotel curtain I could see the sky starting to brighten. Morning. The scattered clouds were painted in stunning orange hues. Through the window it looked like anything was possible.

Too bad reality was setting in.

Closing my eyes, I tried to push it away. I breathed in Adam's now-familiar scent and relished how good his body felt against mine. Finding myself snuggled in his arms was a much better way to wake up than alone in another new hotel. I could get used to opening my eyes and seeing his smile.

But reality pushed right back, reminding me that I'd have to leave soon. Maybe even sooner than expected if Adam's brother had his way. Plus, if Sebastian was right and Nero sent someone else to finish his mission, I'd be putting Adam and his family in danger. If I ran, Sebastian would follow me, leaving Reno far behind. The mystery of the Nero Organization, my birth parents, and how I fit into the puzzle could be solved on the road. No need to drag Adam through the mess. He had a life here. I had... A laptop and a duffel bag full of clothes and toiletries.

Yeah, I'm a prize. I moaned inwardly.

When I started to slide out from under Adam's arm, he pulled me in closer, nuzzling his chin into my hair.

"Good morning."

The bed squeaked as I shifted and rolled around to face him. "How come

you didn't tell me about Aren when I was looking at those pictures? You had to know I saw his college graduation photo over there."

His eyes opened fully and met mine. "You cut right to the chase."

"I've been awake for a little while thinking."

"I see that." He kissed my forehead and drew back. "I should have told you."

"But you didn't. He's a huge part of your life. How could you leave out something important like that?"

"I didn't think you'd ever meet him." He shrugged a little. "It didn't seem important."

I pulled away and sat up. "So all the talk of not wanting me to leave was bullshit." My heart was breaking inside, so it was all I could do to keep the tears at bay. I hoped some righteous anger might help me stay strong.

"No, it's not bullshit. I don't want you to leave. Now you've met my brother, and you heard what he said. The Pack is always going to see you as a potential threat because you're a jaguar. In my head, I didn't think you would ever meet them, so I didn't think I needed to tell you about them."

"You say you don't want me to leave, but if I stayed you were never going to let me into your life. I thought I could handle being your dark little secret, but you made me feel..." I got up and went over to the window. Staring down at the people holding hands, walking on either side of the street made the ache in my heart pulse. "You made me feel like I deserve more."

Even though Adam was still in the room, I felt completely alone.

I heard the bed squeak as he got up. I swiped a stray tear from my cheek. I didn't want him to see me cry.

He stood behind me. The heat of his bare chest teased me through the back of my thin cotton tee. His voice was just above a whisper. "I am so sorry I hurt you, Lana. I know I'm not handling any of this very well."

I turned on him, dipping into my well of self-pity and anger, and lashed out. "Any of what, Adam? What exactly do we have anyway? I don't even know why you're here. We both know there's an attraction, but we also know I can't stay. I never should have stayed even a second day. I'm such an idiot."

He kissed me then, hard. My body betrayed me, pressing against his chest. My fingers slid up into the back of his hair as our tongues tangled with urgent passion. When he finally pulled back, we were breathless and my lips felt hot and sore. He rested his forehead against mine.

“I love you, Lana,” he whispered.

“Is that what you say to all the girls who threaten to walk away before you’re ready to let them?”

A muscle in his cheek jumped, but he didn’t pull back or raise his voice. “I’ve never said those words to another woman.”

I stared into his eyes, searching for any sign of deception, but all I saw was Adam. No masks, no false promises, no defenses. My eyes welled with tears as I reached up to cup his cheek. “How can we ever make this work?”

He turned his head and kissed my palm. “One day at a time.”

“I don’t want to take you away from your family, Adam. I know how horrible it is to go through life without them.”

“Do you love me?” he asked.

My heart screamed yes, but in my head I could hear Sebastian’s voice telling me about the Nero Organization’s experiments with werewolves, how they suffered away from their Pack. I started to look away, but he caught my chin and forced me to look up at him.

“You think too much. Just tell me how you feel.”

He made it sound so simple. But nothing about this was simple.

Panic rose in my throat. My instincts, learned from hard lessons in abandonment, threatened to strangle me. My head was screaming to run while I still could. But I didn’t want to run. I stared into his eyes, this man who knew all the secrets I struggled to hide from the world. He’d never seen me as damaged goods, and when I was around him, for the first time in my life I didn’t feel broken.

“Yes. I love you, too,” I whispered. “But that doesn’t change the fact that we have no future.”

His mouth curved into a sexy, dangerous smile that made my pulse quicken. “We make our own future.”

Adam scooped me up into his arms so fast that I gasped. He kissed me, making his way back to the bed. He laid me down on the cool sheets, and I hummed against his lips, enjoying his slow, lingering kisses. Finally he pulled back.

Without a word, he stood up and unbuttoned his jeans. I watched him take off his pants and wet my lips as he moved to the foot of the bed. Every muscle of his body looked chiseled and strong. A faint shadow covered his jaw, and the intensity in his stare made my skin burn.

He leaned down and kissed just above my knee before looking up at me. I felt his hands stroke along my legs until his thumbs caught the waistband of my lace underwear. I couldn't take my eyes away from his hungry stare. My hips rose up off the bed slightly as he slid the lace panties down and tossed them aside.

His hands caressed my calves, kneading the muscles, drawing a moan from my lips as he moved his attentions upward. He pressed lingering kisses up my thighs, pushing my legs apart, and I opened myself to his attentions. I reached down with one hand, my fingers getting lost in his hair as he kissed along my inner thigh, his hot breath teasing my yearning skin. When his fingers brushed along my curls, my body writhed with desire. Without taking his eyes off of mine, he slid his finger deep inside of me.

I moaned, working my hips as his fingers teased and stroked until my heart was racing. Adam growled against me, giving my aching core a long, slow lick. I cried out his name as he grasped my hips and pulled me even closer. He brought my legs up over his shoulders, feeding on me until I couldn't catch my breath. When his tongue moved inside of me, he brought his fingers up to rub insistently at my sensitive nub until my hips rocked against his lips.

I shuddered, gasping his name as my body exploded, every muscle contracting and writhing with pleasure. He lowered my body to the bed and licked his lips as he moved up over me. I could feel the tip of him pressed against me, but he didn't enter me. My hips tilted, hungering to feel him inside of me.

"I want you," I moaned.

He leaned down and kissed me long and slow. I could taste myself on his tongue, and the territorial animal in me clawed to the surface as my nails gripped into his back. I never wanted him to touch another woman, and no other man would ever touch me. It was a carnal, primal pledge from a part of me I never knew existed.

Adam growled against my lips. "You're mine."

He plunged into me, filling me to the core of my being. His hands kneaded my breasts, teasing my nipples through the thin cotton of my T-shirt until my back arched under him. Adam pushed my shirt up and bent to take my nipple into his mouth. He looked up at me from under his brow as I watched his mouth on my skin. His hips rocked into me harder and faster as he sucked at my breast. Slowly, he drew back, his hand cupping me as he licked slowly across my hardened nipple. My body writhed, and he smiled, claiming my lips with his.

I raked my nails down his back, my heart pounding. Sex had never been this intense for me before, this urgent. I needed him, and he needed me right back. My legs wrapped around his waist as he rose up, pounding himself into me. Adam gripped my hips, slamming me into his pistoning thrusts until I felt him pulsing within my body.

One hand slid between us as Adam growled. "Now, Lana. Now..."

My body obeyed his demands. Every inner muscle clenched tightly around him as he exploded deep inside of me, calling out my name. His fingers dug into my hips as he held me against him until the aftershocks faded. When he laid back over me, his elbows rested on either side of my head as he looked into my eyes.

"I love you." He kissed me.

I smiled. "I love you, too."

"There's something else I need to tell you," he said.

I shook my head with an exhausted smile. "If it's going to mess with my afterglow here, then I don't want to know."

Adam laughed. God, I loved the sound of his laugh. He rolled to the side, pulling me into his arms. I snuggled against his chest with a happy sigh. He

kissed my hair, and his hand ran slowly up and down my back.

“There’s a wolf thing that I need to tell you about.”

I raised my head to look down at him. “Uh oh.”

“It’s not bad,” he reached up to cup my cheek in his hand. “Not to me anyway.” He met my eyes. “Remember how I told you we have to convert women before we can have children?”

I nodded. “Yeah. Only boys carry the wolf gene.”

“Right. Well there’s another part of that I didn’t tell you before because I didn’t want you to run away screaming.”

“I *love* how you’re setting this up so far.”

He shook his head with a grin. “Sorry. It’s just...” He hesitated and my smile faded. “Wolves have an instinct to mate with one female for life. Okay, that’s not even big enough to describe it. It’s like this wolf inside of us comes alive, demanding we protect and love our mate like it’s a physical need. Some of us wait for her to come along, and others just enjoy their freedom without any strings attached.”

“If you’re trying to tell me you’re one of the others, don’t bother. I figured that out a long time ago. You had *player* written all over you.”

He rubbed his face and heaved a sigh before meeting my eyes. “I’m trying to tell you I found my mate.”

I almost choked on my tongue. My brow furrowed. “What?”

“You, Lana. That’s why I can’t let anything happen to you, and if it means we have to leave Reno, then I’m going with you. I just want you to understand. I can’t let you walk out of my life. You *are* my life.”

I collapsed back onto his chest, listening to the sound of his heart beating. “We’re not even the same...species? Race? Whatever.” I lifted my head to look up at him. “How is this even possible? Has anyone else in your Pack had a mate who wasn’t human?”

Adam shook his head. “Not in our Pack. And I haven’t heard of it in any others either.”

“So maybe I’m not really your mate—you just really like me.” My inner foster kid whispered *I told you so*.

Adam brought my hand to his lips and kissed it. "Remember the night we met at the café, when I grabbed your arm to pull you out? It hit me so hard, I almost lost my footing. The wolf knew instantly that you were my other half. My mate. And in the donut shop? When that guy starting flirting with you, I came unglued. I wanted to beat the crap out of him. It was over the top." He put my hand over his heart. "I thought those stories were Pack legends to try to get us to settle down, but trust me. I'm a believer now. Jaguar or not, you're my mate."

I tried to wrap my brain around it. "But we can't be together here, and I can't take you away from your Pack."

"You can't take me, but I can choose to go." Adam stroked my hair. "We're a team, okay? Where you go, I go."

"No, you don't understand. When Sebastian told me about the Nero Organization, he mentioned that they tried to train some werewolf subjects to be assassins like the jaguars, but the wolves couldn't work alone. He said something about their spirits being weakened. They need to live in a Pack. You can't just leave them, Adam."

"I wouldn't trust everything Sebastian tells you." He held me a little tighter. "He just wants you to stay away from me."

"We weren't discussing you when he told me this."

Adam shook his head. "I don't want to talk about him anymore."

I sighed. "He also told me that if he doesn't bring me back to the organization soon, they'll send another jaguar after me."

He held me a little tighter. "I'll kill him."

"Killing a bunch of jaguars isn't the answer here," I said. "One of them might be my brother."

"What?" Adam tensed and pulled back enough to look down at me.

"Sebastian didn't confirm it, but he thinks my mother gave birth and hid me from Nero. They only got the boy."

His fingers slowly traced my spine before he spoke. "As far as they knew, you didn't exist until you got those CAT scans."

"Exactly." I kissed along his neck. "I think I need to get down to San

Antonio and see if I can get my sealed records. There might be a clue about my parents. I need to put the pieces together to truly know what I am up against.”

“You think they’re hiding from Nero, too?” His fingers stroked through the back of my hair. I closed my eyes, resting my head against his chest and drinking in the comfort.

“Sebastian told me my father is still with Nero...” I wet my lips, pushing down my emotions. “My mother was eliminated.”

“I’m sorry, Lana.” He kissed my hair. “You know she loved you.”

I frowned without lifting my head. “How do you know that?”

“Because she didn’t want you to be an experiment like she was. It probably broke her heart to leave you behind, but it was her only chance to save you.”

I kissed over his heart while mine broke for a woman I never got to meet. “I want to know where she left me and when. I want to know everything.”

“I’m going with you.”

I wiped my tears and lifted my head. “What about the ranch?”

“Luke can exercise the horses. We won’t be gone long.”

“No.” I kissed his lips, then pulled back and met his eyes. “I’m not taking you away from your Pack.”

“It’s not forever.” He reached up to cup my cheek. “Remember what I said about needing to protect you?” He kissed me again, long and slow. For a second my brain short-circuited and I forgot what we were talking about.

I laughed softly. “You’re trying to distract me.”

“Am I?” He flashed me an innocent smile.

I gave him a gentle shove. “You know you are.” My smile faded a little. “What about your brother?”

He sobered. “He won’t like me going away with you.”

“Will he follow us?”

I could feel the weight of his stare. “Probably.”

“We could ditch him. I’m good at hiding under the radar.”

“I know you told me you thought you’d be okay being a secret, and I thought I’d be all right with it too. But I’ve lied to my family enough. I feel

like a spineless asshole. I don't want to hide anymore."

His admission felt like a punch in the gut. He lied to them all because of me.

"I should get ready to go." I pulled free of his embrace and sat up in the bed, yanking my cotton T-shirt back down.

He watched me get up. "This isn't your fault, Lana. But I've never kept a secret from Aren. Never." His voice dropped even lower as he looked over toward the window. "I hit him yesterday."

"You did what?"

He rubbed his knuckles, staring at his hand. "We both said things we shouldn't have. It escalated."

I pressed my hand to forehead. "God, Adam. Even if we found a way to keep Nero away, I can't stay here and singlehandedly destroy your relationship with your family. I can't. I won't."

He got up and wrapped his arms around me. "It wasn't just you. I lied to him, Lana. We were both upset and only part of it had anything to do with you. I don't know if my Pack will ever come around, but we don't have to worry about it today." He pulled back and I looked up at him. "Why don't you get the plane tickets to San Antonio, and I'll go back to get the ranch taken care of."

"All right." I nodded. "But no more socking your brother. I don't care what he says."

He kissed my forehead. "Deal."

"We should leave right away." I grabbed my laptop and sat on the bed. "It's only a matter of time before Nero sends another jaguar to finish Sebastian's job."

"I'll be back in an hour. I just have to be sure Luke knows the plan and has everything he needs for me to be gone for a few days." He got up and started dressing again. I watched him pull his shirt on and step into his jeans, his muscles rippling, taut with power. He yanked on his work boots and crossed to the mirror to comb his hair. He looked like the dangerous Adam I'd met that first night. My heart thumped in agreement.

His green eyes cut over to where I sat on the bed. In one stride he was next to me, his hand cradling my head as he kissed me again, urgent and hard. He drew back, and his shoulders looked heavy under the weight of his thoughts.

His voice was low and sparked with intensity. “Stay here, okay? If we want a head start in Texas, Sebastian can’t know we’re leaving.”

“I’ll get the tickets from my laptop, no reason for me to leave.”

His gaze locked on mine. “Be safe.”

“You too.”

He nodded and turned to leave. As he opened the door, he glanced back over his shoulder. “We’ll figure this out.”

Adam didn’t wait for a response, and I was left sitting on the hotel bed staring at the door. I got up to engage the deadbolt, which the hotel staff must’ve fixed during housekeeping. How would we ever make our relationship work? This was all more than I bargained for, but I wanted it. More than I’d ever wanted anything. I started to smile and shook my head. *Be careful what you wish for Lana.*

With a sigh, I yanked my shirt off over my head and went to the bathroom for a quick shower. It was going to be a long day.

Chapter Twenty-Four

ADAM

I gripped the steering wheel so tight that my hands ached. When I glanced down at my bruised knuckles on my right hand, part of me still couldn't believe I'd punched Aren. True, he had been a total asshole, but it hadn't been the first time. However, it was the first time I ever clocked him for it.

My gut clenched and I looked back out at the highway in front of me. If I had stayed out of the Hot Rod Café, maybe I could have avoided all of this.

But I knew I'd do it all over again. In a heartbeat.

The corner of my mouth curved up in a crooked smile. I definitely had it bad. Was love supposed to make you this insane? I felt like I was on a roller coaster. One moment I was holding her in my arms and the rest of the world faded away, the next I was lying to my family and punching my twin brother in the nose. I'd never felt such depth of emotion in my entire life. I thought I'd known what passion was, but now I realized that until I sparred with Lana that first night, I never really had any clue.

So how could I make Aren understand?

When I pulled up to the ranch, Aren was sitting on the front porch. Apparently, I was going to get the chance to make him understand sooner than I'd realized. I parked the Jeep and got out. I wasn't sure what to say. Aren's face didn't look black and blue, which was a relief. It took more than one punch to really mess up a werewolf. We healed pretty quickly.

Aren stood but kept his hands in his pockets instead of clasping forearms with me. "You didn't come home."

"I couldn't leave Lana alone, and I couldn't bring her here either so..." I

shrugged. "I've gotta grab some clothes and call Luke. He'll have to run the ranch for a few days while I'm in San Antonio."

"Texas?" Aren's eyes widened a little, and his hands pressed deeper into his pockets. "Please tell me you're not going with her."

"We have to go check something out down there. We'll be back in a few days."

"She's luring you away from the Pack, you realize that, right?"

I shook my head. "Don't start this with me, Aren. I don't want to fight with you, but I'm not going to lie to you anymore either."

"What are you going to tell the Pack? We're already down one man, and we know there's another jaguar in town besides the one you're sleeping with."

I ground my teeth, struggling to keep my rage in check. The last thing I needed was to hit Aren again. My twin was every bit as strong as I was, and I doubted he would walk away without a fight this time.

"The Pack will be fine. If I take Lana from here, Sebastian will leave too. It's her he's after, not us."

"He'll leave so he and Lana can ambush you in Texas while you're away from the Pack."

Jesus, he was pissing me off. I brushed past Aren and stormed into my house, but I could hear him following me.

"This is dangerous, Adam. It's not a game. Gabe is dead."

I spun on my heel to face him with an angry glare. "Do you honestly think I don't know that? Gabe died in my arms, remember? Lana didn't do it."

"That doesn't mean she didn't have anything to do with it."

I rolled my eyes. "Do you think I'm stupid? Is that what you think?"

"No, but I think this woman has you blinded."

"You know what I think? I think you owe me a little more respect, and I think you should trust me. Lana is my mate. That's not going to change. You can either learn to accept it, or stay the hell away from us."

I walked down the hallway, my hands trembling with adrenaline. I grabbed a duffel bag from my closet and started tossing in jeans and T-shirts while my

mind wrestled with torn allegiances. I didn't have any good choices. Leaving my mate went against every wolf instinct, not to mention I just plain loved her. I'd never met another woman like Lana. But if I stayed with her, I'd be forced to leave the Pack.

After tossing in my shaving kit and assorted toiletries, I yanked the zipper closed and hauled the oversized bag over my shoulder. Aren was waiting in the living room. He stood up and my teeth ground together. None of this was fair. I always pictured that when we finally found our mates, we'd live close by, go on double dates, raise our sons together. But those dreams changed the day I realized my mate was a jaguar.

I kept my face expressionless as I approached my twin. "I'll call Luke. I'd appreciate it if you kept an eye out for him just in case he has trouble with any of the horses or owners."

Aren nodded. "We watch out for our own," he said with a clipped bite to his words.

"Thanks." I held my hand out toward my brother, not knowing if he'd take it. Aren clasped my forearm and tugged me into a firm embrace.

"Be well, Adam."

I held my brother tight until I felt the tension in his back relax. I pulled back with a nod. "Thanks Aren. See you soon."

I walked out and closed the door behind me.

Chapter Twenty-Five

LANA

I wanted to ask Adam what happened when he went back to the ranch, but I didn't. He'd been brooding ever since he got back to the hotel to pick me up. We didn't check out of the hotel though. It was worth paying for a couple of extra days if it could slow Sebastian and Nero down a little. Neither one of us knew the area very well in San Antonio, so it would be tougher to dodge our enemies there. With any luck, we could get my records and be back before Sebastian realized we left Reno.

We went back to the Hot Rod Café and took my rental car to the airport. I hadn't used it since Sebastian came on the scene in Reno so we figured we were less likely to be tailed if we took it instead of Chaney. Besides, it would save me some money to return it. We checked our bags, and soon we were soaring over Nevada, headed south to Texas. I looked over to see Adam had already put on headphones and closed his eyes. Apparently he still wasn't ready to talk. I blew out a frustrated sigh and stared out the window.

I loved flying. Seeing the land changing below us as we soared through the clouds was exhilarating, yet somehow calming. Gradually, the dense trees thinned, and a smile surprised me when I heard the captain point out that we were flying over the Grand Canyon. I pressed my face to the plastic like a little kid at a Macy's window at Christmastime. Even from thousands of feet above the earth, the canyon below was awe-inspiring. All the sunset colors blended together to make nature's masterpiece below.

"Makes our problems seem insignificant, doesn't it?"

Hearing his voice so soft, his lips brushing against my ear, made me melt

back against him as I nodded and turned to look back at him. “You remember how to speak.”

He almost smiled. “Yeah. Sorry I’ve been so quiet.”

“Care to let me in on it?”

His shoulders tensed, and he settled back into his seat. “Not yet.”

I looked back out the window, watching the Grand Canyon fade from view. A sigh escaped me before I could hold it back. A few hours ago Adam told me he loved me. He told me I was his mate. But since then he’d been silent. And definitely not happy.

Insecurity wrapped me in its cold embrace. It whispered that I didn’t deserve to be loved, I never had. I knew he’d gone back to the ranch, and my brain filled in the blanks. Maybe Aren had told him to choose. Me or the Pack. I never should have let him into my heart.

I glanced over my shoulder. His eyes were closed, headphones in place. He was someplace else. Maybe he wished his wolf wiring had chosen differently. Staring out the airplane window, I tried to silence the voice in my head. Adam loved me. I saw it in his eyes when he held me in his arms. He meant it.

But he also loved his family. His brother would have welcomed me with open arms if I had been a nice wolf-y chick.

Except according to Adam there weren’t female wolves. He’d have to bite someone. I shuddered at the thought. What would happen to me if he bit me? Would I be some sort of crazy half wolf half cat? Suddenly the image of the sick cartoon CatDog popped in my head, and I closed my eyes tight, wishing I could wash all thought from my stupid brain. I was making myself crazy.

Adam’s hand stroked my back slow and firm, gradually caressing the tension from my muscles. His comfort gave me a temporary reprieve from the mental assault. I let my head fall forward, and he kneaded my shoulders until I nearly purred. When he stopped, my mind had cleared a little, and I turned to look at him.

He leaned forward and kissed my lips before whispering, “I’m sorry I’m lousy company.”

I could feel my eyes getting hot and did my best to keep back the tears. “I’m sorry I’m not a better mate for you and your family.”

His brow furrowed and he reached up to cup my face. “You’re perfect for me. No other woman has ever made me feel the way I do when I’m with you. In fact, my Alpha was worried I’d be playing the field forever. Apparently I was waiting to find you.”

I looked down at my lap. “You’ve been so quiet. I thought you were having second thoughts.”

He lifted my chin to meet his gaze. “I love you, Lana.”

His tender kiss sealed any doubts I might have had. When our lips parted, he slid his hand down to clasp mine. Our fingers entwined together and neither of us let go until we landed in San Antonio.

...

We got off the plane and caught a cab to our hotel. I couldn’t help gawking when we arrived. The hotel’s website hadn’t prepared me for the European opulence in front of me.

“This is the Fairmount?”

The driver nodded, tallying up the fare. “The Jewel of San Antonio.”

Adam paid while I climbed out and stared at the canopied entrance. He walked up beside me with our bags and smiled. “Not what you were expecting?”

“I just reserved a hotel on the Riverwalk that had a room available. From the ‘Jewel of San Antonio’ title I assumed it would be more like the Alamo, you know? A western-themed place or something.”

The Fairmount looked more like a New England Victorian estate than anything conjured up in the Wild West. Adam stepped up to the entrance and opened the glass doors. While I stared at the large chandelier and ornately carved front desk, a large golden retriever galloped right past me to maul Adam with affection.

“Hey, boy!” Adam laughed, letting our duffel bags drop to the floor so he

could properly scratch his new best friend's ears.

"Duke!" the concierge called, chasing after the dog.

Adam glanced over at the uptight hotel clerk and grinned back down at the wiggling dog. "So your name is Duke?"

The dog barked in answer, and I almost jumped out of my skin. Dogs and cats! I rolled my eyes.

Watching Adam and Duke playing together made me smile. I hadn't seen an animal yet that didn't love Adam. It was like they knew he would understand them.

The concierge gave us a well-practiced patronizing smile. "Welcome to the Fairmount. I hope Duke didn't startle you. He's never met a guest he didn't like."

Adam stood back up. "He's a great welcoming committee."

"That he is, sir. In fact, he's our Director of Pet Relations, so if you find yourself missing a furry friend back home, Duke is happy to go out for a walk with you or meet up for a good brushing. He'll even bring you the paper in the morning."

"Wow! You're a busy dog, aren't you?" Adam offered the eager canine another scratch behind the ear.

The concierge cleared his throat and glanced over at me. Whoops. "Oh, I'm Lana Turpin. We have a reservation for a queen room."

His eyes lit up. "Perfect. Please follow me, and we'll get you checked in."

Before we knew it, we were heading up to the third floor. Duke accompanied us to the elevator, allowing us both to pet him while we waited for the double doors to open. Once we got into our room, Adam dropped our bags and I set up my laptop. "I'm just going to let the PI know we're here and see if he's made any progress yet."

"Sounds good." Adam went to the window, peering out from between the drapes.

While my computer warmed up, I flipped through my contacts on my phone to find Bob Jones's number. He'd come highly recommended and apparently worked plenty of custody cases. Before I clicked "send," I pulled

up my email. I had two from Bob already. Nice.

The first one was just letting me know he'd be meeting with a friend in the department later today. But the second one made me smile. "He's got it."

Adam turned around. "Your file?"

I nodded and glanced over at him. "That's what he says."

Hope swelled inside me and I did my best to tamp it down. It could be the wrong file, or it could be empty. Life had let me down enough times not to be wary.

I punched "send." *Here goes nothing.*

"Bob Jones here."

"Bob, it's Lana."

"Are you in San Antonio yet?" I could hear the smile in his Texas drawl. "Did you get my email?"

"Yes to both. You got my file."

"Sure did. I checked it over to be sure it was the right one." He paused, and I held my breath. "Not much in there, but it's definitely yours."

I stared at Adam's back, my heart sinking a bit. "How soon can I get the file from you?"

"I can meet you first thing in the morning."

I told him where we were staying and scheduled a meeting in the lobby at nine a.m., but before he could hang up, I blurted out. "Can you check something else for me?"

"Sure thing. What do you need?"

"Can you tell me the date I entered the system?"

I heard papers shuffling and Bob hummed a little. "Seems that someone's been through these. There's nothing here referencing when you entered the system. There's transfer papers to foster homes. The first transfer I see shows October 12, 1988."

Adam turned toward me, and I dropped my gaze to the carpet, listening to pages turning on the other end of the line. "This is supposed to be a sealed file, but there aren't any medical records here either. I see some school records..."

“Thanks, Bob. I’ll go through it in depth tomorrow. See you then.”

I hung up the phone and tossed it onto my duffel. Adam sat in the other chair. “Everything okay? We’re getting the file in the morning?”

“Yeah.” I lifted my eyes to meet his. “What’s left of it.”

He frowned. “What?”

“If Nero is as well connected as Sebastian led me to believe, I should’ve expected this.”

His shoulders tensed. “They got to your case file.”

“Sounds like it.” My chest felt tight. All my medical records, any potential report written about my parents or the reasons behind surrendering me to the state, were in the hands of some faceless entity. I felt violated all over again.

“Once they had my name it probably wasn’t too difficult. With someone on the inside they could grab what they needed and no one would be the wiser.”

Adam got up and stood behind me. His strong hands rubbed the back of my neck and shoulders. “I’m sorry, Lana.”

I sighed and rested my head back against him. Closing my eyes, I let out a breath, struggling to let go of the emotion and think. And then it came to me. My fingers flew to the laptop keyboard.

“Got an idea?” Adam asked.

“Maybe.” I got on the *San Antonio Express-News* newspaper’s website and started searching. “Bob mentioned the records for my foster care transfers were still in the file. The first one was in October of 1988. It might be worth checking to see if there was any mention of a baby being found anywhere...” I scanned the headlines.

“Did you find something?”

“The archives on the website don’t go back far enough.” I groaned and glanced at the clock. “The library is probably closed by now, too.” I rubbed the back of my neck. “After we get the file from Bob, I’ll go to the library. They should have the old papers archived. With some of the records missing, this might be my only chance at answers.”

He kissed the top of my head. “We’ll hunt down the info in the morning. Are you hungry?” Until he mentioned it, I hadn’t been, but now my stomach

grumbled in answer, making him smile. “How’s pizza sound?”

Papa John’s delivered a large all-meat pizza and Adam found “Three Amigos” on television. We ate while watching TV on the bed, and a feeling of peace settled over me. This could be my life. I’d have to fight for it, but I’d never wanted anything more.

Adam put the empty pizza box on the table. I watched the way his body moved and wet my lips. I’d never felt very lucky in my life, but the moment he turned back and smiled at me, I was the luckiest woman on earth. Part of me still didn’t feel worthy, but I stuffed a sock in her mouth.

Adam laid down facing me. “Feel better?”

I nodded, chuckling. “I always thought I could eat like a truck driver and never gain an ounce because I had a high metabolism.”

He shrugged a shoulder with a crooked smile that made my breath catch. “It’s a perk of being a shifter.” He searched my eyes, his rough finger tracing my jaw. “How are you holding up? Tomorrow’s going to be a big day.”

I couldn’t help nuzzling into his touch. “I’m ready. I need to know, and with any luck, it’ll help us figure out how to get Nero out of my life.” I kissed his lips softly. “I don’t want to run anymore.”

He bent to kiss me, and my heart jumped in my chest. His muscles tensed under my fingers as I slid my hands up his chest. He hummed into my mouth as our tongues swirled, and his arms clasped me tight against him. The musky, male scent of his skin made my stomach clench with desire. Feeling him pressed against me made all the rest of the world fade away.

Maybe that was what happened when you were in love. I’d had relationships before, but this was the first time I’d ever said “I love you.” It was the first time I’d ever been with someone who made it past my defenses and into my heart.

Without breaking the kiss, he walked me back toward the bed, my fingers making quick work of the button and zipper of his jeans. When I felt the mattress against the back of my calves, I stopped walking and pulled him back onto the sheets with me. His hands slipped under my shirt, cupping my breasts and teasing my nipples until I was aching for him to rip my clothes

off. I broke the kiss long enough to yank his shirt over his head before our lips fused back together. His skin felt hot and slick, and I wanted him.

He was mine. *My mate.*

I pushed him over, rolling on top of him without coming up for air. He growled into the kiss as I straddled his waist, my hips writhing against the hard bulge fighting to break free of his boxer shorts. Waves of pleasure shot through my body until I was wet and aching for him to slide into me, but I wanted to savor every second. This kind of passion was new to me. I'd never really initiated intimacy or yearned for it like I did with Adam. His attention empowered me, and I was hungry for more.

Finally I broke the kiss and sat up, staring down at Adam as I worked my hips against him. As slowly as I could, I unbuttoned my shirt, drinking in the hunger in his stare. My pulse raced seeing him watching my every move and feeling his urgent response between my legs. When my shirt fell away, I slid my hands up my body, my fingers reaching for the front clasp of my bra.

"You're so sexy, Lana." Desire filled his gaze, heating my skin.

I smiled as I tossed my bra across the room.

I moved down his body, tugging his jeans free and dropping them to the floor before wriggling out of my own. The slick silk of my black panties was the only barrier left between us. I knew if I took them off now it'd be too easy to lose control. This time, I wanted to enjoy the passion that burned between us until we were both about to combust.

Okay, so I wanted him to beg me to take him.

Looking down at Adam's perfectly chiseled body, not to mention his amazing green eyes and dangerous sexy smile, made me hot and anxious to feel him deep inside of me. But right now my attention was being drawn to the fine line of dark hair running down below his navel. I wet my lips.

My pulse raced as I laid back over him, moaning as my breasts met the heat of his chest. His kisses were hot and hard, demanding. Our tongues danced, and I rocked my hips against him until he moaned into the kiss, his teeth pressing against my lips. We couldn't get close enough.

Breathless, I kissed my way down his neck, nipping at his shoulder as I

made my way lower. Adam's fingers tangled in my hair, and I felt his breath catch as I licked his nipple slowly before kissing my way downward. I looked up at him, and his gaze locked with mine as I slowly took him into my mouth. Adam's hands clenched my hair as his hips rocked up.

When he groaned my name, I hummed around him, teasing his chest with my fingernails. His hips worked in an urgent rhythm against my mouth until I could feel him pulsing, his fingers tightening in my hair. Slowly, I pulled back. His fingers came free of my hair, and I stood up, peeling my underwear off while he watched.

"You're driving me crazy." He sounded breathless.

"Good," I whispered as I tossed the black silk aside.

I crawled over him, kissing my way back up his chest. When our lips fused together, my hips instinctively tilted toward him. I let out a satisfied moan when he filled me. Our bodies fit so perfectly together that I felt every muscle shiver with pleasure. His strong hands moved down my back, his fingers splayed out until he clasped my hips, pressing me against him as he thrust deeper into me.

Breaking the kiss, I sat up over him, working my hips faster, feeling him reaching sensitive places I didn't even realize I had. I'd always been comfortable in my own skin, but never in my life had I felt so sexy and powerful as I did right then. Seeing Adam look up at me like I was the most desirable woman in the world made my heart race. I reached for his hands and guided them up from my hips to cup my breasts. His fingers teased my nipples, and my back arched as my muscles clenched around him. Adam's hips rocked harder and faster until he followed me over the peak.

I collapsed against his chest, completely out of breath and unable to stop smiling. Adam rolled us over without letting our bodies separate. His thumbs caressed my temples and he kissed my lips, tender, soft, lingering kisses.

"I love seeing you smile," Adam whispered.

"Feels good to smile." I rested my forehead against his. "Whatever we find out tomorrow, I'm ready."

Chapter Twenty-Six

ADAM

I rolled my shoulders back, trying to loosen the tension knotting between my shoulder blades. We'd met the PI for Lana's file, and now she sat in the reference section of the San Antonio library culling through archives of the newspaper for any mention of a baby wrapped in a sweatshirt with the Nero logo on it.

I wandered the aisles, never straying far from the reference section. My nerves were on edge. We'd been in San Antonio for almost twenty-four hours. Long enough for Sebastian to pick up our trail. Especially if Nero knew about Lana's records in San Antonio. It wouldn't be a huge stretch to figure Lana would look for answers about her parents. Once I satisfied myself that the interior of the library was clear of any trace of Sebastian or some other jaguar, I wandered back over to the table where Lana was working.

"Did you find anything?"

"Maybe." She shrugged. "There's a story from September 1988 about a Baby Doe left on the steps of the San Fernando Cathedral downtown. According to the paper, her parents didn't come forward." She looked up at me, and the urge to kiss her welled up inside of me like a dam about to burst. She was sexy even doing research.

"It could be me," she continued. "There wasn't a picture with the article so Nero never would have seen the sweatshirt I was wrapped in. Maybe that's the only reason I vanished from their radar."

I hated thinking about Lana being abandoned, no idea she was a shifter. No family to teach her. What if someone had stolen her off those church steps? I

didn't realize I was grinding my teeth until she reached up to caress my cheek.

"I'm okay, Adam."

I shook my head. "You could've died."

"Maybe they thought that'd be better than me being a science experiment."

I nodded, but I didn't agree. Family wasn't something to be tossed aside. The irony that I might need to walk away from my own didn't escape me. But if Lana's father really was still alive, wouldn't he have checked on her at some point? Lana ended up spending her life growing up in foster homes, moving from place to place. She could have been abused or worse. I didn't want to think of the other outcomes. The fact that she grew up and sent herself to college was very lucky. The odds weren't in her favor.

"No trace of Sebastian inside, but I'm going to check around the perimeter. Stretch my legs a little." I stood up, scanning the room again. "You'll stay right here, right?"

She glanced up at me. "I'm planning on it."

"All right." I bent to kiss her and headed toward the main desk of the library.

When I stepped outside the hot, stale air wrapped around me like a blanket. I could feel my shirt sticking to my skin already. I wiped the sweat from my eyes and started off to my right. The San Antonio library's modern architecture and bright peach color made it stand out from its surroundings, and without much vegetation around it, any stray jaguars would have a tough time surprising me. I breathed in clues to the people who had already passed by. I picked up the scents of children with fresh wads of bubble gum, old women who smelled faintly of mothballs and hairspray, and even a few dogs. I rounded the second corner and my whole body jolted to attention.

I knew that scent. *Fuck*. Sebastian was close by.

I circled slowly, looking into every shadow, searching for any indication of someone watching me. Not seeing any sign of trouble, I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply. When I opened my eyes again I gave myself over to my animal instincts.

I walked, sometimes jogged, and finally came to a stop behind the library. The scent was coming from a park across the street. I hustled that direction, adrenaline pumping. Instinctively, I reached down to my belt, brushing my fingers over the hilt of my knife. My gun was at the hotel, but I couldn't fire on him out here anyway. The last thing we needed was for me to be arrested and leave Lana unprotected in San Antonio while I waited to be bailed out.

As I got closer, blood mixed with Sebastian's scent. My heart pounded as I made my way over to the slide. The scent of blood and jaguar was getting stronger. The tip of an adult-sized black shoe stuck out of the long shadow cast by the slide.

I moved closer, squinting into the shadows. "Sebastian?"

He leaned out to look at me, and I frowned. His face was all beat-to-hell. His mangled shirt barely covered his bruised ribs, blood oozed from his corner of his mouth.

"Jesus. What the hell happened to you?"

"Where is Lana?" he wheezed through his split lip.

"None of your concern. She's safe."

His eyes widened. "You left her alone? You stupid wolf. I warned her that if I didn't bring her back soon Nero would send another."

Oh shit. "I've been watching, but your scent is the only jaguar I've found." My blood ran cold and in spite of the Texas heat, I felt a chill.

"Trust me." He wiped blood from his nose. "Sasha's here, another assassin. Get Lana and keep her safe."

I nodded, and then I ran. I ran like I was about to lose the most important thing in my life.

As I rounded the west side of the large library, movement and the metal clanging of trashcans in the alley across the street caught my attention. I glanced over and my heart stuttered.

Aren. Being held at gunpoint.

Dammit! I wanted to shield my family from Nero, and now Aren was mixed up in it too.

I took a silent step closer. The woman dressed in black with a handgun

pointed at my brother's head must be Sasha. For the first time in my life I wished I was telepathic. I wanted to tell Aren I was there, that I'd take her out. But instead I stayed silent. I crept from a dumpster to a parked car, watching and praying I'd catch her off-guard.

"What kind of jaguar hunts with a gun?" Aren jibed.

"The kind of jaguar who knows she's smaller than a big dumb wolf. Where is your girlfriend?" Her gloved finger gripped the trigger, and silently I begged my brother to shut the hell up.

"I put her on a plane," he said. "She's probably in Reno by now."

The jaguar slammed her knee into his groin so quick that I winced. Aren's legs buckled, and he fell to the ground coughing. She squatted down beside him and raised her hand, but before she could clock him with the butt of her pistol she leaned in a little closer taking a deep breath.

Suddenly she straightened up, her brow furrowed. "Her scent is all over this town, but it's not on you."

"That's because *I'm* her boyfriend." I stepped out from behind the metal trash bin.

The woman pivoted and pointed her gun right at my head. Aren didn't hesitate. He reached out and grabbed her ankles, yanking her feet out from under her. A gunshot echoed through the alley as Aren wrestled with the jaguar. He slammed her hand against the pavement until the gun skittered across the blacktop. I ran over and tucked the gun in my belt before she could reach for it.

I waited for an opening to help my brother, but the petite woman in head-to-toe black leather was holding her own. The two rolled over so many times it was tough to tell where one ended and the other started. Suddenly she head-butted Aren, stunning him long enough to break free of his grip. She struggled out from under him and scrambled free, leaving my brother dazed. The other end of the alley was a dead end. She only had one exit. Through me.

She stared me down for a second before she sprinted toward me, throwing a nasty elbow into my ribs. I caught her arm and jerked her in close. "Where

the hell do you think you're going?"

"To finish my mission."

"Your mission is over."

I could see the goose egg forming on her forehead. She might think twice before head-butting a thickheaded werewolf again. Aren stood up, wiping the blood off of his face with the bottom of his shirt as he made his way over to us.

"Her mission is aborted." Aren kept his gaze squarely on her face, but he still looked dazed and maybe a little confused.

She glared at him. "Wolves aren't my mission."

Before I realized it, the jaguar spun to the right, breaking free of my grip on her arm. Aren started to chase after her, but I called him back.

"Aren, let her go. We've gotta get to Lana."

"What?" He was still looking in the direction the jaguar ran. Finally he turned toward me, his nostrils flaring. "You're not serious. You still trust her after this? Come on, Adam, that jaguar thought I was you, and she attacked me."

"Because she wants *Lana*. I don't have time to explain right now. Just help me protect her."

Aren cast one more glance in the direction his attacker went and then shook his head, muttering under his breath, "It's you I'm worried about protecting."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

LANA

I finished with the newspaper archives and started reexamining what was left of my foster care records. I entered a couple of notes on my laptop, but before I could digest the information I caught the scent of blood wafting around me. My entire body went on full alert. When Adam rounded the corner with his twin, I frowned. Aren's nose was bruised and swollen, and he had blood all over his shirt.

"What happened?" I looked Adam up and down, relieved to see he didn't look injured. I glanced at Aren. "What's he doing here? Have you been following us?"

"We've gotta get out of here. Now."

He had me by the arm so quickly that I almost didn't get a chance to grab the envelope and my laptop from the table. "What's going on? Did you see Sebastian?"

"Yes," he said, scanning the library.

We headed for the doors. Adam was in front, I hustled up behind him, and Aren was right after me. If I hadn't been terrified, I would've laughed to find myself in the center of a werewolf sandwich.

When Adam opened the door to our floor, his shirt rose up and caught on something. I didn't realize what it was until I walked past him.

"When did you get a gun? What's going on?"

"Let's get to the hotel first. Then I'll explain"

We got outside and Adam frowned. "Dammit. We took a cab here. Who knows how long it'll take to get one."

Aren yanked keys from his pocket. "I have a rental in the lot straight ahead."

Adam grabbed the keys, and we all ran toward the lot. Aren took the lead with Adam and I close behind. The automatic locks popped open as we neared a white Lexus. "I'm driving. You could have a concussion."

"I don't have a damn concussion." Aren grunted, but he climbed in the back seat just the same.

Once we were in, Adam pulled out and got us back to the Fairmount without incident. "Stay together," he commanded. Adam made sure I was directly behind him in the parking structure, and I rolled my eyes.

"We know what Sebastian looks like. It's not like we wouldn't see him coming."

Aren nudged me forward to follow Adam to the elevator. Ugh. Men.

Safely inside our hotel room, I set my laptop and file on the table and turned. "Okay, one of you start talking. Did Sebastian do this? And where did you get a gun? I thought you left it here in your bag."

They looked at each other. Aren shook his head, stalking over to the window. I guess he still didn't want to be anywhere near me. Great.

Adam pulled the gun out and laid it on top of my envelope. "This wasn't Sebastian. Nero sent another jaguar. Sebastian's pretty beat up, too."

I took a deep breath, trying to stay calm. "Did you get a good look at him? Do we know who we're watching out for?"

"It's a woman, Lana. She's the one who cracked Aren's nose."

My eyebrows rose, and I looked over at the back of Aren's head. I was pretty proud of myself for biting back the comment I wanted to make.

Something struck me, and I looked up at Adam. "Wait...it was a woman? I know they were trying to breed female jaguars, but Sebastian told me they still weren't being born into their powers."

Aren finally turned around. "She wasn't born into her power. Someone converted her."

I glanced over his way. "How do you know that?"

He pointed to his shoulder just above his collarbone. "She had a scar right

here. I saw it while we were scuffling on the ground.”

I shook my head. “So why would they send her out on missions? Sebastian made it sound like they capture females and convert them for breeding.” My gut twisted at the thought. Knowing I was a product of one of their sick breeding experiments didn’t help. “From the records we read and Sebastian’s cryptic comments, it doesn’t sound like the women who go inside Nero ever come out again.”

His voice echoed in my mind telling me my mother was “eliminated.”

“She was well trained and fast.” Aren glanced over at Adam from the window. “And that pistol is police issue.”

“You think she’s a cop?” Adam looked as surprised as I felt.

“I think she used to be.”

“Before someone bit her?” I shook my head. “Why would a police officer start working for a covert corporation? Are you sure she was from Nero? Why would she beat up Sebastian if she’s on his side?”

“Who knows?” Adam replied. “But she had that same tattoo—that lion with the ‘N’ on the forehead. I saw it on her wrist when she elbowed me.”

“It doesn’t make sense. She’s got to know they kill people.” I still couldn’t wrap my brain around a police officer working for Nero.

“They could have threatened her family.” Adam shrugged. “Maybe she was in love, and after she got bitten she still wanted to work? It doesn’t really matter right now. We’ve gotta get back to Reno.”

Aren looked out the window again. “I’ll stay behind and slow her down.”

Adam shook his head. “No way. We go together.”

Aren shifted his gaze my way, before he looked at his brother. “Look, Adam, maybe I was wrong. Maybe Lana isn’t trying to set you up, but now you’re mixed up in this too. I can help you get out of it. I’ve got the jaguar’s scent and you’ve got her gun. I’ll keep her here and keep her busy while you get back to the Pack.”

Adam ground his teeth together, his gaze moving between his brother and me. “You’ll be right behind us?”

Aren nodded. “I’ll be on a flight in the morning.”

Adam stepped up and embraced his twin. I watched them hold each other tight before they stepped back, and my heart clenched in my chest. They were brothers. And now, once again, I was coming between them.

“Ready?” Adam handed the gun to Aren.

He shook his head. “I don’t need a gun.”

“Take it just in case,” Adam said.

“She was just as dangerous without the gun.” Aren rubbed the knot on his forehead.

“There’s another jaguar here, too.”

“What?” Aren dropped his hand, looking over at Adam. “Besides Lana?”

Adam nodded. “Yeah. His name’s Sebastian. I don’t know which team he’s really playing for, so stay alert. Don’t trust him.”

“Like I would ever trust a cat.” Aren smirked, then he seemed to remember I was in the room because his expression faltered. But he didn’t bother to apologize. Instead he clasped Adam’s forearm. “See you back home.”

“Be careful,” I said, but Aren only nodded as he headed out the door. He didn’t even look at me.

There wasn’t time to think about what a racist jerk he was, though. Adam grabbed the duffel bag, and we hurried out of the room. We hopped in a cab at the back entrance and made it to the airport without any incidents. Inside the ticketing area, Adam seemed to relax a little. He took my hand and smiled at me, but I couldn’t muster much of a smile back.

“Everything’s going to be okay.” He lifted my hand and pressed a kiss to the back of it. “What’d I miss when I left the library? Find anything new?”

“I double checked dates against the Nero documents, and I’m almost positive I was the Baby Doe on the steps of the San Fernando Cathedral. And I think the sweatshirt they returned to me when I got older is pretty solid proof I was the missing baby from the Nero report.”

“That means you definitely have a twin brother somewhere.”

I nodded. “Sebastian seemed a little shaken when I asked him about it. He said my father is still with Nero.” The phrase “my father” felt foreign on my tongue.

We went through security and waited at the terminal for our flight. I lost track of the time, my mind wandering over the information I'd gathered on the trip. It was pretty easy to guess why Nero wanted me now. I was a female born as a shifter with a male twin. An anomaly. No doubt they wanted to study my DNA. My initiation into the "breeding program" probably wouldn't be far behind. They'd want to know if I could reproduce female shifters.

Just thinking about it made me want a shower. I couldn't let them get their hooks in me. Ever.

Forcing the thoughts from my mind, I looked over at Adam. His green eyes were still scanning the airport terminal. His muscles were taut like he was ready to spring into action at any moment. It was hard to believe just last night I fell asleep in those same arms.

He caught me looking at him and his lips curved up just a little. "We'll sort everything out when we get home. You'll see."

Home. I nodded, but the word settled like sand in my stomach. Reno was Adam's home, not mine. I didn't have a home. I'd never had one.

Now that I understood what I was, and why Nero might want me, it was pretty obvious they weren't going to give up until they had me. And after spending time with Aren, it was pretty clear the Pack would never accept me as Adam's mate either. The best thing for everyone would be for me to disappear. I leaned my head against Adam's shoulder, grateful for the comfort of his arm when he pulled me closer. I closed my eyes and breathed him in.

God, it would hurt to leave him.

We had a quiet plane ride back to Reno. It was dark when we landed, but the night air felt good on my face as Adam drove the Jeep back from the hotel toward his ranch.

"Are you sure it's safe to take me to your place?"

"It'll be fine." He reached over to rest his hand on my thigh. "I called Luke and let him know I was on my way back so he could go home."

I nodded, but it stung. Being reminded I was a big secret emphasized the

fact that they were his family and I could never be a part of it. I closed my eyes and tried to bottle up my feelings as best I could.

We pulled in the driveway and got out to grab the bags. Adam slung the duffel bag over his shoulder before catching my hand in his. He pulled me close for a kiss and grinned. “Good to be back home.”

I smiled up at him. I couldn’t help it. “It’s good to see you smile.”

He opened the front door of the house and his smile vanished instantly. “Luke. I thought you were going home.”

A young guy, maybe eighteen or twenty, stood up and started walking toward us. He had dark brown hair like Adam’s, but it was longer, past his shoulders, and his eyes were light blue, piercing, wolf eyes. His skin was tanned too, which only made his eyes stand out even more.

He smiled at Adam, but it faded away as he got closer to the door.

Oh shit. It’s because of me.

He had to be catching my scent. I spun around and jogged back to the Jeep.

“Lana, wait.” I heard Adam call to me.

I hopped in the front seat and scooped the keys off the floor. I jerked the handle and pulled the seat forward, then fired up the engine. I wasn’t going to *steal* Chaney, just take it for a drive. Alone.

It took me a minute to get the feel of the clutch. I hadn’t driven a stick shift in a couple of years, but it all came back and I drove right by Adam and his friend. Brother? Could Adam have a younger brother he didn’t tell me about?

It didn’t matter. I had no idea who Luke might be, and although Adam liked to think I was his mate, he kept me at arm’s distance. Even if I couldn’t meet his family, I would’ve hoped he’d at least confide in me about them. I only knew about Aren because his twin had hunted me down. For all I knew, Adam had a bunch of brothers, aunts, uncles—all the family I didn’t have.

I wiped at the tears that rolled down my cheeks, letting the night air dry my skin. I didn’t know where I was going, but it didn’t really matter. I needed to get away. Adam claimed to love me, but how could I accept it when it meant he’d have to leave his family? Not to mention the danger I’d brought to his hometown. Danger seemed to follow me everywhere I went these days.

I drove back to Circus Circus, grateful now that I hadn't checked out when we left for San Antonio. I pulled into the parking lot and collapsed against the steering wheel. After a few good heaving sobs, I took a deep breath. Feeling sorry for myself wasn't going to solve anything. I needed a hot shower, some time to think, and a plan.

My brow furrowed, and I sniffed. How could I possibly be smelling Sebastian? I peered out into the dim light, grateful for my keen feline vision. I got out of the Jeep quietly and wandered through the parked cars, following the scent that shouldn't be here. "Sebastian?"

I kept my voice low, but he would be able to hear. I slipped my hand in my pocket, relieved to feel my cell phone there. If Sebastian was really going to take me back to Nero I was pretty sure he would've already taken me, but I also didn't feel like he was going to help me escape them either. Until I knew whose side he was really on, knowing I could dial 911 gave me a little piece of mind.

I turned back to the Jeep and gasped.

Leaning against the spare tire on the back was a very beaten up Sebastian.

"What happened to you?"

"No questions now." He looked straight ahead. "We're not safe here. You still have your room, right?"

"Yes, I didn't check out."

He nodded. "Take me inside. We can talk there."

I wasn't excited about being alone in a hotel room with Sebastian again, but he had information I needed. And although I couldn't put my finger on the moment that our relationship shifted, something had changed. I couldn't be sure of Sebastian's motives, but taking me to Nero seemed to have fallen lower on his list. For now.

Safely in my room, he peered out the window, checking the parking area below. Finally he closed the drapes and headed into the bathroom. He came out with a damp washcloth. His face looked bad, but I didn't feel comfortable offering to help him. Since he attacked me the first time we met, my relationship with Sebastian was tenuous at best.

“How did you get here so fast?” I asked.

He pressed the washcloth to his nose. “When I told the wolf to protect you, I knew he would bring you back to his Pack. I am in no condition to wander into a wolf pack at the moment, so I came here to wait.” He glanced at the blood on the washcloth and refolded it. “Where is the wolf?”

“He should be here soon.” No sense letting Sebastian feel like he could stay. “Adam told me Nero sent another jaguar to San Antonio.” I watched him cleaning up. “She really messed you up.”

Sebastian winced as he wiped at the dried blood on his lip. “These are scratches. No real damage.” He stopped, and his head snapped in my direction. “How did you know it was a female? Did you see her?”

“No.” He relaxed slightly, and I rubbed at the back of my neck, trying to relieve the ball of nervous tension. “Adam caught her behind the library in San Antonio.”

He went to the bathroom sink and dropped the washcloth into the basin. He examined his wounds while he spoke to me. “Did he kill her?”

His question jolted me. Until recently, I’d never in my life had people asking me if someone had been killed. It still felt surreal that this was my life now. Wolves, jaguars, and the constant threat of being hunted and killed. Fabulous.

“No, she got away.” I gnawed at my lower lip while I thought about the best way to get more information out of him. “He said she’d been bitten. She wasn’t born a jaguar like me, was she?”

Sebastian shook his head and ran his fingers back through his black hair with a frustrated sigh. “Her name is Sasha.” His eyes met mine. “I bit her.”

“What?” I popped up from the bed like a bolt of lightning zapped me. “So she’s your...mate?”

The corner of his mouth twitched and he shook his head again. “No.”

“But you bit her.”

Sebastian glanced my way and raised a brow. “Jaguars are not like wolves. We do not have an instinct that forces us to mate for life.” He went back to the mirror with a dismissive grunt. “We make our own decisions.”

I wanted to go smack him, instead I smirked. “Sounds like you made a great decision.”

“Enough.” He glared at me, features cold and menacing. “I have history with Sasha that you know nothing about.” He walked back over to the window and parted the drapes to peer into the darkness again.

I stared at the back of his head and reminded myself that pissing him off wasn’t going to get me the information I was looking for. “I think I’m missing something here. If Nero sent her to help you, why did she beat you up?”

And why are you here in my room, not dragging me back to the happy family waiting for me at the Nero Organization?

I was careful to keep the last question in my head.

Sebastian raised his arm up on the windowsill and rested his head against his wrist. “We have history. I’m sure that is why they sent her.”

I bit my lip, waiting for him to say more, but my hulking cat friend, or enemy, whatever he was, remained silent. Sighing, I started to pace. Maybe it was a feline thing, but I thought better on my feet.

“I don’t understand what’s going on here. Are you trying to help me? Is Sasha trying to help you?”

“She used to be a detective when we met. I had an assignment to kill a witness she was protecting.”

I had no idea where this was going, but at least he was talking. “Did you kill him?”

He looked back at me over his shoulder with an arrogant chuckle. “Of course.”

He went silent again. I rolled my eyes and groaned. “Come on, Sebastian. If you came here to talk to me, then talk. Otherwise you should go.”

He spun around. “You cannot be alone. Sasha could already be in Reno.”

“Why are you helping me?”

“I’m not.”

I raised a brow. “Oh really? Sure seems like you don’t want Sasha to get me.”

He shook his head. "I don't want Nero to get you."

"Well, that's helping me. Why do you care anyway?"

"That doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does matter. I need to know what's going on."

He closed the drape and passed me to get back to the sink. He filled a glass of water and took a sip. "I have the highest level of clearance, but I was fed a lie." His dark eyes met mine. "I am well trained, loyal, and lethal. I'm not a mindless drone, and until I know the truth behind this mission, I will not allow it to continue." He glared at his reflection in the mirror. "I have given my life to Nero, but my allegiance is not blind."

I crossed my arms. "Do they know what's going on with you?"

He set the empty glass on the sink. "That's why they sent Sasha." He glanced my way and for a moment I almost thought there was a trace of hurt in his eyes. "Apparently I'm not worthy of the truth."

I gnawed at my lower lip. He could be an amazing actor, but he didn't have to give me that flash drive. He wasn't going to be a trusted friend, but it seemed, at least for now, he could be an ally.

"Assuming I decide we might be on the same side right now, what are you doing here other than cleaning up?"

He turned my way. "The wolves can't protect you like I can."

"Judging by your appearance right now, I beg to differ." I sat down at the small table. "Looks like Sasha kicked your ass."

His jaw clenched. "They sent Sasha knowing I would not harm her. It's my fault she's in their service. But I can keep you away from her. I know how she thinks. The wolf doesn't seem to understand the simple rule that you cannot be left alone."

"First off, *the wolf* has a name. And secondly, Adam knows better than to order me around."

Sebastian shook his head. "Rest. I'll keep watch."

"You expect me to sleep?"

He nodded. "You should rest while you can."

"I agreed we might be on the same side right now, but I don't trust you any

farther than I can throw you. Why would I sleep while you're here?"

His hands balled into fists and he headed to the door. "You should do as I say because I am the only one who can keep you away from Nero." His dark eyes bored into mine. "They will never stop searching for you, Lana, and they *will* find you. You are too precious to them to give you up."

Sebastian twisted the door handle, but before he could pull it open, the door rammed him back against the wall. Adam stormed into the room and grabbed Sebastian by the shirt, yanking him back up to his feet.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Adam shoved him aside before he could answer and spun around toward me. "You stole my Jeep so you could meet up with *him*?"

He was pointing at the angry assassin in the corner. I opened my mouth to answer, but Sebastian beat me to it.

"She took your vehicle because she needed to get away from you."

Okay, that didn't help.

"You stay away from her." Adam slammed Sebastian against the wall. His voice dropped to a growl. "She's my mate."

"Impossible!" Sebastian struggled free from Adam, shaking his head. "A jaguar and a wolf?" His eyes narrowed as he hissed, "Never."

Adam launched himself at Sebastian, pinning him to the back of the door, and pressed his forearm against Sebastian's throat. The jaguar socked him in the stomach, hard. Adam coughed and threw Sebastian to the ground, but before he could pounce on top of him I put myself between them.

"Enough." Both men were out of breath. I looked at Sebastian first. "I think you should go. Thanks for the information. I appreciate it, whether you think you're helping me or not." Then I turned toward Adam and my heart sank. His face was hard; his dark green eyes were not brimming with love.

Sebastian got up, straightened his clothes and went to the door. "Don't let her out of your sight, wolf, or you will never see her again."

The door slammed behind him leaving me with a lot of explaining to do.

...

The longer I watched Adam walk back and forth across the length of my room, the less guilty I felt. What did I have to feel guilty about? Nothing.

He finally stood still and turned to make eye contact with me. “I want to know why he was here. Why did you take Chaney and pick him up?”

I stood my ground, tipping my chin up. “I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“Did I say you did?”

I shrugged. “Not exactly, but attacking my only Nero informant definitely implied it.”

He sat on the side of the bed and tugged me to sit beside him. He took a slow breath and met my eyes. “I love you, Lana. I trust you, but the wolf inside of me...” He shook his head. “Remember the donut guy who flirted with you? The territorial thing is new to me, and it’s going to take me a while to navigate.” He glanced at the door, then back at me. “I didn’t know why you took the Jeep, and then I saw him in your room...”

I stared down at my hands. I wanted to cling to my righteous anger, but my emotions were too intense and raw. I couldn’t even look him in the eyes.

“When I saw Luke was at your house, and saw his reaction when he caught my scent, I just needed some space. The only person in your family who knows about me hates me. And from what you’ve told me that’s how the whole Pack is going to feel, so why do we even bother?”

He lifted my chin to meet his eyes and a tear rolled down my cheek. “I wish I could bring you home and introduce you to everyone. I do. I wish I could tell you how my father was going to love you and how my Pack brothers and Aren would think I was the luckiest guy in the world.” He paused and kissed away my tear. “Because I am.”

I rolled my eyes. “You didn’t look like it a few minutes ago.”

“Well, I’ve been told a few times that I can be a hothead.” He took my hand. “The thing is, I’m not just one of the Pack. Remember when I told you my father is the Alpha of our Pack?”

I nodded.

Adam gave my hand a squeeze. “I’m his *first-born* son. By Pack law and tradition, I’m next in line to lead the Pack.”

“Oh, God.” I got up and went back to rubbing that huge knot on the back of my neck. “It just keeps getting worse.”

“Since I’m the Alpha’s heir, they all expect my mate to be...well, not a jaguar.” He reached out for my hand and kissed my knuckles. “That’s why we’re leaving Reno together. There’s no place for us with the Pack, and it’ll be a cold day in hell before I let Nero anywhere near you.”

My chest hurt. I couldn’t find the right words.

He waited, his eyes searching mine. Finally he added, “Just give me a little time, okay? I can get Luke ready to take over the stable, and Aren will make a much better Alpha for the Pack than I ever would.”

Hot tears tracked down my cheeks, and I found my voice. “No. You’ll resent me for making you leave. I can’t live with knowing I made you lose them.”

“And I can’t live without you.” He stood up, still holding my hand in his.

I sniffled as our eyes met, and my heart melted. No one had ever looked at me like I was the only person in the world that mattered. I ached inside I loved him so completely.

I loved him enough to leave him.

The full moon was coming in a few days. While Adam was in his wolf form, I would vanish. There was no other way. I didn’t want to go, but I had to.

Adam wrapped his arms around me, our lips fusing together in an urgent, hungry kiss. We made love, giving ourselves to each other until we had nothing left. When we were done, I rested against his chest, listening to his heart beating as he held me tight and kissed my hair. “I love you, Lana.”

I closed my eyes and let his words burn into my heart.

...

We woke to the sounds of Adam’s cell phone ringing. He lurched out of bed and fished it out of his pants pocket.

“Aren?” He paused, frowning. “What? Forget it, just come home.” He

shook his head, and I could see the muscles across his shoulders and chest clench. “You’ve done all you can. Now get to the airport and get home, okay? Yeah.” He nodded. “See you then, bro. Be careful.”

He closed his phone and tossed it back on his pants. “Aren has been tailing the jaguar in San Antonio, but he lost her this morning.”

“Her name is Sasha. Sebastian has some sort of history with her. He was the one who bit her.”

Adam raised a brow. “Judging by how she greeted him in San Antonio, she wasn’t happy about being converted?”

“He didn’t exactly offer me the whole story. I just got bits and pieces. She was a police detective protecting a witness Nero was hired to eliminate.” I rolled over, propping my head up on my elbow. “I got the feeling Sebastian fell for her, but I guess it didn’t work out.”

“And now she’s tangled up with the Nero Organization.”

“Looks that way.”

“So why isn’t Sebastian helping her take you back?”

“I don’t really know.” I brushed my hair back from my face. “He made it clear he’s not really *helping* me, more like he doesn’t want Nero to get me. Something about them lying to him even though he has top security clearance. Until he knows why they’re lying and what their plans are for me, I think we can count on him as an ally.”

Adam frowned. “Sebastian is a killer, and he has his own game going. He’s not taking sides. He’s just looking out for his own interests. Until we know what those are, you shouldn’t be alone with him.”

“Nice try.” I chuckled. “You wouldn’t want me to be alone with him anyway.”

He leaned over and kissed me with a crooked smile. “If I had my way, no other man would ever be in your room but me.”

My heart fluttered a little, but I did my best to remind myself that I needed to move on soon. My heart didn’t give a damn. My heart was happy right here with Adam.

I cleared my throat, trying to shake off the emotion welling inside. With

my luck it would pour out my eyes like a waterfall. “Is Aren coming back now?”

“Yes. He wanted to stay behind and look for her, but it’s too dangerous.”

“Your strength is working together as a Pack.” I could hear Sebastian’s words echo in my head.

Adam nodded. “So the sooner Aren is back, the better we can handle the Sasha situation if she turns up in Reno.” He finished dressing and looked over at me in the bed. “I wish we could just stay here.”

“Me too.”

“Get dressed. I’ll buy you some breakfast.”

“I wasn’t sure you wanted me to come with you.”

“I always want you with me, but we have to be careful.”

He turned on the television while I rolled out of bed and scooted into the bathroom. I peeked back over my shoulder and caught him watching me with hungry eyes. I winked and gave my hips a little shake. He responded with a grin that was decidedly wolfish. I closed the door, leaning back against it with a smile. How could he make me feel warm all over with just a look?

I needed to memorize every single one.

After I decided I was presentable, we made our way into the chaos of the buffet to forage for food. Pancakes, waffles, oatmeal, fruit, eggs, bacon—I had it all and lots of it. Adam laughed and kept right up with me.

“I’ve never dated anyone who could eat as much as I do.”

I kicked his foot under the table. “Are you saying I eat too much?”

“I’m saying I don’t have to pretend to eat normal portions with you.” He grinned and lowered his voice. “I can be myself.”

Then he growled, and his hand slid up my leg. My entire body responded, my breath catching in my throat. I snatched his hand to keep him from getting us both in trouble and leaned in close to him to whisper in his ear. “I love you...wolf and all.”

I nipped his earlobe just enough to get his attention and sat back, gratified to see him shift in his seat a little. Sexual prowess wasn’t something I was very confident about, but being with Adam made me feel empowered. I knew

he wanted me. There were no games or power plays.

His phone buzzed on the table then, and we both flinched. Aren's name flashed on the screen. After getting his flight information—just a quick connection in Las Vegas and then he'd be back in Reno—we finished up and made our way through the casino to the parking structure.

“Do you think Aren could ever warm up to me?” I asked softly.

“It's not that he doesn't like you. He hardly knows you.”

“Is he such a racist that he can't see me as a human being?”

Adam groaned. “No, it's not that.” He paused and shrugged. “Okay, maybe that's got a little to do with it. It's more that he's worried about me. After his run-in with Sasha, I think he finally believes you didn't plot to kill Gabe with Sebastian. But he's not ready to make you his sister yet either.”

“The feeling's mutual, believe me. With brothers like him, I wouldn't need to worry about Nero anymore.”

“He's not a bad guy, Lana. I've just never kept a secret from my brother, so finding out about you and also finding out you're a jaguar threw him. He's pissed at me and worried. That's a dangerous combo with my brother.”

We got back in the Jeep and he frowned when his knees jammed up into the dashboard. He looked over at me and laughed. “No one has ever adjusted this seat before.”

“I couldn't reach the pedals.”

He shoved the seat back and leaned over to kiss my cheek. “Thanks for taking good care of Chaney.”

I tried not to blush. “Sorry I stole him.”

“Sorry I made you feel like I wasn't proud to have you in my life.”

...

We got to the airport before five p.m. With the top off the Jeep, Adam assured me my scent wouldn't linger, and as long as I didn't touch Aren it wouldn't stick to him either. I couldn't see us hugging at the airport so I figured we were safe. The sky was just starting to turn orange. Aren's plane

wasn't due in for over an hour, but Adam kept checking his watch.

"What's wrong?"

He pulled out his cell phone. "Aren was supposed to call me when he got to Vegas. I should've heard from him by now." He punched the number for his brother, but quickly hung up. "It went straight to voice mail."

"His plane must've been delayed. It happens all the time."

"Yeah." He looked like he was trying to convince himself. "You're probably right."

We headed into the airport to get drinks while we waited to hear from Aren. He practically jumped on his cell phone when it finally buzzed.

"Aren, what took so long?"

The voice coming from Adam's phone was definitely not Aren's. He tilted the phone to save his ear from the loud female voice, and I leaned in closer.

"If you want to see your brother alive, bring your girlfriend to Las Vegas by tomorrow night."

Adam's knuckles were white he was gripping his cell so tight. "Let me talk to my brother."

"I'm afraid that's not possible."

"How do I know you didn't just steal his cell phone?" A male moan came through the phone. Adam raked his free hand back through his hair. "What'd you do to him?"

"In case you didn't notice, your brother is a little bigger than me, but it was nothing a Taser couldn't handle. Meet me tomorrow night at the Stratosphere Hotel on the strip. Seven o'clock. Bring your girlfriend and no one else, or I kill your brother."

The line went dead. Adam slammed his phone on the table and shook his head. "Goddammit."

I didn't know what to say. This was all my fault. If I had never come to Reno, none of this would have touched Adam and his Pack. Gabe would be alive, and Aren wouldn't be a hostage. My chest constricted, weighed down with guilt. I needed to make this right somehow.

Adam looked over at me and shook his head. "I don't know what to do."

I swallowed the lump in my throat. "You need to tell the Pack and go rescue your brother."

"She'll kill him if I show up without you, but there's no way in hell I'm bringing you to her." He shook his head. "Aren is the plotter, not me."

I didn't have any experience with outsmarting trained assassins either.

Wait a minute. I took Adam's hand. "You're going to hate this plan, but just hear me out. We need Sebastian."

"What?" Adam jerked his hand free of mine and got up from his chair. "No. No way, Lana. He'd kill me sooner than he'd help me. No way."

"He won't help you, but whatever his reasons are, he also doesn't want Nero to get their hands on me. If we tell him we're going to Vegas to meet Sasha he won't be able to resist following."

"I don't like it."

I could almost see the wheels turning in his head, playing out every scenario. My heart swelled. And somehow I realized I loved him even more every day.

None of the options we had were good. I watched him thinking, doing his best to keep a cool head. Giving up was never going to be the answer for Adam. His Pack had nothing to worry about in their future Alpha.

Finally, he turned to look at me. "If we do this, you have to remember that Sebastian is not our friend or even our ally. Until we know why he wants to keep you away from Nero, we can't assume he's completely in our corner. Understand?"

I nodded. "The next problem will be finding him."

Adam looked around the airport. "I'm guessing he's not far away. If I walk away, he's bound to show up."

"Probably. He seems to think I can never be left alone."

Adam leaned down to give me a kiss and whispered, "I'll stay where I can see you. Once he gets here, keep him here."

"Be careful." He gave me a nod and turned away.

Adam walked out of the airport bar and dramatically pulled out the Jeep keys from the pocket of his jeans as he headed toward the door. I made a

point of sipping my iced tea and watching his backside in his faded Levis.

He blended into the crowd outside the airport and I lost sight of him. After a refill of tea, I caught a familiar scent. When I looked up, a tall, dark-haired, olive-skinned man made his way through the crowd, his eyes locked on mine. Sebastian sat across from me without an invitation.

“How can you waste your time with that inept wolf? I thought we understood you cannot be left unguarded at any time.”

I raised a brow. “Hello, Sebastian.”

“I have no time for pleasantries. We need to leave this place. Now.”

Adam walked up behind him and pulled up a chair, spinning it around so he could straddle the back. “Not so fast, my feline friend.”

Sebastian shifted, raising his chin slightly. “We are most definitely not friends, and you will never be able to keep her safe. A wolf does not deserve such a treasure.”

Adam took my hand. “You’re right, I don’t deserve Lana, but I *will* keep her safe.”

“So why did I find her alone, again?”

“Because we were looking for you,” I interrupted before I gagged on all the testosterone. “We figured the quickest way to flush you out was for Adam to leave me alone.” Sebastian snorted, but I went on before he could interject some smarmy, elitist comment. “We’re going to Las Vegas to meet with Sasha.”

Sebastian’s eyes widened. “You’re insane.”

“She has Adam’s brother.”

“He is expendable. You should go get a head start while she waits for you to arrive. This is your chance to disappear. I suggest you take it.”

“Are you nuts?” My brow furrowed. “He’s in danger because of me. I can’t just turn my back on him.”

Sebastian sighed and shook his head. “Then you will walk right into her trap. Sasha negotiated many hostage situations before she was transformed. She knows you will come to her. She will still kill the wolf’s brother, and she will also deliver you to the Nero Organization.”

“Not if you help us.”

He laughed. Not a good sign. Adam gripped my hand tighter, and I shot him a look. This was not the time to beat up our only hope of backup.

I leaned in closer to Sebastian and whispered, “We could just bring in a gun and shoot her before she knows we’re there.”

His laughter stopped instantly, and I could almost see his hackles rise. Apparently I hit the right nerve. What was it with him and that chick? I’d heard of love-hate relationships before, but this seemed twisted.

“If I did follow you, have you thought of a plan?”

“It’s obvious you don’t want Sasha killed,” Adam piped up. “Would she kill you?”

“That I do not know.” He shrugged. “She could have killed me in San Antonio, but she never drew her weapon. However, the next time we meet could have a different outcome.”

Adam nodded slowly. “Okay, so that’s an unknown, but what if you just shadow the exchange. Once we get Aren you can surprise Sasha and keep her busy so Lana can get away.”

Sebastian was quiet for a moment, then his gaze swept from me to Adam. “Going after your brother is noble, but this is a suicide mission. Sasha is an assassin with law enforcement weapons training. She will be anticipating a trap. Any plan that we make, she will counter.”

“Look, the only sure thing is that Aren will die if we don’t go,” I said as I stood up. “So I’m going with or without you two. I won’t have his blood on my hands.”

Adam got up beside me. “I’m going with you.”

Sebastian rolled his eyes and got up from his chair. “I suppose I will have to follow.” He lowered his voice and added, “There is one more thing we can count on. Sasha will not kill Lana. Lana is too precious to Nero. She needs her alive. Keep that in mind.”

He turned and walked out without another word. I looked up at Adam. “I still don’t know whose side he’s on, but that was a good tip.”

“Don’t get too excited. Just because she won’t kill you, doesn’t mean she

won't hurt you."

The truth behind Adam's words sank into me along with an icy dagger of fear. Tomorrow night the man I love could die and I could be abducted. My hands started shaking.

Adam pulled me into his arms and kissed my hair. "I won't let anything happen to you, Lana."

I wrapped my arms around him. "Don't let anything happen to you. I couldn't stand it."

He pulled back and took my hand. "It'll take more than a cat to bring me down."

I watched the light sparkle on the silver bullet he wore around his neck and sighed. A cat with a gun could do it.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

ADAM

I left Lana back at her hotel alone. Knowing Sasha was in Las Vegas meant we could be a little less cautious. Plus, even though it pissed me off royally, I knew Sebastian was still lurking. He'd intervene if anyone threatened my mate.

I pulled into my driveway and frowned when I saw my father's car parked in the driveway. I got out and jogged inside.

"Malcolm?"

He came out of the kitchen with an apple. "There you are. You and your brother have been scarce this week. I wanted to be sure everything was all right."

"Aren had some business in Vegas." Lying to my father sucked, but I couldn't have the whole Pack running to Vegas now. "I'm actually going down to meet him there tomorrow."

"Perfect." He took a bite of the fruit. "I have a free day. I'll go with you."

I didn't know how Malcolm knew something was up, but he did. My heart started pounding and all I could do was try to keep it from showing.

My father could catch the scent of fear in a second. If he figured out Aren was in trouble he'd want to bring in the Pack and my brother would be as good as dead.

"That's not necessary. It's nothing major."

My father stepped closer, his eyes searching my own. I fought to maintain the eye contact. He finally shook his head and took another bite of the apple.

"It's not like you to keep secrets from the Pack, Adam."

I lowered my gaze and shrugged. “No secrets. Just working on a few things.”

“Does this have anything to do with hunting the jaguar who murdered Gabe?”

How did he sense these things? Could I ever be that good at being Alpha? Inwardly I begged him to drop it.

“I think we’re getting closer.”

“I caught the scent of cats on you.” He took one last bite of the apple and inspected the core. “I’ve been calling Aren, but his phone goes right to voice mail. It’s not like him.”

“I know, but we’ve got this handled. Really.”

He came closer and draped his arm around my shoulders. “I trust you and your brother, but something else is going on here. You know our Pack is family, and family is everything. Whatever is happening, we’ll understand, and we’ll come together to help you.”

If only that were true. Even if I told him about Lana and he believed she hadn’t attacked the Pack, Sebastian came into our territory because of her. And the pack would demand his death when they found out he killed Gabe. A week ago I would have too, but now I wasn’t so sure. He was a wildcard. If he really did help us tonight then I couldn’t turn him over to the Pack for justice.

“Look, if we get in too deep we’ll definitely call you for backup, okay?”

“It’s not just the jaguar I’m talking about.” His gaze landed squarely on my face.

“What?”

My Alpha raised a brow and tossed the apple core into the trash. “Luke tells me you haven’t been sleeping here in over a week.”

“Luke has a big mouth.”

Malcolm opened his hands, his all-knowing eyes were difficult to avoid. “Don’t blame the boy. You know how persuasive I can be.”

“I haven’t been around much.”

“Is there a woman behind your absence?”

“Jesus, I don’t have time for this.” It was killing me not to tell him about Lana.

“We don’t have time for you to keep playing the field, Adam. I thought you understood.”

I shook my head. “I have enough on my mind without the Pack-needs-babies talk.”

He took a step back. He looked hurt, but there wasn’t anything I could do about it right now. I promised myself I’d make it up to him later.

“Tell Aren to call me,” he said as he walked out of the house. He stopped at the door and turned back with his all-knowing stare. “I’m ready to listen whenever you’re ready to talk to me.”

...

Lana got our tickets to Vegas, but the next flight wasn’t for another four hours. Dammit. It was a good eight-hour drive to Vegas, so jumping in the Jeep wasn’t going to help either. My hands were tied, and I was stuck waiting. Waiting. I paced my living room floor, wishing I had something to take my frustrations out on.

“I’m going to go batshit crazy.” I grumbled and went out the back door to the barn. I needed to get a grip.

I walked through the barn aisle, and Bruce shook his head as I reached for his halter. “I missed you too, buddy.”

After a quick grooming, I saddled him up and grabbed his bridle off the hook. Bruce was eager to take the bit, and I easily slid the bridle over his ears, giving his neck an extra scratch as I led him out of the barn. He waited for me to get my foot in the stirrup and then started for the ring as soon as my butt hit the saddle. “Impatient today, too?”

He shook his head and we hit the arena. Every gait felt smooth. We were so closely in sync that I could cue each gait with a minor shifting of my weight. The wind blew against my face, lifting his mane so it brushed against my hands where I held the reins.

So simple. Horse and rider.

Why couldn't life be like that?

I took a deep breath and let Bruce have more rein. He didn't increase his speed at first, waiting for my command. I grinned and leaned forward closer to his neck. "Go for it, big guy."

His body lunged forward, his hooves pounding the earth, faster and faster until the scenery around the arena blurred. I lost track of how many laps we did like that before I settled back into the saddle. Bruce's gait slowed gradually until his gallop was a leisurely lope. The sound of his hooves beat out a perfect three pattern. And the calm that settled over me was intoxicating. I eased back on the reins, and his gait slowed to a jog and finally he just walked. I loosened the reins more, letting his head drop down as he cooled his muscles. When we got back to the barn, I dropped to the ground and found Luke waiting for me.

"Want me to rinse him off for you?"

Foam had accumulated where the reins rubbed against Bruce's neck, and sweat dripped from his flanks. I gave his face a gentle rub. "Thanks, buddy. That was just what I needed."

I handed the reins to Luke. "That'd be great. Thanks." I gave him a small smile. It wasn't the boy's fault he was worried.

He led the horse back to the wash rack and unbridled him. I loosened the cinch and removed the saddle. Bruce gave a good full-body shake and pawed the ground, anxious for a reward.

"I'm going to Vegas to meet up with Aren, so you'll be in charge again," I said as I gave Bruce a handful of grain from the treat bucket.

"All right," Luke replied.

I rested the saddle back on its rack and turned the saddle blanket upside down to dry out. When I came out of the tack room, Luke had washed off Bruce and was feeding him a carrot.

"I saw Malcolm when I got back today."

Luke's shoulders rose up a bit, and he didn't turn around to face me when he spoke. "He's been looking for you and Aren."

“Yeah, that’s what he said. Did you mention the woman I brought home with me the other night?”

Luke turned around. “I’m sorry. He kept asking. You know how he is.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Nothing really.” He shrugged. “I didn’t get to see her before she took off in the Jeep. I told him you hadn’t been at the ranch much and that you had a lady with you the last time you came by.”

“That’s all you said?”

Luke thought about it and then nodded. “Yeah, that’s all I knew.” He met my eyes and straightened up a bit. “That was all I knew for sure, at least.” Maybe he assumed the jaguar scent he caught was from me tracking Gabe’s killer. Either way, Malcolm didn’t know. That was all that mattered. “Sorry if I said something I shouldn’t have.”

I shook my head. “You didn’t, Luke. I just wanted to know what you told him.”

“Is she someone special?”

I smiled and nodded. “Yeah. She’s very special.”

“When do we get to meet her?”

I felt my smile fade away. “Hopefully soon,” I lied.

Keeping the truth from the people I care about sucked—fucking sucked. I gave Bruce one last scratch and wondered how I was going to be able to walk away from my life.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

LANA

The lights on the Las Vegas strip were flashing, dancing, enticing everyone to forget their worries and come play. It was a stark contrast to how I felt. Dwarfed by all the massive towers of hotel rooms and suites, all I could think about was that somewhere in these crowds, Aren was injured and being held against his will.

Because of me.

Adam reached over and took my hand as we drove in our rental car. “You’ve been awfully quiet over there.”

“I’m not the only one.”

He nodded, moving ahead a few feet through the traffic light. “Yeah, I just want to get Aren back and move on with our life.”

I nodded and looked out my window, blinking my eyes to keep the tears back. There wasn’t going to be any “our life.” Adam hadn’t spoken much when he came back to pick me up. His dad had been at the ranch, and Luke too. But beyond that he didn’t offer anything else.

I guess we all had our secrets.

While I was back at the hotel, I double-checked the date of the full moon and then bought my plane tickets with my frequent flier miles. No one would be able to trace the purchase through a credit card. Adam wouldn’t be able to find me. My heart clenched. Under the full moon, he’d run with his Pack and I’d be flying out on a red-eye to Chicago. It’d be easier to disappear in a big city, and I’d have two weeks before the new moon to figure out where I could lay low while I shifted. It was getting easier to accept now, that I really did

turn into a large, carnivorous panther on moonless nights. Strange.

When Adam pulled into the back lot of the hotel I laughed. “This is it? We passed all those gorgeous new resort hotels, and our big showdown is going to be here?”

Adam was looking up at the top of the tower. The lit up signboard read, RIDE AT THE TOP OF THE WORLD. He glanced over at me and chuckled. “Maybe Sasha likes wild rides?”

It felt good to smile. It sort of lightened the lead weight on my shoulders for a moment. Adam called Aren’s phone and let Sasha know we were here. After negotiating a meeting place, we walked into the smoky chaos of lights and jackpot bells.

The sea of people around us parted when we walked through, like Adam was an immovable object. Maybe he was. I did my best to keep up with him, though given Adam was on full alert, weaving through the crowd with purpose. For a moment I tried to use my jaguar senses, but the odor of smoke and alcohol covered any other scent I might’ve picked up, and the flashing lights were wreaking havoc on my sensitive night vision. Basically I was lowered to my human senses and instincts. Right now my only instinct was to run away.

Adam stopped at a penny slot machine near a hallway with bathrooms, and I walked right into his back. He didn’t even budge.

“Sorry.”

He didn’t respond, just turned slowly, scanning the room, presumably for his brother. I was looking too, but instead of Aren, I noticed Sebastian lurking in a crowd at the roulette table. His eyes met mine and then he turned away. I wasn’t sure what to think, but I told myself if he wanted to screw up this rescue he would’ve done it already.

Adam pulled out his cell phone. “Yeah.” He paused. “We’re at the rendezvous point. Where is my brother?”

He frowned and watched as a photo loaded onto his phone. Aren’s angry, gagged face was staring back at us. Adam’s hand tightened on the phone. “We’ll be right there.”

He took my hand and pulled me through the throngs of people.

“Where are we going?”

“To the parking structure.”

“I thought you told her it had to be in a public place.”

“That was before she told me I had fifteen minutes until she put a bullet in my brother’s head and then came after you.”

My mouth went dry and my palms became slick and clammy. This was all spiraling out of control. This wasn’t the plan. My brain was spinning.

When we got to the elevator of the parking structure Adam pushed the button over and over.

“Which floor?” I asked.

“Top floor.”

“There won’t be any cars up there.”

“Probably not. That’s probably what she’s counting on.”

I jerked my hand out of his. “Yeah, so she can kill you both and then take me back to Nero. We can’t do this, Adam.”

He pivoted toward me. “What other choice do I have Lana? I can’t let her kill Aren.”

“And how are you going to stop her?”

“I’ll tackle her or something.”

“She’ll kill you.”

Right on cue, Sebastian stalked up behind us. “You are not meeting her alone, wolf.”

Then I had an idea. And thankfully Sebastian had a gun.

...

“I don’t like this,” Adam grumbled.

“We have no other choice,” I replied.

Sebastian wisely remained silent as the elevator slowly crept up the floors of the parking structure. When the bell rang and the double doors finally opened, Adam collapsed onto the floor of the elevator and Sebastian pushed

me forward with the gun pressed to my temple.

“Sebastian?” Sasha snapped, glancing past us at the elevator.

Hopefully Adam looked very unconscious.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

“Finishing my mission.”

She shook her head. “Your mission was finished when you failed to bring back the girl. Now give her to me.”

“If you do not leave this rooftop now, I will kill her.”

Sasha’s eyes widened. “You wouldn’t.”

He cocked the gun, and my heart pounded. This wasn’t part of my plan. A bead of sweat rolled down my forehead.

“Killing is what I’m best at, isn’t that what you told me?” He tipped his head toward the elevator. “Now go.”

“If you kill her Nero will hunt you down and skin you alive.”

“Perhaps, but they will not have this one to experiment on, and it will be your fault she’s dead.” Sebastian nodded toward Aren. “Finish him and go.”

Aren’s eyes widened and he struggled, screaming behind the gag. He was bound at the wrists and ankles with wire that cut through his skin.

I couldn’t let them kill him.

Sasha turned and raised her gun toward Aren, and I reached forward and slammed my elbow back into Sebastian’s ribcage with all the force I could. He let go of me, and I stumbled forward toward Aren, praying that Sebastian was right about Sasha not killing me. Gunfire deafened my ears a moment before I rammed my shoulder into Sasha’s back. We hit the concrete so hard that I saw stars, but not before I smelled blood. My heart sank when I looked over at Aren. Blood pooled on the pavement, the puddle growing. Adam was at his side in a flash.

“Is he...” I couldn’t finish my question.

Sebastian collected Sasha’s pistol and tucked it into the back of his pants.

Adam looked back at me. “It hit his ankle.”

“His ankle?” Sebastian raised a brow at Sasha. “An extremity shot?” He glanced at Aren, then back to Sasha, frowning. “You spared him...”

“She threw off my aim.” Sasha ducked past him and into her car.

Sebastian side-stepped the car as Sasha gunned the engine. Her tires squealed, echoing through the parking structure, but I kept my eyes on Aren. Adam yanked the gag free, and relief flooded me when I heard Aren grunt. “Shit, that fucking hurts.”

“Hold still so I can get these wires off.” Adam winced, and I noticed bone mixed with the blood. I glanced away, fighting to keep myself from throwing up. Adam’s voice stayed even despite the gore. “I know it’s a risk, but we might need to get you to a hospital.”

“No.” Aren gasped and winced as Adam manipulated his legs to pull the rest of the wire free. “Just take me home. Jason can fix me.”

Adam freed his brother’s hands and then took a closer look at his ankle. “Looks like the bullet went straight through, but the bone is probably shattered, bro.” He looked up at Aren. “Even if we stop the bleeding, you might need surgery.”

He shook his stubborn head. “Take me home.”

“All right. But if you pass out on me, your ass is in the hospital.”

“Deal.” Aren bit back a groan as he sat up and pulled in his good leg.

I got to my feet to help him up when I noticed we were down one man. “Where’d Sebastian go?”

“Who cares.” Adam grunted helping his injured twin to his feet. “He was going to let her shoot my brother. He might’ve shot you if you hadn’t attacked him first.”

“Maybe.” But I didn’t think so. I thought Sebastian had actually helped us, but I kept it to myself. I didn’t feel up to a fight with Adam and his brother. Adam’s brother was still alive. That was all that mattered.

I went to the other side of Aren and looked up into eyes that were an identical match to those of the man I loved. This man wasn’t him. This man didn’t trust me. I swallowed down the hurt and wrapped my arm around his waist.

“Let me help you.”

He didn’t rest his other arm around my shoulders. “I can make it.”

“She just saved your life, Aren. Stop being an asshole,” Adam growled.

Grudgingly, Aren rested his arm around my shoulders and hobbled between the two of us to the elevator. Adam had us wait in the elevator while he scanned the area for any sign of Sasha. We could hear police sirens in the distance. Someone must’ve heard the gunshot. Surely Sasha and Sebastian were long gone by now.

Adam came back in and helped me get Aren over to the car. Once we had him inside I felt like I could breathe again. We’d be back in Reno and with any luck Aren’s ankle could get patched up before morning.

...

Adam and Aren both slept on the plane ride, but I was too keyed up to rest. Sasha was still out there. She wouldn’t give up looking for me. Nero wouldn’t let her. And what about Sebastian? Would he have killed me rather than let Nero have me? And why was he so certain now that I shouldn’t go to the Organization? The first time we met, he was ready to abduct me for them. What changed? Maybe the breeding experiment wasn’t the only information he’d found while nosing around the Nero Organization’s computer files.

I glanced down at Aren’s ankle, relieved to see there wasn’t any blood soaking through the bandages we got on our way to the airport. I was also relieved that werewolves have a high tolerance for pain. Aren winced a couple of times, but other than that, he kept his agony quiet. He fell asleep shortly after the plane took off, too. The rest would do him good.

Then he shifted in his seat and muttered something that sounded suspiciously like, “Sasha.”

...

We pulled into Adam’s house in the middle of the night, and I was left in the awkward position of figuring out how to help. Or how to stay out of the way. I tried to keep my distance from Aren who seemed even grouchier than usual, if that was possible. I cut him some slack since I knew his ankle had to be

killing him.

“Okay. Jason is on his way over,” Adam said. “And he’ll be sure Malcolm doesn’t know anything yet.”

Aren nodded, then they both turned toward me.

“What? Should I go hide with the horses in the barn?”

Adam walked over and took my hand. Aren frowned and turned his head to look out the window.

“Let’s go outside,” Adam whispered.

He walked with me in the moonlight. It was so close to the full moon that we could see everything without a flashlight, even without superhuman eyesight. When we got to the barn, Adam stopped to look at me.

“Aren has amazing hearing, and I don’t want him to know we’re leaving. Especially not right now while he’s injured.” He glanced up at the house and then met my eyes again. “I guess we shouldn’t have checked you out of the hotel yet. I thought we’d get Aren home and take off, but with him injured, I can’t leave yet. Not now.”

Not ever, I thought to myself.

“I’ll just visit with the horses,” I offered. “Will that mask my scent enough?”

“Yeah, it should.” He sighed and looked up at the moon shaking his head. “I know this is really crappy, Lana. I hate that it has to be this way.” Adam met my eyes again. “I want you in my arms, but I can’t risk Jason and my father catching your scent on my clothes.” A muscle in his cheek tightened. “You deserve better than this. You saved my brother’s life.”

My eyes welled with tears and the urge to kiss him tormented me. “Not your fault I’m a jaguar.” I blinked back the tears and managed a smile. “Just so you know, I would kiss you right out of your boots if I could.”

The corner of his mouth tilted up into a crooked smile that melted my heart. “I’m going to hold you to that later.” His gaze slid over my entire body. “I’m going to do more than kiss you.”

I wet my lips. “Promise?”

When we heard a car drive up Adam groaned. “I’ll be back as soon as I

can.”

“I’ll be here.”

He turned and jogged back up to the house. I walked farther into the barn, chatting with the horses that put their heads over their stall doors to visit. I could see why Adam loved it here. It was peaceful and simple.

Too bad I couldn’t stay.

Chapter Thirty

ADAM

I couldn't wait to have Lana back in my arms. After nearly two hours of assisting Jason with Aren's ankle, I was emotionally and physically drained. The bone had fragmented into several different pieces, and he should've had surgery, but Jason did the best he could. It wasn't life-threatening. Not worth the risk of taking him to a hospital.

Before tonight, I felt like the Pack would be fine without me. When it came time, Aren would ascend to the Alpha. But now there were questions I couldn't answer. What if something happened to Malcolm before Aren's ankle healed? What if his ankle was never right again? Would someone else in the Pack challenge him for the Alpha position? It would be within their rights. He might not be able to win if they did, especially not now.

I ground my teeth together and walked faster toward the horses. Toward Lana.

"Is everything okay?"

Without hesitation, I pulled her into my arms, holding her tight as I kissed her hair.

"It will be, but Aren's ankle may never be the same." I loosened my grip enough to look down into her eyes. "Jason did the best he could. I guess we'll know in a few weeks when he takes the cast off." I paused and corrected myself. "I mean, *they'll* know."

"You can't leave this place, Adam. They need you and you need them."

"I don't need anyone who can't treat you like part of the family."

She kissed my chest. "Jaguars haven't been very good to your family."

“You’re more than a jaguar. You’re my mate. You saved my brother tonight. And even after you did, he still won’t speak to you. I can’t stay here and subject you to that.” I shook my head. “I’d end up hating every one of them for not accepting you. It’s better to leave before that happens.”

She looked up at the moon. “Isn’t the moon full tomorrow night?”

I nodded.

“So you should stay and run with the Pack.”

I shook my head. “We’ve gotta get going. It’s only a matter of time until Sasha is back on our tail. Sebastian may be helping her for all we know.”

“Don’t break their hearts on a full moon. You should run with them.”

I stared into her dark eyes, unaware until this moment that I could love anyone so much. I brought my hand up to cup her cheek, my thumb brushing over her soft skin. “How did I get so lucky? I have the most beautiful, sexiest, and bravest mate a wolf could ever hope for.”

She smiled and nuzzled into my palm. “Too bad I’m the wrong species.”

I bent to kiss her and whispered, “There is nothing wrong with you, Lana. Nothing.”

A tear rolled down her cheek as she pulled me closer. My hand slid back into her hair, holding her close as the kiss deepened. God, I could not get close enough to her.

Our tongues tangled, and I growled into the kiss when I felt her hands glide up my stomach and across my chest. Every muscle in my body reacted to her touch. She set me on fire, until my jeans were way too tight and confining. When her hand wandered down, stroking my rock-hard erection through my pants, I broke the kiss. I couldn’t take much more, or I was going to take her right there in the barn aisle.

“Aren’s in the house resting.”

“I need you,” she whispered, nibbling at my neck. “Now.”

Just when I thought I couldn’t get harder, I felt myself pulsing, aching for attention. My lips fused to hers as I walked her backward into the tack room. The rich scent of clean leather surrounded us as I backed her up to the saddle rack. Her nails scratched my skin while she struggled to yank my shirt off.

Knowing that she wanted me as desperately as I wanted her was making me crazy. Instead of pulling away to lift her T-shirt over her head, I grabbed the neckline and tore it down the middle. I'd buy her another shirt later. I needed her bare skin against mine.

I kissed down her neck as I unhooked the front clasp of her bra. Feeling the weight of her perfect breasts in my hands made me growl against her skin. When her back arched toward me, offering her body to me, I bent to take her breast into my mouth. Her skin was so soft, with a faint salty taste, and the sound of her gasping my name made me want to take her even higher. I wanted her to shiver with desire when she looked at me later. I wanted to see her glow and know it was because of me.

I licked each nipple slowly, watching her mouth while her fingers clenched my hair. She ran her hands down my back and around my waist to unbutton my jeans. I groaned with hunger when I felt her slender fingers slip inside to stroke me. I couldn't take any more teasing. I needed to be inside of her.

I opened her jeans and pushed them down her hips. I knew she was wet and ready for me. Her lace panties were next. Kissing her hard, over and over, I lifted her onto the side of a saddle.

She broke the kiss with a gasp. "It's cold."

I grinned, hooking her leg over the saddle horn so she was totally open to me while I freed myself from my jeans. "Want to stop?"

Her eyes sparkled as she watched me move closer. She wet her lips and shook her head. "Never."

I kissed her again, humming into her lips as I brushed against her. Slowly I rocked my hips, rubbing, teasing, enjoying the way she moaned and clutched at my ass trying to force me into her. When I couldn't wait any longer, I drove my hips forward, moaning as I felt her surround me inch by inch.

I stared into her eyes, watching every emotion play across her face as I sank deeper inside her. The cool evening breeze teased our skin, and the moonlight filtered through the open door. I worked into her, harder, unable to take my eyes off of her perfect body as she tipped her head back.

"You are so sexy, Lana."

She opened her eyes, looked up at me, and hooked one leg around my waist, grinding her hips into my thrusts. I could feel the pressure building, but I wasn't ready for this to be over. Not yet.

I slid one hand between us, teasing her until I found the right spot. Her entire body shuddered as she gasped, "Faster!"

Her hands kneaded my buttocks as I slammed into her hard, my fingers working faster until I thought I was going to ignite. "Let go for me," I growled. "You're mine."

And she was. In that moment we were one. Every muscle in my body contracted as I felt her orgasm seize around me. I peaked with her, rocking until I couldn't move anymore. I held her close, fighting to catch my breath. I felt her lips kiss the left side of my chest, right over my heart.

"I love you, Adam," she whispered. "Forever."

I closed my eyes and kissed her hair. "I love you too, Lana. Always."

...

I watched Lana sleeping in my bed and my heart felt too big for my chest. I'd carried her up from the barn after we made love and dozed for a couple hours. Her black hair was strewn across the white pillowcase, and her face looked peaceful. For a second I caught myself wishing we could just be normal people. No wolves, no jaguars. Just people. We could get married and have a family. There would be Little League, horseshows, and Lana could write the novels she dreamed about.

But it wasn't so simple. I was going to have to wake her up before the sunrise and rush her out like an unwanted stepchild. I'd open all the windows and put new sheets on the bed so Luke wouldn't catch her scent in my house. It wasn't right or fair. Yet, it wouldn't matter after today. Tonight was the full moon, and in the morning, we'd pack up and hit the road. That wouldn't be simple either. The Nero Organization wasn't going to give up searching for Lana. I'd have to be on alert all the time.

I went in the kitchen and poured a can of Dr. Pepper over a tall glass of ice

while I tried to push the thoughts from my head. I didn't have any control over those things so why worry about them, right?

Except I did, I realized.

I took a swallow of caffeine and stared out the darkened kitchen window. This was usually the time I'd sneak out of bed and try to figure out how to get rid of the bimbo I'd brought home. That seemed like ages ago now.

I walked around the corner to the bedroom. Leaning against the doorframe with my glass, I smiled. Lana was still sound asleep in my bed. It made me want to snuggle up with her and doze off, and at the same time I wanted to pull her in my arms and kiss her awake and make love again until the sun broke over the horizon. Just the thought had my blood pumping.

What a way to start the day.

"Is she still here?"

Holy crap! I almost doused myself with Dr. Pepper. I spun around to see Aren hobbling into the kitchen. In my blissful afterglow, I'd forgotten my brother was still in the house. Guess it was a good choice to pull on a pair of sweatpants earlier.

"Yeah."

"So when are you going to tell the Pack?"

"I'm not."

Aren shot me a look as he leaned on a crutch and bent into the fridge. "You're just going to keep her a secret? They'll find out eventually."

I took another swig of Dr. Pepper. I couldn't tell Aren we were leaving. I knew he'd break and Malcolm would find out. Why did finding my mate drag me further and further away from my family? Love was supposed to enhance your life, not tear it apart.

Aren turned around. "Well?"

"Didn't Jason say you needed to keep your leg elevated?"

"Don't change the subject." Aren popped open a can of Dr. Pepper for himself and took a gulp. "I'm your brother. I've been keeping this secret too. I didn't tell Dad or the Pack."

"Tell me what you think of Lana."

Aren looked confused. “Why? If what I thought mattered, you never would have gone to San Antonio with her, and I never would’ve gotten shot.”

“Low blow.” I shook my head. “No one asked you to come along.”

“You never would’ve let me leave town with a jaguar either.” He stared at me, daring me to deny it.

Instead I shrugged it off. “Probably not. But now you know she wasn’t trying to set me up. She saved your life. None of that makes any difference to you?”

He stopped making eye contact and stared at the soda can. “I just know Gabe would be alive and I wouldn’t have a broken ankle if Lana had never caught your eye.”

I set my glass down on the countertop harder than I meant to. “How can you put all this on her? She didn’t even know what she was the night I met her. She can’t remember when she shifts. Until I told her, she had no idea she was a jaguar.”

“And now she does. That doesn’t make her your mate.”

My hands clenched into fists at my sides. “Lay off, Aren. You’re in no place to give me relationship advice.”

“Just because I haven’t found my mate doesn’t mean that you have. That’s all I’m saying. Can’t you see what she’s doing to you? You’ve been my brother and my closest friend our entire lives, and now in the span of two weeks, she’s already come between us, and if the Pack finds out they’re going to want to know why you think you’re in love with Gabe’s killer.”

I stepped in closer until Aren had to lean back. “Lana did *not* kill Gabe.”

“Then who did?”

“Sebastian.”

Aren’s eyes widened. “The one who came with you to Vegas?” He shoved at my chest, pushing me back so he could hobble by. “I’ll kill him.”

I sighed. “He’s not so easy to kill.”

Aren wheeled on me. “Jesus, Adam! Are you the protector of jaguars now? Have you forgotten who you are?” He shook his head. “Forget it. You do whatever the hell you want. I’ll watch over the Pack and bring Gabe’s killer

to justice. Have fun with your kitty.”

He rounded the corner, and I punched the cabinet so hard that the wood splintered and cracked open. When I turned around Lana was standing in the doorway draped in one of my dress shirts with tears shining on her cheeks.

“Your brother is an asshole,” she whispered. “But he’s right about one thing. I *am* tearing your family apart.” I started to argue, but she held up her hand. “You need me out before Luke gets here, and I need some time. Can I borrow your Jeep?”

Part of me wanted to say no. I wanted to tell her Aren was wrong, she was wrong. But seeing Lana sad, and knowing that loving me was hurting her so deeply, sucked all the fight right out of me.

“When will you be back?”

She shrugged, and her dark doe eyes looked up at me. “Tonight you’re a wolf. I’m guessing I should stay away.”

I ground my teeth together, struggling to find a solution to this mess. “You stay inside. Sasha could already be here looking for you.”

“I know what she looks like now. I can take care of myself.”

I walked past Lana to my room and opened a safe in the back of my closet. We weren’t afraid of banks like we were hospitals, but in case something happened to the Pack, we kept a pretty healthy savings in the safe. I went back to the living room and handed her a bound pack of twenty-dollar bills.

“That’s a thousand dollars. Don’t use your credit cards or an ATM. Sasha worked for the police department. I’m pretty sure she can get your electronic information.” Lana took the money, and I pulled her into my arms, breathing in the scent of her hair.

“I’m sorry this isn’t simple, but we’ll start over, okay?” I pulled back when she didn’t answer and lifted her chin until she met my eyes. “Don’t give up on me.”

She nodded and kissed my lips. Her mouth was soft and inviting. I could feel her love flow through me like a warm summer breeze. It felt real—like it was something I could hold in my hand and never let go. Without a word she went in my room to get dressed. She came out with my keys in hand and the

wad of cash bulging in her pocket.

She stared at me for a long time, and I wished I knew what was going on her head, wished I could make her smile again.

I started toward her, and she rushed into my arms.

“I’ll see you soon,” I whispered, but she didn’t reply. Instead she just kissed me. In fact to call it a kiss was too simple. It was hunger and passion and love and heartbreak all wrapped up into one deep, slow kiss.

When she finally pulled back I wasn’t sure I remembered my own name. Her eyes lingered on mine for a moment. “I really do love you, Adam.”

“I love you, too,” I replied. “See you soon.”

And then she was gone.

Chapter Thirty-One

LANA

I cried the whole way back into the city limits. At least with the roof off of the Jeep the wind dried my tears for me. My hair whipped around my face in a frenzy, and all I wanted was to keep driving. I wanted the hurt to stop a little more with each mile.

I heard every word Aren said when he and Adam had been fighting. And most of the time he was right. Here I was wishing I could have a family like Adam's, and at the same time I was ripping his apart. But it was so hard to make myself leave him, when every part of me wanted to stay.

The sun was still hidden below the horizon, but the faint glow of daylight was starting to seep across the mountains. It would have been beautiful if I weren't such a mess. I pulled off at a rest stop and killed the engine. Gradually the colors bled across the dark sky, painting a masterpiece over me. As the sobs and hiccups calmed, rational thought crept back into my mind. First off, I needed to find a place to stay. I couldn't take Adam's Jeep when I left town, but I also couldn't bring it back to him during the day while the other wolves were around. I'd have to wait until sunset. While the Pack changed, I could leave Chaney and call a cab.

Maybe I'd leave Adam a note, so he wouldn't worry that something more sinister happened to me.

Just the thought of saying goodbye made my eyes well with tears again.

I needed to focus on the future. Sasha was in my future. I needed to stay away from her, and then there was Sebastian. Was he my friend or foe? Hard to say with him. Either way, I couldn't really trust him. But I had to keep

them both away from Adam and the Pack.

I was alone again.

Now that I'd been part of something, an "us," it was tough to go back to being a lone wolf. I smirked at the euphemism. If I were a wolf none of this would be happening.

Focus, Lana.

I took a deep breath and fired up the engine. I'd get a room to hang out in for the day. Eat, try to write, and then I'd take the Jeep back to Adam's, call a cab, and catch my flight to Chicago.

Simple.

I sighed as the sun broke the horizon. Nothing was simple anymore.

Chapter Thirty-Two

ADAM

I watched Luke working Bruce and couldn't help but smile. I'd been so busy with life, I hadn't noticed how much he'd grown. Not just in size, but in manner and attitude. Luke used to be a mouthy teen, but seeing him on Bruce, taking him through his gaits, I realized Luke was turning into a damned fine horse trainer. At least I'd be leaving the stable in good hands. Aren could handle the business end with the feed company and the other owners in the barn. Everything would run smoothly after I was gone.

It stung a little to realize the world would still turn without me here. I'd been raised knowing the mantle of leadership would be mine someday. I would succeed my father as Alpha of the Pack. Giving it up wasn't something I ever saw coming.

Then I saw Lana's dark eyes in my mind, and my heart warmed. She was worth the sacrifice.

Jason drove up to the barn, and I walked over to greet him. We clasped forearms in the traditional Pack greeting. "Thanks for coming by, Jason."

"How's Aren? Is he staying off the leg?"

I chuckled. "This is Aren we're talking about."

"I know." Jason sighed, his smile fading. "I was serious about my instructions. His joint was badly damaged from the gunshot." He paused and lowered his voice. "He may never heal completely."

My chest tightened up. "He'll be all right. We heal fast. You'll see."

"It's not the healing, Adam. I did the best I could, but without a hospital and a new metal joint, I'm afraid he may always have a limp. Even when he

shifts.”

“Are you saying he won’t be able to run with the Pack?”

Jason looked up toward the house and shrugged. “I honestly don’t know. But if he doesn’t rest it, he won’t stand a chance of the joint repairing correctly.”

“Have you told him any of this?”

“Oh, I told him. Did he believe me is the question you should be asking.” Jason’s eyes cut back to meet mine, and he frowned slightly. “Are you all right?”

I shrugged, wishing again for the millionth time that I could tell someone the truth. “Yeah, I’m okay. Rough night last night.”

He nodded. “I didn’t ask last night with everything going on, but... What happened to you two?”

Jason had these light brown eyes that could look right through you. They made most people uncomfortable so he usually wore sunglasses, but he wasn’t wearing any now, and I was left unprotected from his prying stare.

“We were chasing down the jaguar who killed Gabe, and there was some unexpected gun play.”

He frowned. “The jaguar shot Aren?”

“One of them did.” I didn’t realize my slip until it was out already of my mouth.

“There was more than one?” Anger flashed in his eyes. “Have you told Malcolm about this?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I didn’t want to worry him. Aren and I have it under control.”

“This is *not* under control. Not even close.” Jason crossed his arms over his chest, making it obvious he’d been working out lately. “If you don’t tell him, I will. It’s the full moon tonight, Adam. We’ve got to be on alert, especially if the jaguars have guns.”

“I’m not stupid.” He was starting to piss me off. “I’ll tell him.”

“When?”

“Back off, Jason.” I didn’t like being pressured, and it seemed like every

part of my life wanted a piece of me. I didn't need to be threatened by anyone, least of all the wolf in front of me. "I'm not a pup, and I outrank you."

His fists clenched, and my eyes narrowed. Part of me wanted him to take a swing. A good fistfight might help ease all the pent up frustration brewing in my chest. But Jason let his hands drop to his sides.

"We'll be vulnerable tonight if you don't do the right thing, Adam. I don't know what you're hiding, but it can't be worth risking the Pack." He started to walk away and added under his breath, "We already lost Gabe."

I tackled him then. We hit the ground so hard I saw stars for a minute, but a minute was all I had before Jason was wrestling to get on top of me. All the anger, worry, and frustration of the past two weeks exploded into physical form with every hit. He got his hands down on the dirt and pulled his knees in, I punched his stomach as he pushed up from the ground, and he returned fire with his elbow. I felt one of my ribs crunch as I rolled off of him. He started to get to his feet, but I snagged one leg and yanked him back to the ground. Before we could grapple anymore, Luke pulled me back.

"Stop!"

I stepped back, glaring at Jason.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Jason spat.

"Nothing until you started getting in my face with your hotter-than-horseshit attitude."

"My attitude?" Jason pointed at his own chest, and then shook his head. "You know what? Fuck you, Adam. I'm done with this. I'm going to go check on Aren's ankle, and I'm outta here."

I stared at him as he walked up to the house, getting a little satisfaction that he was covered in dirt. Asshole.

When he vanished into the house I turned and found Luke staring right at me. "What?"

"I don't know, but you're acting crazy," he said.

I started to open my mouth to deny it, then closed it again and shook my head. "I have a lot on my mind, and I don't need Jason reminding me that

Gabe's dead. I'll never forget that, and it pisses me off he thinks I might."

"Tonight's the full moon."

"I know." Apparently Luke was eager to change the subject. Suited me just fine.

"Are you going to change with the Pack?"

"Yeah, I am." I nodded and glanced at the barn. "But then I'm probably going to have to leave for a while. I need you to take care of the horses for me."

Luke followed my gaze and nodded. "Sure. When will you be back?"

I stared at the dirt, felt like dirt. "I'm not sure yet. Could be a while though."

His brow furrowed. "What? Why?"

"You saw what happened with Jason. I'm wound too tight right now. I need to figure out how to make things right again."

"Did you break up with the lady I saw the other night?"

I knew I had to lie to him now. When did I get to be such a spineless shit? I sighed and ran my fingers back through my now dusty hair.

"Her name is Lana."

He smiled a little. "Pretty name."

"Yeah." I nodded. "Gorgeous lady, too."

"I didn't really see much of her before she took off. So is she your girlfriend like Teri was?"

I knew I should lie, but it felt so good to finally be telling someone about Lana without having them tell me she's wrong for me. I looked him in the eyes. "She's nothing like Teri. I'm in love with Lana."

Luke's eyes widened before he buried his surprise and rolled his shoulders back. "So when do we get to meet her?"

"I don't know." I hated sinking back into the lying sack of shit, but I didn't know what else to do. I couldn't tell him I wasn't coming back. "I hope soon."

"Are you leaving with her?"

"Yeah, but that's just between us. Aren and Malcolm don't need to know,

okay?”

Luke lowered his eyes. I knew he didn't like it. I was asking too much of him and his loyalty. He'd crack under my father's pressure, but I'd be long gone by then. I reached out and gripped his shoulder.

“Let me be the one to tell them, all right? I don't want them to hear it from someone else.”

He nodded. “I can do that.”

I pulled him in and gave him a firm hug. “Thanks Luke.”

Jason was coming out of the house as I was going in. He didn't make eye contact and started to go around me.

“Hey, Jason?”

He stopped and finally looked at me but he didn't say anything.

“I'm sorry.” Then I added, “I was an asshole.”

He nodded. “A *raging* asshole.”

“I've got a lot on my mind. I shouldn't have taken it out on you.”

“Whatever is going on with you and Aren, we're family, remember? We take care of our own.”

“I know.” I started to smile. “Sorry I confused it with beating the crap out of our own.”

“Hey, you didn't even leave a mark.” Jason started to grin. “I could have taken you if I wanted to.”

I held out my hand, and he reached out to clasp my forearm. “Thanks for taking care of Aren.”

Jason nodded, his hair falling over his eyes. “Tell Malcolm about the jaguars.”

“I will.”

But I would leave out the jaguar who mattered most. The one I was about run away with, leaving the Pack behind for good.

Chapter Thirty-Three

LANA

I drove aimlessly until I finally ran out of tears. Numbness filled the gaping hole, dulling the ache of knowing I was leaving the only man I'd ever really loved. I knew it was for the best in the long run, but that didn't make it hurt any less. I should have been looking for a place to hide. Sasha was still somewhere, searching for me. But it was hard to give a crap about tomorrow when I knew Adam wouldn't be a part of it. My heart hurt so badly it felt like it might burn out of my chest.

I pulled into a coffee shop and borrowed their Wi-Fi connection, checking email, and calculating my PayPal balance. Any mundane task I could dredge up became of utmost importance. I needed to take my mind off of the time clicking away, each minute bringing me closer to leaving. My red-eye flight was due to take off out of Reno at ten p.m. I figured I'd drop off the Jeep with the note at Adam's around eight p.m. and catch a cab to the airport. He'd be running with the rest of the Pack. And when they changed back in the morning, I'd be long gone, fading into the masses of people in Chicago.

A couple weeks ago it would have been a great adventure. Tonight I dreaded it.

I slid a couple of bills out of the wad of cash and bought a hot chocolate, a chocolate truffle, and a chocolate chip cookie. Apparently I needed comfort food and lots of it. I pulled up my next article deadline, and then opened Word and stared at the blank document. The cursor blinked, taunting me to write something, anything. I started my letter three separate times, but it was all crap. I sighed and closed my laptop. I couldn't write while my heart was

twisting in a wringer and Nero had a nasty jaguar assassin on my tail.

I slipped my laptop back in the bag and wandered around until I found a blank greeting card with a picture of the sun sparkling on Lake Tahoe. Seeing the peaceful lake reminded me of the day Adam took me there. Before we found Gabe and everything started to unravel around us. That afternoon when he taught me to use my cat senses and patiently waited for me to grasp what I really was inside.

I paid for the card and wrote a note inside for Adam. No matter what I said he wouldn't be happy, but someday I hoped he'd understand.

Tucking the card in my bag, I went back out to the Jeep and started out of the parking lot when I caught Sebastian's scent. I pulled into another parking place and got out, scanning the area for the elusive tracker. If he didn't want me to see him, I was pretty sure I wouldn't, but I looked anyway.

"Sebastian?" I called, turning around slowly. "I know you're here."

Finally I caught movement out of the corner of my eye and spun around. He approached from the shadows behind a dumpster outside a coffee shop.

The corner of his mouth quirked up into a little crooked smile. "You're getting better at reading your senses. I thought I'd masked my scent by standing near the restaurant waste, but you caught it anyway."

Wait, was he proud of me? I tried not to let my bewilderment show on my face.

"Why are you still following me?"

"Because Sasha is in Reno."

I frowned. "Already?"

"The Organization knew I found you here. I'm sure she knew you would return with the wolf."

"So you're back to helping me instead of blowing my brains out?"

He raised an arrogant brow that made me want to punch him. "If blowing out your brains was truly my plan, you'd be dead now. How many times do I need to tell you that?"

"You fooled me last night when you held that gun to my head and cocked the trigger."

“What was important was that I fooled Sasha.”

I crossed my arms, wishing I could get a straight answer from him. “I got the feeling if she hadn’t have backed off you would’ve pulled that trigger.”

“I wouldn’t have allowed Nero to get their hands on you.” He rolled his shoulders back, his eyes scanning the parking lot. “Where is the wolf?”

“Why do you care?”

His eyes met mine. “I thought I made myself clear—”

“I’m not a child, Sebastian. I can take care of myself in broad daylight.”

“So he is not with you.”

I rolled my eyes. God, he was pissing me off. “I don’t have time to play these games, Sebastian. Stay away from me.”

“No.”

I shook my head and turned to get back into the Jeep. He caught my wrist and twisted it up behind my back before I realized what was happening. Sebastian yanked me back and whispered against my ear. “Sasha is even faster than I am and you never saw me coming. How do you think you can avoid her on your own?”

I answered him by kicking my heel right up between his legs. Hard. When his grip on my wrist weakened I hammered my elbow back into his rib cage and took off. In less than a second I was in the Jeep with the tires screaming across the pavement. My eyes kept flicking up to the rearview mirror, watching him straighten up and stare at me. My chest heaved as I pulled into traffic and checked my mirror again. I half expected him to be sitting in the backseat. I knew he couldn’t fly, but it felt like he was everywhere.

I turned a corner and saw the Reno archway, and a familiar face exiting the Circus Circus hotel on the corner. My heart pounded and a chill ran down my spine.

It was Sasha.

I zoomed past her, wishing for the first time that Adam owned a normal car with climate controls. As it was, I was driving past a master tracker with no window or roof between us. My scent was out there in the breeze just waiting for her to catch it. I got to the next light, but she didn’t seem to notice me. I

glanced over my shoulder and saw her walk around the corner to the parking lot. While she was out of view, the light changed to green. I drove through the intersection slowly and pulled over to the curb once I was across. A baseball hat was wedged between the front seats, so I grabbed it and put it on. Not like it was a great disguise, but it couldn't hurt.

I held my breath, watching for her with my foot hovering over the gas pedal. When she finally pulled out of the lot in a black Mercedes, my breath whooshed out of my lungs. She pulled into traffic, and I turned around, following behind. As long as I was behind her, the wind would blow my scent back, or at least that's what I was counting on.

I stayed a few cars away, trying to remember every single cop show I'd ever seen on television. I had no training for surveillance, but I'd written about personal bodyguards before so I had done some research. When I wrote the article I never dreamed I'd be using the knowledge to follow a woman who was trying to kidnap me.

After a few blocks, she pulled into a gas station. Shit. The best way to not have her sneaking up on me was for me to know where she was. As long as she was in front of me, she couldn't surprise me from behind. But I couldn't pull up to the pumps and wait. I drove around the block and stopped behind the station's minimart to watch for her exit.

I didn't expect her to come around the back to make a phone call.

With nowhere to run, I slid down in the seat, tugged my hat down slightly, and prayed that the wind would keep blowing my scent away from her.

"I already swept the hotel. She checked out." She plugged her other ear as she listened.

"Sebastian is here, sir. His scent is all over this town."

She waited, nodding. "I know. She's being protected by the wolf pack here. One in particular." She shook her head. "The twin got away. I did get a shot off, but I don't believe it was a mortal wound."

I listened to her talking to her contact inside of Nero, grateful that it kept her distracted.

"Yes, sir. I understand, but is it wise to take out the wolf? Do you want a

war with the Pack here, sir?” She paused. “The twin doesn’t like the girl—he was just helping his brother.” Another pause. “No, I’m not defending him, I’m just saying...” She sighed and nodded. “Yes, sir, I understand. I know it’s the full moon. They’ll shift tonight. But I thought you wanted the girl.” She rubbed her forehead with her free hand and shook her head slowly. “Perfectly clear. Her boyfriend dies tonight.”

She closed her phone and walked back around the corner to the gas pumps.

I skootched up in the seat, my stomach clenched. I had to stay calm. As long as I didn’t lose sight of Sasha then I had the upper hand. But how was I going to stop an assassin from killing Adam?

My eyes welled with tears. I rubbed my face and pulled out of the station after her. I needed to think, not cry.

She got on the highway, and I lost sight of her for a second. My pulse raced as I wove in and out of the lanes, searching for the black Mercedes. When I finally saw her ahead I let out a sigh of relief. I still knew where she was. For now.

I pulled out my cell phone and hit Adam’s number.

“Hi, beautiful.”

My skin flushed just hearing his voice. “Hey, Adam, we need to talk, but I can’t right now.”

“Okay.” He sounded confused. “But you just called me.”

“I know. I just needed to know you were all right. Sasha is in town.”

“Already?”

“Yeah, I guess Nero told her this is where Sebastian found me the first time.”

“Have you seen her?” There was no more smile in his voice. He sounded ready to jump through the phone and drag me home. Sadly part of me almost wished he could.

“I’m tailing her with the Jeep right now.”

“What?”

I had to hold the phone away from my ear for a second while he erupted in the speaker. When he quieted I brought the phone back to my ear. “Listen, as

long as I know where she is then she can't sneak up on me."

He was quiet for a moment, then his voice was a growl. "If she turns around she'll be on top of you, Lana. Please come back here, okay?"

"If she turns around I'll call 911 while I'm hauling ass to the cops. I'm pretty sure Nero wouldn't want her to drag them into the headlines." My brow furrowed. "Besides, if I go to the barn your Pack won't be happy either. In fact, there's a good chance Aren would love to lead the lynch mob."

"I would never let them hurt you. Please turn around and meet me somewhere. Just tell me where."

"I can't, Adam."

"No one will know," he said. "Luke's already working the horses and Aren's sleeping."

"It's not that. I have to know where she is."

He let out a frustrated sigh. "Why?"

"Because she's going to try to kill you tonight after you change." It was very quiet. "Are you still there?"

"Yes."

"Did you hear what I said?"

"I'd like to see her try."

I pressed the accelerator to pass an eighteen-wheeler, keeping Sasha's car in my line of vision. "You may be strong when you're a werewolf, but you told me yourself that you can get killed by a truck or a bullet just like any other wolf, remember?"

"I know, but we'll rip her throat out before she gets a shot off."

I sighed. "Only if you see her first. I'll call you back soon."

I closed my phone and took a deep breath. Surely Adam didn't think he could beat a bullet. I knew his senses were heightened when he was a wolf, and maybe he figured they'd catch her scent before she ever saw them. I didn't know if he could, but I wasn't going to risk it.

Chapter Thirty-Four

ADAM

“Fuck!” I grumbled when Lana hung up. She was putting herself in harm’s way, and there wasn’t a damned thing I could do about it. I jammed my phone in my pocket and went back inside to wake Aren.

He stirred before I could make a sound. “What’s wrong?”

“Sasha’s in town.”

“Already?” He glanced down at his splinted ankle. “I have a few things I’d like to say to her.” He met my eyes with a cold smile. “But this time I’ll be sure I separate her from her Taser.”

“This isn’t about getting even. Lana overheard her saying she was going to kill me tonight after we change.”

Aren grunted. “I’d like to see her try.”

“That’s what I said.” I shook my head. “She’d never be able to sneak up on us during a full moon. But we need to warn Malcolm either way.”

Aren’s eyes cut back up to meet mine. “So you’re going to tell him?”

I shrugged. “I think so. He needs to know about Sasha and Sebastian. I’ll have him come by early tonight, before sunset.”

“But you’re still not going to come clean about your girlfriend.” He shook his head. “I’m supposed to keep quiet about it too?”

I nodded. “No sense worrying Malcolm when he’s already got two jaguars on the move.”

“I won’t lie for you, Adam.”

“I’m not asking you to lie. I’m just asking you not to bring it up.”

His eyes narrowed, and he shook his head. “Very fine line there.”

“I know. I’m sorry it has to be like this.” I walked over and pulled a chair over by the couch where Aren was lying with his leg propped up. “I wish you could be happy for me.” I could see his hackles rise, but I went on before he could interrupt. “I realize that’s impossible for you right now. What I mean is you’re my brother, my best friend. It sucks that I’m finally in love, and you’re not happy for me. For the first time in my life, I can see my future. Do you understand how amazing she makes me feel? But I can’t share any of it with you. I can’t share it with anyone.”

Aren pulled himself up so he was almost sitting up straight. “You’ve always been a player, Adam. The entire Pack knows that. And I know Dad’s been putting the screws to you to find your mate. He wants grandchildren and a new generation to keep our Pack strong.”

I chuckled and looked over at my brother. “So you got his settle-down-and-have-babies lecture too?”

Aren smiled a little and nodded. “Yeah, but you’re the oldest so I’m pretty sure I’m safe until you get tied down and give the Pack a new pair of pups.”

I sighed and got up. My life was never going to turn out the way I thought it would, or the way my family, or my Pack wanted it. I was leaving with Lana in the morning. Who knew when we would be back? We’d have to keep moving. Lana was the missing key to Nero’s need for jaguar females who wouldn’t need to be bitten. They could raise them like their own breeding stock. The thought sickened me.

With my back to my brother, I stared out the window at the barn I’d built, filled with horses I’d trained and many that I loved. I was about to lose it all.

“You really think Lana is your mate.”

The sound of Aren’s voice jarred me from my thoughts. I nodded but I didn’t turn around. It would piss me off to see his face cringe like she was some kind of disease.

“I’m sorry I’ve been such an ass to her.”

Now that got my attention. My brow furrowed as I turned to face him. “You’re apologizing?”

The corner of his mouth quirked up a notch. “It’s not like I never

apologize.”

“I never expected it over a jaguar.”

He shook his head. “She’s not just a jaguar. She’s your mate.” He lowered his voice and added, “She risked her ass to save my life.” A smile toyed at the corner of his mouth. “I still think you’re insane.”

I grinned. “They say love makes you nuts, right?”

He tilted his head a little. “You may have been a little crazy before Lana anyway.”

“Careful. I’ll still dump you off that sofa, hurt ankle and all,” I teased. Then I walked over and embraced my brother. “Thanks, Aren,” I whispered as I clapped his back. When I pulled back, his gaze met mine and my heart felt heavy in my chest. It would’ve been so much easier to leave him behind if I was pissed at him.

“I’ve always got your back,” he said. “Sorry I forgot that for a while. I just didn’t want to see you get yourself killed.”

“We’re not out of the woods yet. I better call Malcolm.”

Aren nodded. “Tell Dad I’m feeling better.”

“Will do.” I walked out toward the kitchen, clenching my jaw to hold back the twisted emotions churning inside of me.

Chapter Thirty-Five

LANA

The black Mercedes pulled off at a rest stop, and my pulse jumped. I was going to lose her unless I followed, but I couldn't. There was no way I could hide from her there.

I drove past, my hands slick on the Jeep's steering wheel. What now? I glanced at my cell phone on the seat. If I went back to the ranch I'd lead her right to Adam. I'd brought enough tragedy to the Pack. I wasn't going to lead Sasha to them. It was me she really wanted.

I got off the freeway and headed in the other direction. Toward the airport. If I could get her to follow me there, Adam would be safe for now. With TSA officers and air marshals around, I doubted she'd draw a weapon on me. I gripped the wheel tighter. I hadn't realized she led me so far from the city when I was following her. Over the roar of the wind, something made a *pow* sound. Did the Jeep backfire? Another *pow* and the back started fishtailing.

Not a backfire. A bullet.

I struggled to keep control of the Jeep. In the rearview mirror I caught a glimpse of the Mercedes tailing me. One more gunshot and the Jeep squealed in protest. As I slowed to the shoulder, the flattened tires wobbling and screeching, I pocketed my cell phone, preparing to bail. I could make a run for it and call 911.

I popped my seatbelt and while the Jeep rolled to a stop I jumped out. It was jarring, but my feline reflexes kept me on my feet. I ran down the embankment while something whistled past my calf, followed by a sharp pain. My jeans had a tear now, but the bullet just grazed me.

“The next one will take you down,” Sasha called from behind me. “I need you alive, not unharmed.”

I kept running. If she caught me, I’d be going to Nero. I’d rather get shot.

Something hit my shoulder. Hard. I fell to the ground, knocking all the wind from my lungs. Stars danced around the edges of my vision. The brush crunched around me, but I couldn’t get any air to force myself up.

“Did you really think I wouldn’t know you were following me?” Sasha holstered the gun and drew a smaller one from her calf holster.

I laid face down on the ground, trying to figure out what happened. I wasn’t bleeding, and I could move my fingers and toes but nothing else. It wasn’t the Taser she’d used on Aren, though. She must’ve shot me with a plastic bullet like the ones cops used for riots. It hurt like hell, but other than a bruise and maybe a cracked rib, I was unharmed. She grabbed my upper arm and yanked me to my feet, pointing her gun at my chest.

“No more running. I don’t have plastic rounds in this gun.”

The valley below the freeway was deserted, screaming wasn’t going to do me any good, and I couldn’t outrun a bullet. My hip ached where the canister of pepper spray banged into me during the fall. If I could get the spray, I might have a chance.

My heart raced as she pushed me along, up the embankment and toward her car. If I got in, I was as good as on a plane to Nero, but with Sasha behind me and armed. I was screwed.

So I stalled. “Did you have that phone call at the gas station just because you knew I was listening?”

Her gun barrel never faltered. “I’m not here to have a chat with you. Get in the car.”

“If I get in the car, will you leave Adam and the Pack alone?”

“I’m not here to bargain with you either.”

“It’s not a bargain. If Adam will be safe, I’ll go. If not I’d rather take my chances and see if you’ll shoot me.”

Sasha laughed, which threw me off guard. Her gun never moved from me as she shook her head. “You’re a piece of work. I’ve already shot one wolf,

why wouldn't I shoot a wolf-lover?"

Okay, I had had just about enough of the digs at wolves. "My God. You people. Has Adam ever done anything to you?" I slipped my fingers into my pocket, around the canister.

Sasha stopped laughing and started walking toward me. I waited as long as I could, and yanked the pepper spray free, dousing Sasha's face. She screamed, wiping her eyes, and I bolted, racing up the embankment toward the cars. The Jeep had two flats. Useless. I peered in the Mercedes, praying to see keys hanging from the ignition.

No such luck.

Sasha, close behind even after being pepper sprayed, grabbed a fistful of my hair, pulling me out of the front of the car. She punched my kidney, paralyzing me long enough to get the back door open. She shoved me facedown into the back seat and cuffed my wrists behind my back. She pulled me up and kicked my feet inside. Tears streamed down her face, her eyes bright red.

Blood trickled down from my nose, but I couldn't reach up to wipe it. Right then the only damage I could do would be to her upholstery. I sat quietly trying to collect my thoughts. There had to be a way out of this, but I didn't know what it was just yet.

While I sat in the back seat weighing my very limited options, Sasha was on her phone. "Yes I have the girl. And I have terms." She nodded and went on. "When you come through on your part of our agreement I'll turn her over to you. Not before." She shook her head. "Absolutely not. It's simple really, fly out to Reno and bring the package, or I'll kill the girl. Call me when you land, and I'll tell you the drop off location." She pointed the gun at me and held out her cell phone. Then she shot a round into the leather seat beside me.

I screamed, and she faced forward again. "Proof enough? You have six hours. I need to make the transaction tonight while the wolves are running."

She hooked her phone on her belt, closed her door, and pulled back onto the highway without a word.

"So you don't trust Nero either?"

She didn't answer me.

"Sebastian told me he wasn't sure who he was working for anymore."

She glanced at me in the mirror. "Sebastian's a little slow."

At least I knew she could hear me.

"So you think he should've known sooner?"

Her attention went back to the highway. "I'm not here to make friends. Sebastian taught me that lesson the hard way. I've gotta look out for myself. No one else will."

"Do you even care why Sebastian doesn't want you to take me back to them?"

"If there was any other way to get what I need from Nero, I'd do it. Believe it or not, holding you for ransom and shooting your friend weren't highlights for me."

"Maybe there is another way. Maybe we can find one..."

"There isn't any other way." She tightened her grip on the steering wheel. "I have my Taser handy if you can't be quiet."

Apparently I hit a nerve, but I definitely didn't want to be Tasered so I closed my mouth and tried to come up with a plan.

Chapter Thirty-Six

ADAM

Between Lana not answering her cell phone, and waiting on Malcolm to arrive, I thought my head might explode. I needed to go find her. I was about to borrow Luke's truck when Malcolm pulled in the driveway. I met him at the car and reached out to clasp his forearm, but he pulled me into a hug instead.

"I'm still your dad, Adam."

I returned the embrace and nodded with a smile. "I know."

"So you have some important information for me?"

"I do, but let's go inside first."

I opened the door for Malcolm. Being the Alpha of our Pack commanded respect, and the line between father and Pack leader was always hard for me to differentiate.

"How is Aren?"

"He's resting now, but he's feeling a little better. Jason said he needs to keep the leg elevated and he casted his ankle."

Our father raised a graying brow. "What about changing? It's a full moon tonight. Do we need to keep him inside?"

I shrugged. "He'll change anyway, and I'm sure it'll be painful. If we pen him up we won't be able to help him."

Malcolm shook his head. "If we're all wolves we won't be much help to him anyway."

"But we could at least be with him. I'm pretty sure when that leg starts shifting it's going to hurt like a son of a bitch, and what if he starts bleeding

again?" I didn't want to think about how much anguish my brother would be facing tonight. Part of me couldn't believe our father was willing to leave him behind.

Malcolm pondered, staring out the back window toward the barn. He finally nodded and turned back toward me. "You're right. We'll bring him along and hope for the best. Either way he shouldn't be alone."

I nodded, grateful Aren would be somewhat protected. Malcolm didn't even know about the jaguars yet.

"You mentioned a threat to the Pack." His eyes met mine, the physical weight of his stare pressing against me.

"The jaguar that killed Gabe is still at large. We found out he works for something called the Nero Organization. Apparently they train the jaguar shifters to become assassins."

I stopped when I noticed my father's expression. His eyes were distant as he looked out the window, his jaw clenched. I waited for him to speak, or at least notice that I had stopped, but he seemed lost in his thoughts.

"Malcolm?" The sound of my voice seemed to snap him out of his trance. He turned from the glass and stared at me with haunted eyes.

"Sorry. I hadn't heard that name in years. I should've been watching for them, but I was too eager to believe they no longer existed." He shook his head and sat at the dining room table suddenly looking years older. "I'm afraid I may have waited too long to tell you about my Pack."

"You knew where these jaguars were coming from?" I sat down, and for the first time in my entire life, I saw fear in my father's eyes. I felt like I just got sucker punched in the gut. My shock quickly mutated into anger. "How could you keep Nero secret from us? You knew and you said nothing."

"I thought we could keep them out of Reno." He sat across from me in the chair. "Until Gabe."

"Even after Gabe." I couldn't sit any longer. Rage pulsed through my muscles. I wanted to punch something. I needed to release the frustration. "You never said a word. You had information and let us chase these guys down blind."

“When I was a pup my father was not the Alpha of our pack.”

I raised a brow. I’d never heard Malcolm talk about his childhood, but I’d always assumed my grandfather had been the Alpha male. In most Packs the Alpha was passed from father to the eldest son unless there weren’t any sons alive in his line. Usually that led to squabbles and Packs splintering off.

What any of this had to do with Nero I had no clue.

“Our Alpha was a powerful businessman. He was probably older than I am now, but you know it’s tough to guess actual ages in our kind. He had gray hair and wrinkles around his eyes, which I’d thought made him old.” He waved his hand. “None of that matters. What matters is that he was friends with a high-ranking military official. My father was one on the enforcers for our Pack, and his father was a Pack elder.”

My head was spinning as I built a mental family tree, trying to piece together the puzzle as my father spoke.

“My grandfather was an elder. He was at the meeting when Allen Caldwell first mentioned a chance for the younger members of our Pack to be part of an undercover military operation called Moonlight.”

Fuck. Sebastian had mentioned Moonlight to Lana. I tried to sort out all the new info swimming around in my head. “So Allen Caldwell was your Alpha?”

Malcolm nodded and clasped his hands together, wringing them slightly. “Yes. And I volunteered for the project.”

I ran my hand down my face trying to keep from saying something I couldn’t take back. “You worked for the Nero Organization?”

“It was called the Nero Project then. The man in charge was named Severino. I’m not sure if that was his first name or last name.” He paused rubbing his chin for a moment, then shook his head. “Anyway, Severino procured a government grant to investigate paranormal solutions to foreign hostilities. Allen told us that Severino knew we had extra-sensory abilities and that during the full moon we actually changed from men into wolves. He presented it to us that we could be an asset to our country.” He sighed and met my eyes. “I was young and resented being different. So I convinced my

Pack brothers—Dominic, Nicholas, and Wyatt—to come with me to volunteer as part of the Moonlight Operation for the Nero Project.”

My father and our Pack elders had known about Nero all along. They’d kept this secret from us while we hunted jaguars. No one had ever mentioned Nero to me until Lana ran into Sebastian.

Malcolm went silent again, but with the afternoon sun getting lower in the sky I nudged him out of his thoughts. “What happened once you got there?”

“They separated us.” His gaze met mine, and I saw shadows of pain lurking in the gray-green depths of his eyes. He took a deep breath, opening his hands. “They wanted us to be assassins for our government, trained mercenaries who could infiltrate foreign governments and take out leaders who were deemed madmen. But they wanted us to work alone.”

“So you quit?”

“We escaped.” Malcolm shook his silver mane and got up from the chair. “Our strength is working as a unit. Family and the Pack are always the top priority. It went against every instinct inside of us to work alone. We tried to explain it to Severino, but he still refused, and instead of allowing us to train together, he dumped us into cells. For three months we were nothing but lab rats. He tried to suppress our changes during the full moon and used shock therapy in an attempt to force us to turn on one another.”

His eyes shone with emotion as he steeped his fingers. “When the sky was dark on the night of the new moon, he tossed us out on the grounds while he shifted into a jaguar and hunted us. His motto was ‘trust no one, least of all your best friend.’”

Malcolm got up and walked over to the window again. “So we waited for the next full moon, hiding their drugs under our tongues, and doing whatever was necessary to keep our minds sharp. Once the moon was full, we shifted and broke free from our cells. When we got back to the Pack, Severino was already meeting with Allen, explaining to him that our kind didn’t suit his purpose, that we were weak. I was furious and tried to explain what that madman put us through, but Allen had more loyalty to Severino than to us. The following evening he banished us from the Pack.” He paused. “That’s

when I became Alpha of our new Pack and we settled in Reno.”

My mouth was dry. I raked my fingers back through my hair and went to stand beside my father, this man I apparently knew so little about. “So all this time, when the Pack has been hunting jaguars, you and the elders knew they were being sent by Nero?”

He shrugged. “We suspected, but none of us had heard any mention of Nero since we’d escaped. It was a simple leap for me and the Pack elders to believe the project was abandoned once we were gone. Besides, those jaguars behaved like drifters, trouble-makers, not trained assassins.”

“Could the jaguars that come through Reno every few months be looking for you?” I turned to face him, waiting for an answer.

Malcolm lifted his gaze to meet mine. “I don’t think so. We would have told you if we believed any of us were specifically being targeted.”

I took a deep breath. “I guess I’d better tell you the rest of my news then.”

“There’s more?” He turned to face me.

“There’s also a female jaguar who has threatened to come after me once the moon is full tonight.”

He frowned and shook his head. “Why would they send a female? They’re not born into their power. They’d never be strong enough.”

“This one is.” Just looking at Aren would prove that, but I kept that information away from my father. “I think she used to be in law enforcement before she was turned.”

He nodded. “Does she have a mate then? Is he the one who killed Gabe?”

“He’s the one who bit her, but I don’t think they’re mates. She beat the crap out of him in San Antonio.”

Oh shit...

His brow furrowed, and I knew he’d noticed. “San Antonio? What were you doing there?”

“I’m not sure you want to know.” Could I lie to my father, my Alpha, right to his face? This was different than promising a lady in a bar that I’d call her. I wasn’t sure I was a good enough liar to sell it to Malcolm.

I wasn’t sure anyone was that good a liar.

“I know you’ve been keeping secrets, Adam, and I’d like to know why.”

“You’re one to talk.” The shadows were lengthening outside. “It’s not important right now. The Pack will be here soon, and we need to warn everyone about the jaguars.”

“I shared my secrets.” Malcolm leaned against the table. “Trust me with yours.”

His words sat squarely on my shoulders like a fifty-pound weight. “I can’t.” I met his eyes. “I’m sorry but... I can’t.”

He straightened to his full height, commanding my obedience on an instinctual level. I could feel his gaze boring into me. I clenched my fists and met his eyes. “You don’t want to know this. Let it go.”

A crease marred his brow. “What could be worse than Nero still being in existence and sending operatives into our city?”

My hands were sweating and the wolf inside me ached to please our Alpha. I wouldn’t last much longer. I started for the door, but he caught my arm. “Please Adam.”

I sighed. Maybe I could just tell him the good news. “I found my mate.”

Malcolm’s eyes widened and then he smiled. I’d never seen a grin like that on my father’s face before. He looked happy, proud, and relieved all in one expression. “This was your big secret? Adam, this is wonderful news. Who is she? Why haven’t I met her yet?”

And here came the bad news. “She’s a jaguar.”

His smile vanished as soon as the words left my lips. His eyes narrowed, and he shook his head, walking away from me. “That’s impossible. You’re making a mistake, Adam.”

I shook my head, staring at his back. “She’s lots of things, but not a mistake.”

He turned toward me again, scrutinizing my face. I was pretty sure he was hoping he’d see any sign of uncertainty, but loving Lana and knowing she was my mate for life was one of the few things I was sure of.

“It can’t be,” he whispered.

“I struggled with accepting it, too, but I’ve never felt like this before. It

happened exactly like you said. I looked into her eyes, and the moment I touched her skin, I felt something inside of me click. I knew. She's my other half."

"She's also the enemy."

I groaned. "I knew you would never give her a chance. I knew it." I went to the door and stopped. "I'm leaving in the morning."

"What?"

I repeated myself a little louder. "I'm leaving in the morning with Lana. Nero has been hunting for her, and I knew the Pack wouldn't accept her, so we're leaving town. This is my last full moon with the Pack."

"You can't mean this, Adam." He took a step in my direction. "You're my successor. You will be the Alpha."

I opened the door and shot a glare over my shoulder. "Aren will be a much better Alpha than I ever would anyway."

"You're wrong." Another step closer. "Your brother is a great fighter and a thinker, but you're my first born son. The mantle has always been yours. You can't expect your brother to shoulder it because you're running away."

"If you can't accept my mate, then how can you possibly expect me to stay?" I fought to keep from shouting as I circled my father. "Has Mom been gone so long that you forgot what it feels like to love someone so much you would give up everything just to see them smile? You'd lay down your life and die for them?"

His green eyes shone, and somewhere deep beneath my rage, the boy inside of me wanted to hug my father. I knew he'd never gotten over the pain of losing his mate.

He took a deep breath. "I would die for any member of this Pack."

"Because it's your duty." I let my voice drop a little. "I'd give up my life for Lana because I couldn't live without her."

That verbal blow actually knocked Malcolm back a step and he growled, "Enough of this. We will *not* have a jaguar in our Pack."

"Then you won't have me either." I turned to go out the door, but Malcolm's voice froze me where I stood.

“Answer me this: how do you know she didn’t have anything to do with Gabe’s murder? If Nero is looking for her then she means something to them. How can you be sure where her loyalties lie?”

“Because she could have killed me a hundred different times.” I met my Alpha’s stare and added, “She also saved Aren’s life. That bullet that went through his ankle was meant for his head.”

I didn’t wait for him to respond. I stormed out into the late afternoon sun and slammed the door behind me. Jason and his twin, Jared, were getting out of his truck as I made my way to the barn. Jared pulled himself up straighter and squared his shoulders when he saw me coming. The wind made a mess of Jason’s hair, but Jared had his tied back and his fiery hazel eyes flashed with bitterness. If I didn’t know better, I’d think he was daring me to attack. It was obvious Jason must’ve told him about our confrontation earlier.

As twins, Jason and Jared couldn’t have been more opposite. Jason was a doctor. He fought battles with his mind, but Jared was a carpenter and worked out regularly. His fights were with his body and his spirit. He was tough. But I was so pissed at Malcolm right now, that seeing Jared giving me his I-dare-you-asshole glare made me want to beat him senseless.

Before I could say anything, Jason maneuvered himself between us, clasping my forearms in greeting. “Did you tell Malcolm about the jaguars?”

I nodded and rolled my shoulders back, releasing a little of my aggression. It wasn’t completely Jared’s fault. We all got punchy with the full moon so close.

Jason and Jared shared a look and then focused on me again. “So do we have a plan for tonight?”

“Ask Malcolm. He’s the Alpha.”

I walked past them toward the barn when Logan came barreling down the road to the barn. He slammed on his brakes, sending up a tidal wave of dust so thick we couldn’t see him getting out of his car. When he emerged from the dust cloud he looked confused.

“Adam? What are you doing here?”

The corner of my mouth quirked up. “Last time I checked, I live here.”

“Yeah, but your Jeep isn’t here.” He frowned. “I thought something happened to you.”

“Why?” I could feel my muscles tense. Lana had my Jeep.

“I saw the Jeep with two flats on the edge of the highway. I pulled over to see if you were okay, but there was a laptop on the passenger seat and nobody there.” He held out two metal cylinders. “Then I found bullet casings.”

I took off running and called to Jason. “I need to borrow your truck.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

LANA

Sasha drove me back to the airport and parked on the rooftop of the parking structure. The power windows engaged all at once, dropping the glass around me. The sun bathed me in orange light while she got out and leaned against the front of the car.

My wrists were starting to ache. The metal of the cuffs was biting into my skin, and no matter how I shifted around in the backseat, I couldn't seem to relieve the pressure. I blinked rapidly, not allowing myself to cry. I wouldn't be able to think if I got upset. My only hope was to keep a clear head. If I could get to my cell phone, I could call 911, but it was safely in my front pocket and my hands were trapped behind my back. I was screwed.

I leaned forward, keeping an eye on Sasha. She was on her phone again, so I peered around the front seats. She had a map of Reno strewn across the floor of the passenger side in a mass of improperly folded paper. And beneath it was the black grip of a gun or...a Taser. Sasha was still busy conducting business on the hood of the car, and I looked down at the Taser again with a sigh. Even though I knew where it was, unless I got free of the cuffs, I wouldn't be able to use it.

Great. Back to square one.

I leaned back against the seat but shifted so I sat sideways with my shoulder against the seat back, giving my wrists a break from being smashed against the metal cuffs. I stared outside watching the sky turn a deeper orange, like a fire spreading across the horizon. Time was running out. If I didn't think of something soon, I'd be handed off to the Nero Organization,

and Sasha would be free to kill Adam.

Unless that was a ploy to get me to follow her. I wouldn't bet Adam's life on that, though. That left me with...

Sebastian. At the front of the car. My heart started pounding. Was he here to rescue me? It didn't look like it. I took a deep breath and forced my inner voice to shut the hell up so I could use my enhanced hearing. If I could just quiet my mind, I was sure I'd be able to hear them.

Sebastian glanced at me through the windshield, but he didn't give me any indication, and his words were too low to make out.

It was easier to hear Sasha's voice because it was pitched higher than Sebastian's, and I caught little bits of her side of the conversation.

"I'm not going to let you have her. She's my ticket and you know it."

Sebastian said something about Nero then, but I couldn't determine all of his words.

Sasha looked over at me and back at Sebastian. "So if they come for her, you're just going to kill her? That makes no sense."

I strained to hear, but all I caught was Sebastian saying, "She is a treasure...not a twisted science experiment." I lost his voice for a second, then I heard, "She would be better off dead than with him."

My heart sank. Sebastian wasn't here to rescue me from Sasha, he was here to kill me if she traded me to Nero. A tear ran down my cheek, and I fought to keep my breathing slow. Sasha's cell phone rang, distracting me from the panic that welled up inside my mind.

It was a quick call, and once she closed her phone she was in motion. As she opened the front door, she slowed and looked over at Sebastian. "Stay out of my way tonight. You owe me at least that much."

She slid into the driver's seat and fired up the engine. The tires squealed as she gunned the accelerator and I rolled around in the backseat, unable to steady myself with my hands behind my back.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

She glanced at me in the rearview mirror. "I'm not sure yet. I put the coordinates in my GPS so we'll know soon."

Not that it mattered. I didn't have much time left.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

ADAM

Jason jumped in the passenger side just as I cranked the wheel and fired the truck up the dirt road.

“What the hell is going on, Adam?”

I kept my eyes on the road, gripping the wheel so tight I thought I might crack it. I briefly considered a lie, but Malcolm knew I was leaving. No reason to keep everyone in the dark anymore. “I found my mate.” That stunned Jason silent. Then I said, “And she was driving my Jeep.”

He was quiet until we got on the highway, then he pulled out his cell phone and called Logan to find out where exactly he found the Jeep. When I pulled up behind Chaney, Lana’s scent was thick, and panic coursed through me. I couldn’t lose her. No way. Not when we were so close to forever.

I got out of the car and peered inside the Jeep. Her laptop and a small handbag were lying on the floor of the passenger side. That ruled out a robbery.

Jason walked up behind me and froze. “Jaguars have been here.”

I nodded, and resisted telling him I was in love with one of them. Instead I followed Lana’s scent away from the Jeep. At the edge of the asphalt, I picked up another female jaguar’s scent.

Sasha.

One more step and I found a drop of blood in the dust. I wiped my fingers into it and lifted my hand to my nose. My lungs constricted on the scent. It was Lana’s blood.

But one drop wasn’t a mortal wound. She had to be alive.

I rushed back to the truck, with Jason close behind.

“They must have left in another car,” he said.

I nodded, accelerating back onto the highway. “Looks that way.”

“So we won’t be able to follow their trail.” He glanced up at the sky. “Plus, we’re going to change soon.”

My eyes cut over to him. “I’m going to find her.” I looked back at the road. “Call Malcolm and tell him...” Shit, what could I tell him? I’d just told him I was leaving the Pack for a jaguar. I swallowed the lump in my throat and passed an RV. He was still my father, and I’d always be his son. “Just tell him I need him. And I hope he’ll be ready with the Pack to help me.”

Jason nodded and made a call while I tried to figure out where Sasha might take Lana. She wanted to give her over to Nero so she’d have to leave town. The airport it was.

I pulled into the terminal, rolling down the windows and breathing in all the exhaust fumes and aftershaves and perfumes, searching for any sign of Lana.

“Why are we at the airport?” Jason asked.

“Just a hunch. Help me search for jaguar scents.”

Jason nodded and leaned toward his open window. After trolling slowly past the terminals, I drove around and headed up the parking structure. The tires squealed as I made the tight turns. When I was nearing the top floor, a black Mercedes came careening around the corner and nearly hit us. I slammed on the horn and kept circling until we reached the roof.

Sebastian stood up top. Alone, like a dark sentinel. I stopped the truck and flew out of the cab. He didn’t move or try to defend himself when I grabbed his shirt and got in his face.

“Where is Lana?” I growled.

“I told you not to leave her alone, wolf. Now your mistake could cost her life.”

I punched him in the mouth, grateful to see blood bloom on his lower lip. He smiled, revealing bloodstained teeth. “If you are through being an animal, perhaps we can help one another.”

Jason came up beside us, looking at each of us before he spoke. “Adam, are you going to introduce me to your friend?”

“This is Sebastian. He’s going to take me to my mate. *Now*. Aren’t you, Sebastian?”

The jaguar raised his arrogant brow and yanked my hands off of his shirt. “Your mate? Does she know?”

“Fuck you.” I shoved him backward. It was too tempting to have him so close to me when I wanted to rip his head off so badly I could taste it. “Sasha’s got Lana.”

He wiped his lip and nodded. “Yes, she does. She’s meeting with Nero for a trade.”

“Where?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know exactly.”

My head felt like it was going to explode. I signaled Jason back to the truck. “Fine. I’ll find her myself.”

Sebastian pulled something out of his pocket. “I can probably find her a little bit more easily since I put a tracking device on Sasha’s rental car.”

With my keen wolf hearing, I caught every word and looked back at Sebastian. “Get in the truck. You navigate.”

His lip was starting to swell, making his smile crooked. Without a sound he was past us and in the back of the truck.

Sebastian was focused on his tracker while I maneuvered Jason’s truck out of the parking structure. When we hit the highway, I heard Sebastian yell through the back window. “Keep heading north. I think she’s going to the Lake.”

I glanced over at Jason as the speedometer edged past eighty miles per hour. His eyes narrowed, but he kept his voice low and even. “Since when do we work with jaguars? Ever occur to you that this guy could be leading us right into an ambush? Think, Adam.”

Keeping my eyes on the road, I did my best to keep my voice down. “The jaguars are coming from a place called Nero. They’re breeding and training assassins for hire, and if I don’t get to Lana first, I’ll never see her again. If I

have to work with a jaguar to find her then that's what I'll do. I don't expect you to understand. I do expect you to call the Pack and let Malcolm know we're headed toward Lake Tahoe."

"This is insane," Jason grumbled, but he made the call. I nodded and focused on the road.

Jason finally slipped his phone back in his pocket. "Jared is getting everyone together, then they'll head up to the Lake. We can change up there tonight."

"Thanks, Jason," I said without making eye contact. Right now the only thing I could concentrate on was the vision of Lana's smile in my head. Everything about her taunted me as I pushed the truck faster. I could see her looking up at me when she told me she loved me. I could hear her laughter and see her dark eyes flash at me when Aren had been impersonating me the first time they met. Dammit, I could even smell her hair. I gripped the wheel tighter. I had to believe we'd get there in time. We had to.

"This is the exit," Sebastian shouted from the back of the truck.

Once we were on the main road around the lake I slowed down, breathing in the scents, praying I'd pick up Lana's. From the back of the pick-up, Sebastian kept watch on his tracker. This time he leaned up into the window, keeping his voice soft.

"They're close by, wolf. Do not go gentle into that good night."

"What the hell? Isn't that the line from a Rodney Dangerfield movie? What does that have to do with anything?"

Sebastian rolled his eyes. "Uneducated wolves. It's one of the finest villanelle poems ever written, by Dylan Thomas." When Sebastian saw that didn't explain anything, he shook his head. "It means do not give up. Don't lose hope."

My nerves were wrapped so tight I could explode at any second. Some jaguar reciting poetry was *not* helping. "Just tell me which way to go, Shakespeare."

"I would pull over here. We should go on foot. Otherwise Sasha will hear us coming."

Jason shot me a silent don't-do-this-Adam look, but I parked anyway. When I turned off the key I handed the key ring to Jason. "Stay here and wait for the others."

"No way." His eyes shifted between Sebastian and me. "We can't trust him, Adam. And sunset's coming."

I shrugged. "I can take care of myself."

"You're not thinking clearly." Jason took the keys and stuffed them in his pocket. "You don't even know if he's helping you. You could be walking—"

"Right into a trap. I get it." I got out and slammed the door. "This is my only shot and I'm taking it."

"Shit, Adam. Don't pull me into this with you. You know I can't let you go alone."

"Listen, Sebastian doesn't want Nero to have Lana either. For now, we want the same thing. Stay here and watch for the Pack." I glanced at Sebastian to be sure he heard. Since I didn't know his motives for helping Lana, it wouldn't hurt for him to know he'd be hip deep in wolves soon.

Jason groaned and shook his head. "Fine. Good luck."

"Looks like it's just you and me," I said to Sebastian as we walked away from the truck toward the trees.

"I am only taking you along as a shield, wolf. Sasha carries a gun, and she never misses."

"She missed with Aren."

Sebastian raised a brow and kept moving. "So I have seen."

When he didn't say anything else, I realized what he wasn't saying was probably more important than what he had. Arrogant bastard.

I struggled to keep my footsteps silent, staying close behind Sebastian. The wind whistled through the tops of the pine trees, bending the branches and masking our movement. I glanced up at the twilight sky. Fighting against the moon was painful, mentally and physically. Sweat soaked through my shirt, and I gritted my teeth to stay focused. I wouldn't be able to hold off shifting much longer, and I couldn't shift with Sebastian nearby. I'd be too vulnerable.

But there weren't any other options. I had to follow him. Lana needed me.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

LANA

Sasha stopped the car in a clearing off the main road. We were back at Lake Tahoe, which instantly made me think of Adam, of the way it had felt when he brought me here last time. The way he'd goaded me into jumping to the top of a boulder and showed me how to be me. Now my wrists were rubbed raw, my back was bruised from some sort of plastic bullet, and an armed woman was about to hand me over to Nero as a science experiment. I tried really hard not to feel sorry for myself, but none of this was fair.

She opened the back door and yanked me out of the car. The crisp night air felt good on my skin. Above us, the sky was a stunning masterpiece of reds and purples, completely unaware of its contrast with my current predicament.

"Turn around," she demanded.

I faced the car and then felt her messing with the cuffs. The metal bands released me, and I gasped at the pain that shot up my arms and into my shoulders now that my hands were free. My right wrist was bleeding, my left looked bruised, but it felt so good to be free that I didn't care.

"Thank you," I rubbed at my aching arms.

"Nothing's changed. I just don't want them to pull some stunt about you being harmed and then break their end of the bargain."

"I thought they said alive, not unharmed."

She ground her teeth, the muscles of her jaw clenched, but didn't answer. I couldn't prevent a small smirk from creeping onto my face.

"Are they paying you a lot to bring me in?" The writer in me wanted to know details and keeping her talking couldn't be a bad thing, I gathered. If I

lived through this night, I had some great ideas for a book.

Sasha grabbed my elbow and walked me toward the trees. “They’re not paying me money.”

My jaw dropped a little. “You’re screwing up my life for free? Is this fun for you?”

She tightened her grip, and I made a mental note that pissing off my abductor was probably not a good idea. When we got to a shadowed area she pulled me down to the ground. I watched her crouch and take a deep breath.

Time was running out though, and at this point, my best shot at freedom was finding some way to appeal to her humanity. Sasha was tough, but I couldn’t let go of that moment in the car when I saw, for a second, a flash of what might live behind her emotional battle armor.

“You said if there were some other way, you’d take it. If money’s not what you’re after, then what is it? Maybe the Pack can help you get it.”

She kept her attention focused on the growing shadows. “No one can help me but Nero. There’s no other way.” She glanced my way as she lowered her voice to a whisper. “They promised me a cure.”

“A cure? For what—” Then it hit me. “They can reverse the jaguar bite?”

Her eyes scanned the wilderness around us. “They say they can.”

“Then what will you do?”

“Go back to my life, I hope.”

“How long have you been gone?”

She rubbed absently at the scar along her collarbone. “He bit me a year ago.” She gripped my arm tighter, and I couldn’t be sure if she was trying to convince me or herself. “They’re not going to kill you, you know. They want to keep you healthy.”

Revulsion snaked its way down my back. They wanted me healthy to see if I could create more female-born jaguars. I opened my mouth to reply, but Sasha shushed me. Without a word she grabbed my arm and started dragging me farther into the forest.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“Away from Sebastian,” was her only reply.

Then I heard the lone howl of a wolf, and my heart stuttered. Sasha slid her pistol free from her shoulder holster. I didn't care if she was trying to get a cure for her jaguar bite; if she was planning to hurt Adam or his family, then I was going to hurt her first. The realization hit me hard, but on some primal level my fear vanished and determination and love filled the void.

I loved Adam, and I wasn't going to let this bitch hurt him.

Not a chance.

Sasha pulled me through the trees, only stopping when we reached the edge of another clearing. With the bright full moon overhead, we couldn't hide, so she opted for taking the offensive. She shoved me in front of her, pressing the barrel of her pistol against my spine as she guided me to the center of the clearing. When we were where she wanted me, she didn't holster her gun, instead she circled slowly, keeping it aimed and ready for anything that might approach us from the forest. Finally she lowered her gun, and I heard her exhale.

"Maybe they'll actually get here before Sebastian screws everything up for me," she mumbled.

A howl cut through the night, making her gun fly back up to the ready position. With both her hands on her revolver I could have tried to run, but as much as I wanted to believe I was more valuable to her alive, I didn't want to prove that theory. Besides, she could always shoot out a knee.

My leg ached just thinking about it. I'd stay put. For now.

Chapter Forty

ADAM

When we found Sasha's car near Lake Tahoe it was empty, but the backseat was ripe with Lana's scent. I glared at the darkening sky, the giant silver moon rising, calling to the animal inside of me. My incisors lengthened, and when my hackles rose, I could feel each hair bristling underneath my shirt. I'd never fought my instinct to change before. My skin hurt, my bones ached, and my pulse pounded in my head. I ground my teeth and kept Lana's face in my mind. I had to resist the shift until I knew she was safe. She needed me, and it was programmed inside of me to protect her.

The reality that I needed her just as much as she needed me didn't escape my notice. The primal instinct to hunt down and kill the person threatening my family made rational thought practically impossible.

"I've got to find her," I grunted, following the scent of Lana's blood toward the trees.

Sebastian stepped back as I pushed past him. "You are already changing, wolf. I will find them. You should go to your Pack."

I glared over my shoulder and noticed my muscles straining against the fabric of my shirt. "Not until I know she's safe."

He shrugged, but kept his distance. It was for the best. His scent was teasing the predator inside. Lana was a jaguar too, but the wolf recognized her as family. It recognized Sebastian as a bastard and potential threat.

We traveled silently through the underbrush and the shadows as Lana's scent grew stronger in my nostrils. We were getting close. When a howl broke the silence of the night, followed by many more, my head spun in the

direction of the call from my brothers, my Pack. My throat burned as I bit back my answering call. When I didn't reply, another howl echoed. I recognized my father's plea, my Alpha's instruction, and primal animal instinct won out over rational human thought. The tenuous hold I had on my change was lost.

I fell to the ground, gagging as my bones popped and mutated, changing my shape from a man into a large black wolf. My shirt tore and the buttons burst from my jeans. When I could finally stand, I was on four legs, my jeans sliding free of my haunches. Panting, I swiveled my head, searching for Sebastian. His scent was still fresh, but I couldn't see him.

Tilting my head back, I cried out to the moon and to my brothers, my Pack, my family. The answering call told me the Pack was here at the lake, including Aren. In wolf form, my human mind and memories resided along with the wolf's primal thought processes, so even the wolf seemed to understand my twin was injured. And they were coming to find me. But this night I knew I wasn't hunting for food or territory like they were. My mate was in danger.

I galloped through the brush, trying to place the pads of my feet on solid ground to keep from making any noise. It was easier to catch the jaguar's scent in my animal form. There were three now. My ears twitched as the wolf realized that one of the jaguar scents was my mate. With a swish of my tail, I picked up speed until the trees thinned, opening up to a clearing. The moon was full above us, casting light on the three shifters. My eyes locked on Lana. I panted softly, pulling her scent into my lungs. The smell of blood was weak; her wounds couldn't be serious.

The wolf recognized the other female as an enemy, her name gone from my tongue as the wolf took over completely. My ears flattened, my tail lowered as I maneuvered in closer, every muscle on alert. She had a gun, and my wolf recognized danger. It was also pointed at the male of the trio. I tried to concentrate on what he was saying, but half of me remained focused on Lana. The wolf wanted to remove the threat to his mate, but I kept him back, kept him tempered. Barely.

My ears pricked up when the rest of my Pack arrived, forming an invisible perimeter around me and the jaguars.

Chapter Forty-One

LANA

“Get out of here, Sebastian,” Sasha hissed. “This is none of your business anymore.”

He started to raise his hands. “You wouldn’t shoot an unarmed man.”

“You would,” she replied, her weapon still aimed directly at him.

He shrugged, lowering his hands slowly. “Perhaps, but you have more moral character than I do. Nero has not beaten that out of you yet.”

I saw her finger brush along the trigger, and my chest tightened.

She tossed her head, sending her dark hair back over her shoulders. “Don’t be so sure.”

Sebastian’s face softened, and for a moment I thought I could see behind the veil of arrogance he wore like a second skin. He stared at her and then shook his head slowly. “Do not let them win, Sasha.”

He looked at me next and his cool demeanor returned. “If you hand her over to Nero, they still will not give you what they have promised.”

“Then I’ll kill her.”

Sebastian raised a brow. “If you kill an unarmed woman, then Nero still wins this battle, Sasha. Instead of having a research subject, they will have broken your spirit.”

I watched her gun start to lower and my blood pressure followed suit. Another howl cut through the night, and all three of us turned to look in the direction from which Sebastian had come. A wolf stepped forward, his dangerous gaze meeting mine.

“Will he recognize you when he’s a wolf?” Sasha asked.

“I don’t know.” My mind was racing from hearing Sasha say she was going to kill me. I couldn’t even be sure this wolf was Adam. I tried to remember when he’d first told me about his own shifting. He had been surprised that I didn’t have any memories of being a jaguar when I woke up in the morning, so did that mean he could remember being a wolf? Would the wolf remember being human?

I swallowed as I watched the wolf, large and black as pitch. God, he was so much bigger than a regular wolf. Massive even. Fear lit through me like wildfire, but I didn’t move from where I stood. When his eyes flicked toward me again, I knew. His eyes were a bright green, even in the glow of the moon. And then I caught the glint of silver—the silver bullet still dangled from his thick furry neck.

This massive wolf was Adam.

Part of me wished I could run to him and run my fingers through his fur. I wanted to see this other part of the man I’d come to count on, to love. But I couldn’t reach him. I wasn’t even sure if he’d let me touch him.

I didn’t know how to communicate with him in this form, but I didn’t want him to run at Sasha and get shot. I had to do something. Slowly I looked over at the gun, then I met his eyes again. He tipped his snout down and then peered back up at me as if he understood what I was trying to tell him. I was grateful when he didn’t move.

Sasha kept her eyes on the wolf. “Time for you to go, Sebastian.”

“I can’t let you give Lana to Nero, Sasha.”

“You can’t stop me either.”

Without a warning, without a noise, Sebastian knocked Sasha to the ground. Adam started to lunge forward and I shook my head. He flattened his ears and shifted his weight back and forth on his front feet, but thankfully didn’t approach.

Sasha and Sebastian grappled on the ground and after a moment, he broke free with Sasha’s gun in hand and a pair of red scratches on his face. She had also broken the split on his lip wide open. Sasha was quick to get back on her feet, her hair mussed up but otherwise not looking like he’d hit her.

Her eyes narrowed. "Give me the goddamned gun, Sebastian. Haven't you fucked up my life enough?"

He tucked the gun into the waistband of his pants. "It is not my intention to ruin your plans or your life, Sasha." His voice softened. "It never was."

"Ha!" She shook her head. "You could've fooled me. I've lost everything, you bastard! All of it. Gone. All because of you."

The bushes rustled, and my heart jumped in my throat. I couldn't see the other wolves, but I knew they were there. The Pack was together, and I was a jaguar.

An unarmed jaguar. One Adam's family wouldn't recognize as an ally.

I took a step back from Sebastian and Sasha, toward Adam. Before I could get much closer, we were bathed in headlights. Sasha was on me again before I even noticed she'd moved.

She tugged my arm up behind my back until I had to walk on my tiptoes, shoving me toward the headlights. A silhouette stepped in front of the lights.

"Is this our subject?"

I frowned. "I don't belong to you."

Sasha rewarded me with jerking my arm up even higher behind my back. My eyes brimmed with tears.

"Yes, this is her," she answered. "Now give me what I want."

I don't think the tranquilizer dart that shot toward her was what she had in mind. Sasha crumpled to the ground, and the pain in my arm ceased. I backed away from the lights and Sasha's body when Adam bolted from the trees, apparently unable to keep the wolf in check any longer. He stood in front of me, growling and baring his teeth at the men in what I could now see was a black van.

I heard the slide of a rifle being cocked and instantly the other wolves appeared from the tree line, springing into action. The headlights shut off then, followed by screams and growls. I reached down to touch the back of Adam's neck. I couldn't help but wonder if the Pack would come after me when they finished with the men in the van.

Gunfire broke through the chaos, and a pained yelp came from the same

direction. Howls ensued, and I saw a wolf dragging a large body back toward the trees. One of the men from Nero fired his gun up into the sky.

“Enough!” he yelled. “Take out the Alpha.” Then he pointed directly at Adam.

Guns and rifles cocked. Without hesitation, I vaulted over Adam, landing directly in front of him. “No!” I shouted. “Don’t shoot. I’ll go with you. Just no more killing.”

The other wolves backed up, circling around Adam, growling and baring their teeth. Would they kill me before the Nero guys got me? Other than Aren, and a brief peek at Luke, I’d never seen any of them before, and I definitely didn’t know what they looked like as wolves. Plus, they knew nothing about me except that my scent made me a jaguar. I was the enemy. How could they know I was trying to protect Adam?

Adam moved through their protective line and stood between the rest of the Pack and me. The wolves shifted, looking at each other then back up at me. A few bared their teeth, but none of the large animals moved toward me. My fingers slid into Adam’s fur, letting him know I recognized him.

A very light, tan-colored wolf stepped forward. He had bright orange, almost hazel eyes. His hackles were raised up on his back, and he nudged at Adam, but the black wolf didn’t move. I could feel the rumble of Adam’s growl. The other wolf snapped at him, but backed away just the same. I wasn’t sure what was happening, but as other wolves stepped forward to challenge him, Adam resisted their attempts to reach me. They didn’t seem to like it, but it was obvious they respected him.

But Adam told me his father was the Alpha. Not him. Not yet.

A lone howl broke the tension, and all of the wolves turned. This was my chance to give myself up to Nero. No one had to die because of me.

I bent down close to Adam’s head and whispered, “I don’t know if you can understand what I’m saying, but I love you, Adam. I love you.”

And then I turned to go.

Adam snapped at the leg of my pants. I tugged but I couldn’t break free. I stared into the blinding lights of the Nero van and held my hands up.

“Give me a minute,” I called out. I couldn’t see them, but I didn’t hear anyone moving, and no bullets were fired.

When I looked back to try to get Adam to let me go, a huge silver wolf stepped forward. The other wolves parted to let him through. As he got closer I could see his intelligent emerald eyes sparkling in the moonlight, and I knew.

This was Adam’s father.

His upper lip rose up to reveal long, sharp canines, but he didn’t growl. Adam immediately let go of my pant leg, but he didn’t move from in front of me. The Alpha pushed against him and finally snarled, but Adam stood his ground. Circling me, the silver wolf sniffed the air toward the lights of the van, and then started along the back of my leg.

I tried to hold still partly out of fear. This was a wolf, regardless of what he might have been an hour ago, and I stood still for his inspection because he wore the mantle of Alpha. Although I wasn’t a werewolf, on an instinctive level, I recognized his station and respected him for it. But deep down, I really wanted him to accept me. Besides not wanting the Pack to turn on me, I also knew this was Adam’s father. Adam’s family.

I bit back tears. Adam had just admitted his affection for a jaguar, the enemy, in front of his entire family. I wasn’t a secret anymore.

Sadly, it didn’t solve anything. The other wolves made it obvious they wanted Adam away from me. Would he be willing to disobey his father, his Alpha, in front of the Pack? It would humiliate both men. I couldn’t do this. This was Adam’s family, not mine. I didn’t have a family. I had to go.

I spun on my heel to walk to the Nero van, only to come face-to-face with the silver wolf. He barred his teeth and growled again. Before I realized what was happening, the rest of the wolves charged the van, and then the bullets started flying.

“No!” I screamed.

Adam lunged up against my back, knocking me to the ground while gunfire echoed around us. He barked in my face, and I got the distinct feeling he was telling me to stay put. With bullets flying, I was fine with lying low. Adam

loped off, and my heart raced. He should be lying low too.

Raising my head as little as possible, I tried to see what was happening, grateful for my excellent night vision. The wolves were everywhere. I heard men screaming, more gunshots, and then I noticed another black wolf, almost identical to Adam, over at the tree line. He was limping and dragging something large with him.

Then I realized what his package was.

Sasha.

Before I could decide if I should stop him or just let him have her, something occurred to me. Where was Sebastian? He'd shown up before all hell broke loose. Before Sasha got knocked out with a tranquilizer dart. I didn't see him anywhere.

I turned back toward the van and saw a familiar face. Cyrus.

He raised his gun at Adam and adrenaline shot through my veins. "No!" I jumped to my feet revealing my position. "Leave him alone! I'll go with you."

The second his eyes flicked toward me Adam attacked. Gunfire deafened my ears, and a giant silver wolf knocked me to the ground. I struggled, not certain if I was being attacked or protected.

Adam. Please let him be all right.

I rolled out from under the large wolf and rocked up on my knees. Relief swamped my entire body when the black wolf with a bullet hanging from his neck stood over a body growling. Cyrus didn't struggle. In fact, he laid deathly still.

"Retreat!" A male voice shouted.

Doors slammed and an engine started up. None of the men tried to rescue their fallen leader. The red taillights of the van grew smaller as it drove away. No license plate. Nothing.

A high-pitched whine broke the spell. At the sound, Adam left Cyrus's mangled body and galloped over to the silver wolf who had knocked me down. He nudged at the silver wolf with his snout and huffing at the Alpha. He wasn't getting up. I knelt beside the wolf and quickly found blood

spreading across his fur.

“Oh God, he’s been shot,” I whispered as the wolves circled around me.

Adam whined again, pushing at the silver wolf’s nose. I ran my hands down his side, grateful when I felt his flanks moving. He was still breathing. I needed to stop the bleeding, fast.

The entire area reeked of blood. I’d never seen anything like it. While I searched for something to use as a compress, my stomach retched, and a dry cough escaped my lips. I forced myself to keep moving until I found one of the Nero agents motionless on the ground, his throat ripped wide open. For a second the horror of it short-circuited my brain. I wasn’t sure where to start with this body.

I looked back at Adam with the silver wolf, his father. The image brought me back, forced me through the fear. I didn’t want Adam to lose his family. Staring back down at the body, I decided not to try to pull his shirt off. I wasn’t sure how well his head was still fastened to his body, I thought all too easily. Instead, I ran to his feet, ripping off his shoes so I could get to his socks.

I hurried back to Adam’s father, fell to my knees, and pressed a sock against the wound, hard enough to enter the bullet hole. The silver wolf whimpered, and I stroked his head gently, hoping it might calm him.

“I’m sorry it hurts. I’m trying to stop the bleeding. Just rest now.”

But instead of resting the wolf started to pant. Hard. His muscles tensed and trembled under my fingertips.

“What’s happening?” I looked over my shoulder, but the big black wolf with the silver bullet around his neck was gone. “Adam?” I called out. “Where are you?”

The hollow sound of joints snapping and popping drew my attention back to the injured wolf. His large body convulsed, and I suddenly realized what was happening.

“You’re shifting.” My eyes welled with tears. “No.” I shook my head. “No, you can’t waste the energy.”

I had no idea if he could understand me. But he was mutating back into a

man whether I wanted him to or not. Maybe that's what happened when they were injured or...dying.

As his fur vanished, leaving smooth tanned skin behind, I saw the exit wound of the bullet through his back. The hole was larger than I'd expected and glistened with fresh blood. I folded the other sock and bent over him to press it against the exit wound. The change was nearly finished, and the man moaned, wincing as I applied pressure.

"We need to get you to a hospital." My heart was racing. There was too much blood.

"Jason, go change. Now." The sound of Adam's voice startled me.

I spun around to find him standing right behind me. He was naked in the moonlight, his jaw set, his eyes determined. One of the tan wolves with orange eyes—Jason, I assumed—raced off into the trees.

"You're a man again. How?" Forming full sentences felt like performing high level math. "The moon is still full. I..."

Adam answered in spite of my inability to verbalize. "Yeah. It hurts like hell, but we can shift back by force." Moonlight glistened in the sweat all over his face and chest. "Takes a lot to control the wolf during a full moon, but we can if we have to."

He knelt beside me, and I met his eyes. "He's losing too much blood."

Adam took his father's hand. "Stay with me, Dad. Jason will be here in a minute. We'll get you all fixed up."

The older man's lashes fluttered and finally opened. There was no denying the resemblance.

"Introduce me," he whispered. "I want to meet your...mate."

For a moment Adam's expression softened. He took my hand, laced his fingers with mine. "This is Lana." His voice trembled when he looked at me. I could see his pain and his fear for his father, but he cleared his throat and pushed his emotions back when he looked back down at him. "Lana, this is Malcolm, my father and my Alpha."

My eyes brimmed with tears as Malcolm placed his palm over our joined hands. His mouth curved into a warm smile and his eyes moved between our

faces. “Welcome to the Pack, Lana...” His breath wheezed. He winced, closing his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again, his gaze locked on mine. “I accept you as my son’s mate.”

Adam’s eyes shone in the moonlight, his jaw slack. “But you told me—”

“I was a fool.” He fought to swallow and catch his breath. He glanced at me, and I swore his green eyes sparkled. He stared up at his son. “She’s pregnant, Adam. You didn’t tell me.”

Shock and disbelief shot through me. “You told me you have to bite a woman and convert her before you can have a baby.”

Adam nodded and looked back down at his father. “It’s impossible. I didn’t bite her, Dad.”

He coughed and moaned. “I don’t know how, but she is. Concentrate on her scent.” He pulled in another shallow breath through his nose. “Beyond the jaguar. There’s more. There’s almost your scent mixed with hers.” He nodded to himself. “She’s definitely carrying your child.”

I’m sure my face must’ve looked as shocked as I felt on the inside, my heart racing out of control. I was about to tell them I felt fine—I was pretty sure I’d know if I was pregnant. I wasn’t sick or tired. But before I could say anything, another naked man rushed to kneel beside Malcolm.

He glanced over at me. “Can you give me some room?”

I nodded and got up. Until then I hadn’t even noticed that Malcolm was nude too, but none of it mattered.

Adam watched the man’s every move. He carefully lifted the sock I’d been using for a compress and inspected the wound. Malcolm groaned and hissed as his Packmate explored the wound with his finger.

When he leaned back, he replaced the compress. “The bullet grazed your liver. I’m going to need to do surgery right away.”

Malcolm shook his head, his face glistening with sweat. “No. Just patch me up here.”

The doctor looked up at Adam. “He’s bleeding internally. We’ve got to get him to a hospital.”

“Too risky to the Pack,” Malcolm rasped. “The needs of the Pack come

first.”

Adam squeezed his father’s shoulder and looked at the doctor. “Jason, talk to him. He has to understand.”

Jason stared at his patient. “I can’t do surgery here even if I wanted to, Malcolm. I don’t have any of my equipment and not enough light. I can fix this, and you’ll be fine. We just need a hospital.”

Adam got up, his jaw tight and eyes stern. I noticed the black wolf with the injured leg was limping back to the Pack. Aren whimpered and nuzzled his father, nudging his shoulder with his long snout. I looked back at the trees and wondered if Sasha was still alive out there or if the wolf had remembered she was the one who shot him and took his revenge while she was tranquilized.

I reminded myself again that she had been about to trade me to Nero like a prize cow. She was also planning on shooting Adam.

Adam stared into each wolf’s eyes as they gathered closer around and spoke slowly. “The run is over. Malcolm needs a hospital. Go shift and meet back at the ranch.”

He turned around and knelt down beside Jason. “Let’s get him to the truck.”

“No!” Malcolm bellowed. It was most definitely a command.

The wolves halted and returned to their fallen Alpha.

With my enhanced night vision, I could see the pain in Malcolm’s eyes. He held his hand up to Adam. “Sit me up, boy. I need to say something to my Pack.”

“You *need* a hospital.”

Malcolm’s silver brow furrowed. “Do as I say, Adam.”

Chapter Forty-Two

ADAM

I shot a glare at Jason. Why wasn't he backing me up? I sighed when he looked away, attending to Malcolm's exit wound. I was on my own. I turned to my father. I knew it would dishonor him to disobey his wishes in front of the entire Pack, but I couldn't let him die.

As if he could hear my thoughts, he whispered. "Let me go, son. My life has been full. Let the Pack remember me the way I choose, giving my life under the full moon to save my grandchildren. Please, Adam."

I gnawed at the inside of my cheek, fighting to keep from scooping him up off the ground and running him to the hospital on foot. "Dad, please don't do this. You don't have to die. Not now."

He moved his head, trying to see past me. "Where is your mate?"

Lana knelt down beside me. "I'm here."

Malcolm took her hand. While the Pack watched, he brought my hand to hers and joined them together. I could feel tremors racing through my father's fingers when he covered our hands in his. Then he looked over at the Pack.

"Lana is now Adam's mate. She is a member of our Pack. Together we are family. In her womb is our future. Protect her." He closed his eyes tight and his hands slid free of ours.

"No," I growled, as I pulled his broad shoulders onto my lap. Shoulders that used to carry me when my Mom was still alive. "We need you. You have to fight."

His eyes opened and tears clouded my vision. The corner of his mouth curled up slightly as he whispered, "Where's Aren?"

My brother, already changed into his human form, limped forward. Lana held out her hand to help steady him as he sat down at our father's side. When Aren took her hand and accepted her help, something inside of me started to crumble.

Of course he would accept her now. Our father had given his blessing, and I was about to become Alpha.

Aren's eyes met mine, and I knew in that instant that he believed in me. I didn't deserve it. I didn't even want it. Not yet.

"Aren," our father whispered. He reached up to clasp Aren's cheek, the pad of his thumb sliding over my brother's skin, leaving a trail of blood behind. "You have made me a very proud father."

Aren took a deep breath, but his face remained stoic. "I love you, Dad."

Malcolm started to smile, looking from Aren's face to mine. "I love you, too. Both of you." He focused on Aren again. "Watch over your brother and his mate. I know she's not what any of us expected, but..." His eyes met mine. "I trust Adam's judgment."

My heart pounded in my chest. I wasn't ready to be the Alpha. I still needed my father.

I looked over at Lana, watching her fingers smooth back Malcolm's silver hair from his forehead. She didn't look like she even realized she was doing it, but she cared for others more than herself. She was going to be an amazing mother to our children. God... Our *children*. We were going to have a family.

I was going to be a father.

But I wanted my father to live to see it. I needed *my* father.

"I will always be with you, Adam," he whispered.

I smiled as a tear escaped the corner of my eye. "How do you do that?"

His eyes sparkled. "What?" He knew exactly what I was asking.

"How do you know what we're thinking?"

"You'll soon find out. Being Alpha comes from your heart and soul, son, not an instruction manual."

"What if I can't do it?"

He took my hand. His skin felt cold.

Lana looked over at Jason. "Can you get something to cover Malcolm please?"

Jason nodded and headed in the direction of the downed Nero team.

How did she know what I wanted before I even asked? Could everyone do that but me?

My father smiled up at me, his voice now a whisper. "If you ever need help, turn to your mate. There is a bond between you that will make both you and your Pack stronger."

Jason came back with a few shirts and a windbreaker. He and Aren covered Malcolm, and I watched his eyes drift closed again. His breathing got more rapid, thinner. Jason took his pulse and our eyes met.

"Not long," Jason mouthed.

I squeezed my eyes shut against the tears that threatened. Kneeling beside my father, I took his hand, holding it tight. "I'm sorry, Dad."

"For what?" he murmured without opening his eyes.

"For never paying attention when you tried to teach me things. I'm sorry I spent so much time being a selfish bastard."

His eyes opened, and he gave me one last smile. For a moment he looked like he did so many times when he stood in my house telling me to grow up and stop wasting my life. The weight of how much I was going to miss him cut through me like a dagger.

"I always knew you would be there when I needed you most." He gave my hand a weak squeeze. "I need you now. The Pack needs you." His breath hitched, and his lips pulled back in pain. "Lana needs you," he wheezed. "Tell my grandchildren I loved them before they were even born."

I pulled him into my arms, holding him tight, as if I could force his spirit to stay inside his ailing body. "Don't go. Please." I heard his breathing get shallower and panic seized me. "Please, no. Dad, I need you. No."

I heard his last breath, and then he was still. I held him tight, oblivious to the wind that stung my bitter tears. The Pack circled us and howled at the moon, singing my father's soul to the other side.

...

Back at the barn, I stared at my father's face. He looked peaceful, like he was only sleeping, but he wasn't ever going to wake up. The pyre was built out back, and tonight we would celebrate his life and finish the ceremony by cremating his remains. I hadn't slept. I couldn't.

I had left Lana sleeping in my...our bedroom. She'd worked right beside me all through the night, helping the Pack dispose of the bodies and all other evidence of the fight with Nero. Knowing she was close helped me focus on the work. I'm sure she had plenty she wanted to say to me, but she didn't push. I also knew I probably should say something to her about the twins—or at least I figured they would be twins. It was in our natures—and about me being the Alpha now. But I didn't have time for words, and somehow she seemed to understand.

When we had first gotten back to the ranch, we'd fallen right into bed. At some point Lana drifted off, but I kept staring at the bruises and cuts around her tiny wrists. We never found Sasha's body, but we assumed she was part of the death toll. Lana had seen Aren drag her away—her remains could've been left for scavengers. I didn't ask him outright if he'd finished her, but I didn't have to. He would've told me if she'd escaped.

Sebastian slipped away. He may have gotten away in the Nero van, or maybe he ran during the fight. It didn't matter right now.

The sun was rising. A new day. I stood in my barn with all I had left of my father. His empty shell.

"Couldn't sleep?"

I turned around to see my brother, on crutches, making his way down the barn aisle. I nodded and focused back on Malcolm. "Yeah." Aren pulled a stool over and sat beside me. I shook my head. "I still can't believe he's gone."

Aren nodded. "Me neither." He paused and looked over at me. "I'm glad you told him about Lana."

"He wasn't happy about it at first."

Aren shrugged. "If I brought home a jaguar for a mate, you wouldn't have been happy for me at first either."

I thought about it and had to agree. "I guess you're right."

"She was amazing last night," Aren said quietly. "In spite of everything, she never lost her head."

"So you trust her now?"

He nodded. "With my Alpha's life."

My shoulders tensed. "Don't call me that." I looked at our father and blinked hard to hold back the bitter tears. "Not yet."

Aren rested a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. "You acted like an Alpha last night."

"I cried like a boy who lost his father."

"You were. So was I. Doesn't make you any less of an Alpha." His hand lifted from my shoulder as he went on. "None of us were thinking straight last night. We never would have cleared the lake of the evidence. In the chaos, the wolves would have scattered and met back here. But we stayed and we made the right choices because you did, Adam. In spite of the pain and fear and rage, you put the Pack first."

I clenched my jaw to bite back the wave of emotions brewing inside of me. I met Aren's eyes and whispered, "I was going to leave this morning with Lana. I wasn't putting the Pack first then."

Aren shook his head. "You wouldn't have gone."

"You're wrong. I was ready. We were going to leave this morning to draw Nero away from Reno."

He was quiet for a moment, and I watched for any sign of how he was feeling, but Aren's face was a mask. Finally he looked up from Malcolm and met my eyes. "Are you still leaving?"

His question jarred me. "I don't know."

Aren's brow furrowed, and he shot up off the stool, wincing in pain when he put weight on his injured ankle.

"You don't know?" he fumed, grabbing a crutch to lean on. "You selfish asshole. How can you say that, Adam? If you leave now, then you leave the

Pack with me, an injured Alpha. You remember what that means, right?”

“What does it mean?”

We both turned and saw Lana walking toward us. Her dark hair was mussed from sleeping and she looked exhausted, but somehow in spite of all that, she had a glow of natural beauty that blinded me.

Aren glared at me and then answered Lana. “If he doesn’t become the Alpha of our Pack, then I would be next in line. Since I can’t lead the Pack right now, one of the others would have to step forward.”

I finished it for him. “Once they step forward, they have to fight Aren to the death for the Alpha spot unless he agrees to leave Pack territory.”

Lana’s eyes widened. “What?”

Aren nodded and snatched up his other crutch. He kissed her cheek as he passed by and growled, “Please knock some sense into my idiot brother.”

Chapter Forty-Three

LANA

I watched Aren go, trying to steady myself. God, was I so starved for a family that a simple peck on the cheek from Adam's brother made my heart sing? Apparently the answer was yes, because the small gesture made me feel like part of the family.

Adam was sitting on a stool, facing his father's body. I couldn't imagine his pain. I'd always wished for a father, wished I'd even just known who he was. I used to imagine he'd be proud of me. Maybe he was a writer like I was.

But Adam had all of that. And now his father was gone.

I stepped up behind him and massaged his shoulders. They were like cement. His head fell forward, and he moaned. I kissed the back of his neck while I did my best to loosen the knots. I could almost feel the weight of the world resting on his broad shoulders.

"What were you and Aren fighting about?" I figured it was best to approach calmly, casually, though I knew where the conversation would inevitably go. Adam was not leaving his brother here to be killed.

"He was telling me what a great Alpha I was last night, and I let him know that until Malcolm got shot I was planning on leaving with you. Now I don't know what's going to happen."

I wrapped my arms around him and closed my eyes, breathing him into my lungs. I felt his fingers lightly trace over the bruises from the handcuffs.

"They're never going to leave us alone, Lana. Nero will be back."

I didn't want to think about Nero or the blood and body parts we cleaned

up last night. I wanted to pretend we were a normal couple, just for a little while. I opened my eyes and saw Malcolm pale and motionless on the pyre. I couldn't hide from this though.

The horses nickered as I moved around to sit next to Adam. "I wish I had the right answer, Adam. I feel like I'm just treading water, trying not to sink into panic. So many questions are rattling around in my head. Your Dad can't be right about me being pregnant. You haven't bitten me. I don't even know if that would work since I'm already a different kind of...animal. And now that he's gone, you can't leave with me. You have to stay here and lead the Pack. They need you."

He took my hand and looked over at me. "But I can't do this without you."

My eyes were already raw from crying, but they brimmed with tears again anyway. "Your Pack will never be safe if I'm here."

His green eyes narrowed. "I'll never let anyone hurt you again, Lana."

"Then you'll spend the rest of your life fighting them."

"No." He leaned over and kissed me so soft and slow that my heart ached. I opened my eyes again, and his gaze held mine, demanding my attention. "I will spend the rest of my life loving you."

A tear spilled down my cheek. "Your father would be alive right now if it wasn't for me."

He cupped my cheek, brushing away my tear with the pad of his thumb. "If it wasn't for you, I never would have learned to love anyone but myself."

"I know Malcolm said I was part of the Pack, but they didn't get a say in that. Do you think they could ever truly accept me?"

"Aren already has. The rest of them will too. It may take some of them longer than others."

"They'll resent me after a few more visits from Nero."

He shook his head. "We'll be ready for them in the future. They won't catch us off-guard again. Plus, we already know what Sasha and Sebastian look like so we'll watch for them. Don't underestimate the Pack, Lana. We can protect ourselves."

"Believe me, I saw the carnage last night." I stared at my hands. "I was

going to leave last night. While you were running with the wolves. I already had a plane ticket to leave for Chicago.”

He was up off the stool so fast that I flinched. “Why? I told you I’d go with you.”

“I didn’t want you to give up your family for me. It wasn’t right, Adam. You’d never be happy without them.”

“So you weren’t even going to give me a choice? You were just going to walk away?”

His words stung. I got up and crossed my arms. “I loved you enough to walk away so you could keep your family. You have the one thing I’ve always wanted. How can I take that from you?”

He shook his head and raked his fingers through his dark hair as he walked over to pat Bruce. “Let me get this straight. I was ready to give up my entire life for you, and you were planning to dump me the entire time.” He looked over his shoulder at me with a disgusted look on his face. “So did you come down here to tell me goodbye, or are you just going to surprise me when you leave?”

“It’s not like that. I didn’t want to hurt you or your family.”

He spun on me. “What part of *I love you* did you miss? When I told you that, I meant it. You didn’t think it would hurt when I found out you were gone? You didn’t think it would rip my heart out to find you left me while I was a wolf and vanished without a trace? I thought we were a team. I trusted you.” He looked up toward the sky and shook his head. “I should have listened to them.” His eyes met mine and he whispered, “They told me a jaguar could never love me.”

I couldn’t listen to another word. I turned and ran from the barn, his final stab following me out. “After we made love in the barn,” he called after me, “you said you’d love me forever. What an asshole I was to believe you.”

...

Aren leaned against the doorframe while I jammed the few personal

belongings I still had into a bag. For a split second I thought it was Adam, but the crutch and wrapped up ankle gave him away. He raised a brow as I zoomed past him in search of my tennis shoes.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

I’d spent the better part of the last half hour bottling up my feelings and trying to morph them into self-righteous anger. Adam had twisted everything around. I did love him. I loved him enough to leave him. I was being noble, not hurtful. The bastard.

“I’m leaving.”

“Now?” He straightened up on his crutch. “Where are you going?”

“Anywhere but here.” I pulled the sides of the bag together and massaged the zipper until it finally slid over the opening.

“What happened?”

I sighed, trying to keep my rage simmering so I couldn’t fall apart. “I know that he told you we were planning on leaving this morning so we could keep Nero away from the Pack, but—”

“He told me he was leaving because the Pack would never accept his mate.”

“Well, I didn’t want him to do that for me.”

“Did you tell him that?”

I sighed. “I thought so. I don’t know.” Tears were threatening again. I took a deep breath and tossed the bag over my shoulder. “My laptop was in Adam’s Jeep when Sasha shot out the tires. Was it still in there when Luke and Logan went over to tow it back?”

He nodded. “Yeah, they left all your stuff beside the sofa last night.”

“Thank you.” I moved past him, noting again the subtle difference between his scent and Adam’s. Adam always smelled musky, like a forest after rain, a wildness to it. Aren’s was similar, but where Adam oozed charm, Aren didn’t. His scent was harder to describe. His scent reminded me of autumn, spicy and intimate, with the aura of winter. Almost as if he had a wall constructed around himself. I shook off the thoughts, picked up my laptop, and went to call a cab.

“So now you’re leaving him, but you’re mad at him for being upset that you’re leaving?”

I sighed and looked up at Aren with the phone in my hand. “I don’t want to go. Not anymore.”

“Then why are you packing?” His brow furrowed.

“Because.” A sob strangled my voice. I cleared my throat and squeaked out, “Because I told Adam I was planning to leave last night so he could stay with all of you and Nero would leave the Pack alone. And now he thinks...” I wiped a tear away. “Now I need to go.”

Aren glanced toward the barn and back at me. “So my new Alpha is an asshole?”

I laughed through my tears. “He’s not an asshole. But he’s not happy with me.”

Aren hobbled over and sat next to me. “Here’s a secret for you, little kitty, and I’ll deny it if you ever repeat a word.”

I wiped my nose and nodded.

“My brother, Adam, is a total horse’s ass when he doesn’t get eight hours of sleep. I’m not saying whether or not you deserved whatever it was he just dished out down there, but we just lost our father and our Alpha. He just got an entire Pack to lead dumped on his shoulders, and on top of all of that, he’s going to be a father himself.” He gave me a little nudge with his elbow. “All that packaged with no sleep, and I bet Adam can’t even stand himself, let alone any of us.”

Placing the phone back on the charger, I took another deep breath and looked at the carbon copy of the man I loved with all my heart. “I love him, Aren. I didn’t want to hurt him, but I didn’t want him to give up his family for me. He doesn’t know how lucky he is to have all of you in his life.”

“The question is, will you give us the chance to have *you* in our lives? I know you’ve seen me on less than my best behavior, but can you handle an entire Pack? Because in spite of our bad attitudes and fighting, we always know beyond a shadow of a doubt that if we need help, we’ve got each other’s backs.”

“But you’re all wolves. I’m...not.”

His mouth curved into a crooked grin. “We’ll still be there for you even though you’re a kitty.”

I elbowed him. “Jaguar. A big, scary black one. Adam showed me a picture. I’m ferocious.”

Aren tipped his head back and laughed. I’d never heard him laugh before, and I felt warmth fill me. I had a brother.

“Glad you find this funny.”

We both looked up to see a very unhappy Adam staring at us. Aren stopped laughing. My smile drained from my face.

Aren pulled himself up on his crutches. “I’ll let you two talk.”

He moved really fast for a guy with a broken ankle.

Adam didn’t move. He stood across the room, pinning me with his stare.

I met his eyes and whispered, “It was because I loved you that I was going to leave.”

“No.” He shook his head. “It’s because you’re a coward.”

“What?” I dropped my bag and my brow furrowed. “I am not. I just wanted you to be happy. I love you, and I was putting your needs before mine.”

“You love me and it scares the crap out of you.”

My jaw dropped, and the volume of my voice rose. “What scares me is that Nero will come back and hurt you and your family.”

“It’s easier to live life on the run, isn’t it? You don’t ever have to worry about getting hurt that way. When things get uncomfortable you just move on to the next city. No one to worry about but yourself.”

“That is so unfair,” I yelled, pointing at him. “I never asked to live like that. I never got to know my parents or have a family. You have everything I ever wished for and you treat it like shit.”

I started to pick up my bags, but he came across the room and grabbed my hand. “And the moment you had a chance to have everything you wished for, you were going to run.” He stared into my eyes, and his expression softened. His free hand came up to cup my face, and I felt all my rage and frustration start to crumble. “I am so sorry I didn’t tell my family about us and force

them to accept us right from the beginning. You weren't the only coward, Lana."

I pulled my hand free and gave him a half-hearted shove. "I wasn't being a coward. I never wanted to leave you, Adam." I stared into his eyes, hoping he could see the truth in my words. "I love you so much. I couldn't go on if something happened to you because of me."

"Then we should stay here. We have strength in numbers. We can fight Nero. But I can't lead the Pack and be the Alpha if I'm worried that I'll come home from a ride one day and you'll be gone. If that's still in your mind I won't be able to think straight, Lana." He bent to kiss me before continuing. "From the first moment I looked into your eyes, you had me. I could never leave you, and dammit it hurts like hell to know you could leave me."

A tear spilled down my cheek as I shook my head slowly. "I didn't mean to hurt you, Adam. But if I stay, it will be forever, so you better not let Nero hurt you." I kissed him and bit at his bottom lip playfully. "Or I'll be pissed."

He smiled and scooped me up into his arms. "Angry cats are the worst."

"And don't you forget it." I laughed sliding my arms around his neck as he carried me back to the bedroom.

He laid me down on the bed and pulled me into his arms. "Malcolm was right about the baby."

I looked up at him. "Really? You can tell too?"

He shrugged. "Your scent is different, and when I'm very close to you I can hear a faint heartbeat next to yours."

"That's impossible. Even if I was pregnant, it's way too soon for a heartbeat."

"Gestation for us isn't as long as for humans. That's part of the reason why a human woman can't get pregnant with us until we convert her." His hand slid down over my still-flat abdomen. "Jaguars must be similar. We're both shifters." Splaying his fingers out he smiled at me. "Plus, you're glowing."

"What?" Now I was completely lost. "You're sleep-deprived. I look like hell."

"No." He smiled, looking way too sexy for anyone's good. "You look

amazing. More alive and more beautiful than you ever have.”

I kissed him and murmured against his lips. “Now you’re just trying to get lucky.”

“Is it working?”

I tangled my legs with his and slid his hand up from my belly to my breast.
“What do you think?”

Chapter Forty-Four

ADAM

I woke up when the first car pulled in, but I didn't move. Lana was still sleeping, curled up and facing me. She had a hint of a smile on her lips. It was all I could do not to kiss her again. I wasn't ready to get up and face the reality of what lay ahead for us tonight.

We had made love long and slow before falling asleep, whispering secrets we'd never share with anyone else. Her love filled a place in my heart that I never realized was empty. I never knew love could be so honest and real and overpowering. When she looked at me with her dark eyes filled with emotion, I felt like the luckiest man on earth, like a superhero, like anything was possible.

But none of it was going to bring my father back.

Another vehicle pulled down the drive to the barn. It sounded like Jason's truck. *Jason*. Suddenly I knew I needed to talk to him. I sensed it. My brow furrowed. Strange. Did he feel like he'd let the Pack down by not being able to save Malcolm? On some level I never knew existed, I knew he needed me.

I kissed Lana's cheek, drinking in her scent like a balm for all the wounds in my heart. She stretched and her lashes fluttered. The sight of her smile as she opened her eyes made my heart pound.

"Is it time to get up?" She stretched her arms over her head.

I nodded. "Yeah, the Pack is here. We better get down there."

Her smile vanished, and she took my hand. "I'm sorry, Adam."

I brought her hand to my lips and kissed the back of her fingers. "We'll get through this."

Then another sixth-sense-type realization hit me. Aren. Something was... off with him. I focused on Lana again. "This is going to sound crazy, but I need to tell you something."

Lana chuckled. The sound of her laughter was a gift. I'd never be able to tell my father goodbye without her shoulder to lean on.

"I turn into a jaguar once a month, and I've seen what an amazing wolf you are when the moon is full. What could be crazier than that?"

"My dad used to have a sense about the members of the Pack. It was creepy sometimes how he'd know something was wrong and then just show up. He did it to me a couple of times after I first met you. Every once in a while he could almost finish your thoughts for you even though you didn't say anything out loud."

"Maybe he was a little bit psychic?"

"He said something to me last night about how I would know how to be the Alpha. I thought he was crazy, but now..."

Her brow creased. "Are you all right?"

I nodded. "I'm fine, it's just that now... I sense them. Like when Jason drove in, I knew I needed to talk to him tonight. I could feel his guilt over my father dying."

"But it wasn't his fault."

"I know that, but he's our doctor. He's worried Aren and I are angry with him, and that he let the Pack down by not saving Malcolm."

She raised a brow. "That is kinda crazy." Then she kissed me and smiled. "Crazy cool."

My grin went crooked. "Too bad it doesn't seem to work with you."

Lana got out of bed, and my eyes slid over every curve.

"Good thing. I'm pretty sure it'd piss me off if you thought you knew what I was thinking all the time."

"You'd change your mind just to prove me wrong," I teased as I pulled on my pants.

Lana popped her head through one of my T-shirts and shot me an innocent look. "Who? Me?"

I kissed her tenderly and smiled. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For helping me get through tonight."

Color flushed over Lana's cheeks. "You don't need to thank me. I thought we agreed we're a team now, right?"

"I want to be your husband." I hadn't realized I was going to say the words, but once they were out of my mouth, I knew they were true. Lana didn't say anything, and my heart started to pound.

"Are you asking me to marry you?"

I swallowed the lump in my throat as I looked at the tiny ball of fire wearing my shirt and a pair of wrinkled blue jeans. "This wasn't how I pictured I would propose."

Lana grinned and rushed into my arms, laughing. "Then it's just perfect."

I kissed her long and slow, savoring the way her soft lips parted and her tongue tangled with mine. I'd never get tired of tasting her. Never. I drew back with a smile.

"So is that a yes?"

Her eyes sparkled up at me. "Yes."

I kissed her again, holding her so tight that her feet left the ground. With a single word, Lana had added light to a dark day in my life. I could face anything with her in my corner.

...

When we got down to the barn everyone had arrived except Gareth. The last remaining members of our elders, Nicholas and Wyatt, with their mates Laura and Sarah, stood together, stoic beside Malcolm's body, saying their goodbyes. As Lana and I approached they both straightened and offered their condolences.

"Thank you." I clasped their forearms. "It looks like we're only missing Gareth."

"He may not make it. He's still mourning his brother." Nicholas made eye

contact with Wyatt. “Since Gabe was killed by a jaguar, Gareth is struggling seeing our Alpha with...”

His words died away, but I could feel my hackles rising. “She had nothing to do with Gabe’s death. She helped me try to save him.”

“So you say,” Gareth replied from behind me.

I didn’t turn around to face him. I wanted to blow my stack and attack him, but staring at my father’s body reminded me that I couldn’t be the hotheaded son of the Alpha anymore. I *was* the Alpha. I was now the voice of reason for my Pack. Somewhere the fates were laughing their asses off.

Gareth finally came around to greet the elders, and then faced me. “I’m sorry about Malcolm,” he said clasping my forearm.

“Thank you. I miss Gabe, too, you know”

He glanced at Lana. “Not enough.”

When he tried to step back, I didn’t release his forearm. Instead, I pulled him up close to me. His eyes widened, but he didn’t fight.

“Whatever you think of my mate needs to stay inside of your lips. Do you understand me?”

Gareth was the polar opposite of his twin, Gabe. Where Gabe had a warm smile for everyone, Gareth usually had a dismissive look. He’d never attacked anyone in the Pack, but he was our lone wolf. It was tough to read what was going on in his mind, so I wanted to be sure he understood I wouldn’t tolerate any threats against Lana. If he couldn’t get past that she was a jaguar and the mate of his Alpha, then he could leave the Pack forever. His choice.

“Do you understand me, Gareth?” I asked him one more time.

His eyes looked as black as his hair. He gripped my arm tighter. “Yes.”

He tore his arm out of my grip and turned on his heel to walk out the back toward the pyre we built for Malcolm.

Wyatt stepped in closer. “He’s hurting. His brother was all he had left. He misses him. We all do.”

“I know.” I nodded.

They followed Gareth out, and I walked over to Aren. “Have you seen

Jason anywhere?”

Aren scanned the barn and then shook his head. “He pulled in about twenty minutes ago with Jared, but I haven’t seen him since.”

To my surprise, my brother leaned down to embrace Lana. I couldn’t help but smile. If she could win over Aren, the rest of the Pack would surely follow. I just needed to be patient. Not one of my strong suits.

“I need to find him. I’ll be right back.”

Aren nodded. “I’ll keep Lana company until you get back.”

“Thanks.” I kissed her forehead. “Be back soon.”

...

Jason was standing at the pasture fence, feeding carrots to one of the old broodmares. She nickered and nudged his arm for more treats. He pulled out another piece of a carrot from his jacket pocket and stroked his hand down her mane.

“You can’t find a better listener on earth than a horse,” I said as I approached. Jason looked over at me and nodded. His light brown hair was tied back at his collar, and he wore black from head to toe. But he still didn’t say anything. “You’re gonna spoil Sandy if you feed her any more carrots,” I added.

He rubbed the blaze that ran down her forehead. “Sorry, Sandy. Adam said you’ve had enough. Blame him for the carrot shortage.”

He turned to face me, and we clasped forearms. “I’m sorry about Malcolm.”

“I wanted to talk to you about that before the ceremony.”

Jason raised a brow, and I could sense him tensing up. I shook off the strange psychic interference. “I want you to know that I know none of this was your fault.”

He started to open his mouth and then closed it again, pondering. When he finally spoke, his voice was soft and low. “I should have backed you up to take him to the hospital. It didn’t matter that he was the Alpha. I should have

made him go to the hospital. I could have saved him, Adam.”

I shook my head slowly. “I don’t think you could have.”

“I could have repaired his liver and stopped the bleeding. I know it.”

“You don’t understand. I think Malcolm was ready to cross over. He wanted to die with the Pack and not in the hospital.”

“I’m a doctor, Adam. Patients live when you give them surgery.”

“You were there when my dad was dying. You saw him. He didn’t look frightened or sad. He looked ready.”

“What are you saying?”

I shrugged. “I’m not sure what it all means, except that maybe he was waiting for me to find my mate so he could cross over to be with his. You know the Pack never would have accepted Lana without his blessing.”

“Even with his blessing it will be hard to win over a few of them.” Jason stopped and met my eyes. “Is she really pregnant?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I’m sure of it.”

“That’s impossible, though, isn’t it?”

“I’ll have to catch you up on her history after the ceremony, but Lana was born into her power.”

His eyes widened. “Also impossible. Only males carry the gene.”

“Until now. Nero was working on a breeding experiment with psychics and jaguars to give birth to females born into their power.”

“So you think because she’s already a shifter, she can carry your child?”

“Just a guess, but after the ceremony, maybe you can check her out and make sure everything is all right?”

He nodded. “Of course.”

“We better get up there.” I said the words, but inside I wished I didn’t have to go. I wished my father were still with me to answer my questions and help me keep my mate safe and my babies strong.

As Jason and I walked back to the barn, I felt very alone, and an icy dagger of fear shot down my spine. I stopped walking and looked back up at the house.

“Everything okay?” Jason asked.

I couldn't see anything moving, but my senses were on high alert. I took a deep breath, pulling all the scents inside my lungs to process, but nothing specific caught my attention. With a heavy heart, I turned and went back to the pyre with Jason to greet my Pack and say goodbye to my father.

Chapter Forty-Five

LANA

Malcolm's body rested on top of the large pyre. I stood with Adam at his head, and Aren to Adam's right. The rest of the Pack took places around Malcolm and waited. I looked up at Adam and wished I could ease his pain. His eyes looked older, heavy with the weight of this task.

Adam took a deep breath and looked at each Pack member with a slow sweep of his gaze. He cleansed Malcolm's face with oils, and then lifted his head toward the stars. "Tonight we celebrate the life of our Alpha, our leader and friend, my father, Malcolm. He was a counselor, a peacekeeper, and a fierce protector of his own. Now that he has crossed over, I accept his responsibilities to the Pack. I will carry the burdens of our safety and battles on my shoulders." His voice softened. "I will always keep his memory alive in my heart, and I only hope that I will make him proud of our progress. We offer his spirit back to the moon and the night. May his soul be lifted, free to run with the Pack of our ancestors and watch over those he has left behind."

Aren stepped forward. "I call to our mother, Martha. Please welcome your mate, and guide our father to the other side."

One by one the Pack members shared a story of Malcolm and touched the pyre with a torch before passing it to the next. When the torch finally reached me, the fire was already blazing hot. I didn't realize I would have to speak. I wasn't ready. I barely knew him, but when the weight of the torch was placed in my hand I called out.

"Thank you for accepting me. I wish our children could know their grandfather." At that moment something inside of me fluttered. I dropped the

torch in surprise. Adam picked it up and tossed it into the fire.

“Are you all right?” he whispered in my ear.

“I think they just kicked.”

He slid his arm around my waist and pulled me in close to his body. Together we watched his father’s body burn until his ashes floated up into the night air, stolen away by the wind. As the fire crumpled into embers, the Pack chanted a melancholy farewell.

With the ceremony over, I helped Aren back up to the house while Adam and the others buried the embers to quiet the fire. Once I had Aren settled on the couch I elevated his ankle and went back to the kitchen to get him some water. On my way back I felt movement inside of me again and nearly dropped the glass. Aren sat up on the sofa, ready to spring into action.

“Everything okay?”

I nodded, rubbing at my stomach with my free hand. “Yeah. I keep thinking I feel the twins kicking, but I know it’s too soon for that.”

“How do you figure?” Aren looked like he was fighting back a smile.

I handed him the glass of water. “Because if I’m actually pregnant, I could only be a couple weeks along. Adam thought he could hear a heartbeat, but even so...”

The door opened behind me, and I smiled when Adam walked in. Jason was following close behind. Funny thing to meet a man when he was naked, now it seemed surprising to see him dressed. I hoped that would go away eventually.

Adam kissed my forehead and smiled over at Aren. “I felt like Dad was there with us tonight. Did you?”

“I think so. I was dreading the ceremony, but once it started...” His voice drifted off, and he shrugged with a slight nod. “It did feel like he was with us. I didn’t feel so much sad as I did proud.”

I looked up at Adam, relieved to see him smiling again.

“Me too,” he said as he glanced down at me. “I brought Jason with me to check on the babies.”

“What?” I frowned, suddenly feeling nervous. I looked over at Jason and

then back up at Adam. "Sorry, but I haven't even taken a pregnancy test yet. And even if it is positive, I'd rather go see an obstetrician." I peeked over at Jason. "No offense."

"None taken," he said with a smug smile.

Adam shook his head. "You can't go to a regular doctor. You're not having a regular pregnancy. Besides, the hospital is how Nero found you, remember? All it would take is a red flag on a test that comes out irregular, and they'll know where you are."

"They already know," I argued. "I want a real doctor, Adam."

Jason stepped forward. "Excuse me, but I am a real doctor."

"What?" I looked up at his hazel, almost-orange eyes, half expecting his hair to be a mane around him like it had been last night at the lake. He looked tame now with it all tied back. He appeared to be...professional. I sighed. "So you have a medical degree?"

"I do." He nodded with a sparkle in his eyes. "I even have an office at the hospital. You can come inspect my diploma if you'd like."

"That won't be necessary." I looked down at my hands. "I'm sorry. This is all happening so fast, I can't keep up."

Jason nudged Adam. "You haven't told her, have you?"

"Told me what?"

Jason's gaze met mine. "I can hear the heartbeats now. We all can."

My hands went to my abdomen. Was it getting bigger? I looked down, my brow furrowing. I'd hardly eaten anything, but my stomach was definitely pooched out. In one day? Holy crap!

"What are you guys trying to tell me?"

Adam took my hand. "I'm trying to say I want Jason to check you over because—"

"Because why?" I could feel my blood pressure rising. "Talk to me, Adam!"

He chuckled and knelt down in front of me. Holding my hands in his, Adam looked up at me with the most gorgeous green eyes. No one should be that irresistible. I rolled my eyes and shook my head.

“The babies will be born in about four months.”

I would’ve fallen down if I wasn’t already sitting. I felt my jaw go slack. I glanced over at my new doctor. “Is this true?”

Jason opened his hands the way doctors do when they’re trying to calm their patients. I wanted to jump up and shake him.

“Well, for our Pack the average gestation time has always been four months. Since you weren’t converted”—he glanced at Adam, then back at me—“we’re wandering into uncharted territory here.”

I clung tighter to Adam’s hands. “Did Adam tell you I wasn’t bitten by a jaguar either? I was born into my power.”

Jason lifted a brow. “He did, although I still don’t know how that’s possible.”

“I’ve been changing for years, not knowing that’s what was happening.”

Adam straightened up. “Nero was experimenting with psychic women, trying to breed female jaguars who are born into their power. Sebastian smuggled the records out and gave them to Lana.”

Jason rubbed the bridge of his nose. “I don’t know the standard gestation for jaguar females. I’ll need to do some research.” He met my eyes and offered a smile that spoke volumes. “I’m sorry I don’t have all the answers yet, but we’ll get through this, Lana. I’ve got my bag out in the truck. Do you mind if I have a listen?”

I shook my head, and he disappeared outside. Adam rose up and kissed me tenderly before the pacing began. Jason came back in with a stethoscope around his neck and a bag in his hand. The doctors on General Hospital would kill to look so good.

He knelt down beside the chair and popped the black rubber plugs into his ears. “Can you lift up your shirt?” It was actually Adam’s T-shirt, but I slid it up over my stomach anyway, making a mental note that I had a major shopping trip coming soon.

The metal was cold on my skin, and I felt a flutter of movement again.

Jason grinned. “Did you feel that? They don’t like the cold.”

I smiled and nodded. “I felt it.”

“Do you want to hear them?” he asked.

I nodded, and he carefully put the earpieces in my ears. I could hear the whooshing of not one, but two small hearts. My eyes welled up with tears as I looked over at Adam. He froze, staring at me. I held up my hand and gestured for him to come over. When he did, I started to take off the stethoscope, but he shook his head, placing his hand, fingers splayed, over my abdomen.

“I hear them,” he whispered.

In that one single moment, I had a family. My family.

I pulled Adam to me and kissed him with every bit of love that was in my heart. I knew the future was uncertain. I was a medical anomaly, but I didn’t care. I felt safe and loved and a part of something larger than myself. Whatever the future brought, Adam and I would face it together. Two parts of one stronger whole.

We both drew back from the kiss, and Adam rested his forehead against mine. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Aren launched a pillow at us. “Get a room you two.”

Adam got up and retaliated, knocking his twin in the head with the soft projectile while Jason tucked his stethoscope back into the bag and shook his head. “Ignore them. They’ve always been like this.”

I grinned. “I hope they never change.”

Epilogue

ADAM

Bruce loped around the arena while I worked the reins to get him to drop his neck. The wind blew past my ears, biting my skin with the fall chill in the air. Billows of fog floated by, giving the illusion that we were flying, racing through the clouds. The past three months had been quiet. Although we'd been patrolling the city nightly, there was still no sign of any jaguars lurking. Since taking out Cyrus and sending the surviving members of his team running, Nero had to be regrouping. It was obvious the Pack wasn't going to relinquish Lana to them, and now that we knew they existed, we'd keep watch.

If they showed up in Reno again, we'd be ready for them.

I was glad for the respite. Alpha senses I never had before kept flooding me when I least expected the interruption. I wish I knew how Malcolm made it all look so simple and seamless. When I suddenly knew one of my Pack needed me, I felt like I'd just seen the Bat-Signal. I wanted to jump in my Batsuit, fire up the Batmobile, and race off to the rescue, but I was still learning my new role. The Alpha wasn't supposed to fight every battle. I needed to make my interference in Pack affairs as minimal as possible. But sometimes that was easier said than done.

My brother, for example, was never easy. I knew he was hiding something, but regardless of how often we talked, he never offered me a clue that anything was wrong. But I could feel it. I knew. Yet there was nothing I could do until he decided to share.

My best guess was that it was something to do with his concern over his

ankle healing to full strength or something like that. It'd make sense for him to have those kinds of fears. While he was finally off the crutches, he still favored his good leg, and Jason still wasn't sure if he'd ever get back his full mobility again. The Pack needed him for patrols anyway, but I couldn't let him go out alone anymore. His bruised ego came across in a short temper and overall bad attitude, but I didn't know what else I could do. Being the Alpha, he had to obey my order, but he didn't have to like it.

I understood my father more and more every day.

And then there was Lana.

I stopped Bruce as we came around to the chair underneath the tree. Lana's fingers slowed and finally rested on the laptop keyboard as she looked up at me. "I thought you were training the horses."

I put my hand on the saddle horn and grinned down at my wife. She'd married me just over a month ago, making me the luckiest bastard in the world. "I am, but my wife keeps distracting me."

She laughed and closed her laptop, exposing her enormous round belly. My heart swelled in my chest. Our babies were due any day, and I was eager and terrified all at once. Jason seemed confident he could deliver the babies without a problem, but Jason always seemed confident. I was pretty sure doctors had to pass a class in confidence.

"Your wife is the size of a house at the moment." She rubbed her belly with both hands. "Ripe and ready to burst."

I jumped off of Bruce and lifted the reins over his head. Leading him over to Lana, I took her hand and helped her up from the chair. As soon as she was vertical her face went white. Her grip on my hand squeezed until I felt my knuckles popping.

"Luke," I screamed. "I need you. Now!"

He poked his head around the corner. "Yeah?"

"Come get Bruce. Lana's in labor." Luke snatched the reins from me quickly. "Call Jason."

Luke nodded, and took the horse back to the barn while I scooped Lana up into my arms. She winced, her brow already beading with sweat.

“Jason’s on his way. It’ll be okay.”

She nodded, blowing out her breath the way we’d been practicing. It hurt me to see the pain etched in the lines of her face. Guilt weighed on me, and I wished I could take the burden from her. But all I could do was lay her out on the bed and hold her hand. For the next half hour I kept watching the clock, timing her contractions. Jason had said it could take hours, but the contractions were already under five minutes apart. These babies were ready. I did my best not to panic.

She met my eyes. “I’ll be all right.”

“I know you will. Those babies are lucky they have such an amazing mom.” The corner of my mouth curved up, and I wiped her brow with a cool washcloth. “*I’m* supposed to be reassuring *you*, remember?”

She shrugged. “I don’t like to see you worried.” Her hand reached out to caress my face. “I like to see you smile.”

I kissed her palm. “You have that effect on me.”

Another contraction hit, and her hand slapped the mattress. “Oh God, it’s getting worse.” She tried to breathe, but a sob escaped her throat instead.

Where the hell was Jason?

During the next half hour her contractions came more rapidly, and I called Jason’s cell again. Right to voicemail. *Shit.*

I knelt at her side again, holding her hand and wiping her brow. “You’re doing great,” I encouraged her. As the contraction faded, she took a deep breath and opened her eyes again.

“They’re coming. I can feel it.”

I could hear the panic in her voice. “Jason’s on his way.” *Or he damned well better be.*

She shook her head. “He won’t make it, Adam.” Her eyes locked with mine. “I need you to help me.”

My pulse skyrocketed, pounding in my ears as I shook my head. “He’ll be here...”

Her next contraction interrupted me with the force of a hurricane. Lana leaned forward from the pillows and pulled her knees up. The bed linens

were turning crimson. I pushed the sheet up from her feet, just as the top of a tiny head crowned. All my panic vanished, and my adrenaline kicked into high gear.

“I can see the head, Lana. You’re almost there. Push.”

She closed her eyes, moaning as she strained. Her hands gripped the sheets, tugging until the contraction ended. A tiny wail interrupted Lana’s exhausted panting. Her eyes widened as I scooped up the baby in my hands. Tears ran down her face when I showed her our little howling son.

“He’s beautiful,” I whispered.

She nodded, reaching up to touch his cheek. “Let’s name him Malcolm.”

Tears obstructed my vision, but I nodded. “I’d like that.”

Suddenly her hand fell away. Oh God, I’d forgotten there was another baby coming! Panic was back in full force. While one tiny life cried in my hand, another was fighting to be born. I couldn’t put him down, but I couldn’t leave the other one. Lana needed me.

“Got your hands full?”

Never in my entire life had I been so happy to see Jason. He took over, helping Lana to deliver Malcolm’s twin while I stayed beside her, doing my best to encourage her. When we heard the second cry I rested my forehead to Lana’s, and we both laughed and cried. Two healthy babies. She did it.

But Jason was quiet.

I turned toward him, my brow furrowed. “Is everything all right?”

He nodded and looked up at us holding a tiny, wriggling, wailing baby, but Jason no longer resembled the calm and cool doctor. His jaw was slack and his gaze unsure. “It’s...a girl.”

Lana smiled, holding out her arms to embrace her new daughter, but Jason and I just stared at one another for a second.

“How can that be?” I asked.

“I’m not sure, but there’s more.” Jason tipped his head toward our new daughter. “She’s not a werewolf.”

I raised a brow. “But little Malcolm is... I caught his scent right away.” I leaned closer to Lana and our baby girl. I inhaled and realized what had

confounded Jason. “She’s a jaguar.”

Jason nodded and started to smile. “No wonder they were moving around so much in there, Lana. They were already fighting.”

She looked up at me with an exhausted smile. “Dogs and cats chase each other, isn’t that what you told me the night we met?”

“Yes, but what did I know, huh?” I settled Malcolm into the crook of her other arm and nodded as I kissed her. “They’re beautiful.”

“What should we name her?” She smiled at our new daughter.

“How about Madeleine?”

“Madeleine.” She kissed her forehead and looked up at me. “I like it.”

Jason helped cut the umbilical cords and finished cleaning Lana up before he quietly vanished and left me with my new family. I laid beside her in the bed and stroked her hair back from her forehead.

“You’re amazing.”

Lana smiled up at me. “You weren’t half bad yourself.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t more prepared.”

She kissed each new baby. “I think we did a pretty good job anyway.”

“We did. I’m not sure any werewolves have ever been born without an identical twin, let alone a jaguar. We didn’t know that was even possible.”

Lana laughed, nuzzling the twins. “And they said *I* was amazing. You two were just born, and you’re already one of a kind.”

“They’re incredible.” Gradually my smile faded away. I sat up and sniffed the air, my brow furrowing with worry.

“Adam? Is something wrong?”

I didn’t want to scare her. This was an amazing night, filled with two tiny miracles she cradled in her arms. I buried my concern and leaned over to kiss her brow.

“Everything’s fine. Just rest. I’ll be right back.”

She began to nurse the babies as I closed the door and went down the hall. Aren and Jason went silent when I walked in the room.

My brother grinned and got up to give me a tight hug. “Congratulations, bro.”

“Thanks.” I clapped his back and pulled back to meet his eyes. “But we need to be careful.”

Aren’s smile vanished. “What’s wrong?”

“I thought I caught Sebastian’s scent.”

I opened the door to scan the property and froze. Sitting on the doormat was a flower arrangement and a card. I picked it up and opened the card.

Take care of your new family. –S

I crumbled the card and dropped it on the floor. “I think Nero is going to be back... if they aren’t already here.”

Aren crossed his arms over his chest. “We won’t let them near Lana.”

“I don’t think Lana is what they’ll be after.”

Both of them looked confused. I stared over at the door to my bedroom knowing that Lana and our babies were inside. They were my world now.

“The babies... Our daughter...”

Jason ground his teeth together, and Aren’s shoulders tensed. “We’ll stay on alert,” Aren growled. “No one is coming near my niece and nephew.”

Jason added, “We’re on it Adam. I’ll gather the Pack.”

I gripped each of their shoulders. “Thank you.”

Aren started to smile. “Go keep your wife company, and get some rest while you can.”

I watched them go and took a deep breath. I was the Alpha now, and I wouldn’t live my life in fear.

Lana’s eyes opened when I came back in the room. I’d never seen anyone look so beautiful.

With two tiny lives resting in her arms, her eyes sparkled up at me. “Look Malcolm, Madeleine, your daddy’s back.”

The weight of the future lifted from my shoulders. This was my family. I got into bed beside Lana and kissed each cheek of our tiny twin babies. “Welcome to the Pack.”

Acknowledgments

This series may not have ever happened without Ray Bradbury's challenge to me to write 52 stories in 52 weeks. *Moonlight* began as one of those stories, but after I'd written it, the characters wouldn't leave me alone. While I continued the weekly challenge, I also wrote this book and the second, *Hunter's Moon*. I'll be forever grateful to him for that inspiration.

I also need to thank my agent, Laurie McLean, for her passion for the Moon series and her confidence in me and the books. Having you in my corner has been exciting and I look forward to many more books together. Thanks also go out to Theresa Cole at Entangled for reading the books and making sure the Moon series had a home with Entangled Publishing. I'm also grateful and super lucky to work with my fabulous editor, Danielle Poiesz, who took this wolf pack and made them ready for public consumption. I have learned so much from you!

Thanks to my publicists Renee and Sarah for always looking for new ways to find new readers! You rock! And to my amazing street team, the Night Angels, you have been so crucial in helping me get the word out about this book. I'm grateful to every one of you! Thanks to Denise for your beta reading excellence and to Panda for being my second set of eyes.

And special thanks to my amazing husband, Ken. Your belief and faith in me and my stories makes me feel like anything is possible, and that is the most priceless treasure ever.

Keep reading for a special look
at the next novel
in the Moon series
Hunter's Moon
by
Lisa Kessler
Coming soon from Entangled Edge

Chapter One

AREN

The dry Las Vegas wind stung my eyes as I rounded the corner of the building, scanning the shadowed parking lot for my prey. Even the dark of night couldn't cool the desert heat wafting up from the pavement. The stench of the spy's fear stung my nostrils, making the corner of my mouth twitch. I could admit I was eager to take this guy down, but knowing he was scared shitless sweetened the deal considerably.

For the past six months, this secret had festered inside me like an open wound. I'd been traveling too often. Instead of protecting my Pack back in Reno, I had found myself sneaking around, unable to stop myself from tracking her. Protecting our enemy.

Sasha.

The wolf inside of me growled, aching to fight for this woman I barely even knew, who'd tried to kill me. Twice. I forced a slow breath into my lungs. Patience. I could wait this guy out. My bum ankle left me little choice anyway.

All my senses were on full alert, adrenaline pumping through my veins. Nero was still searching for her, and this guy was the latest in a string of scumbag informants looking for easy money. With a bounty on her head, they were eager to provide proof that she was still on the loose.

Finally he made his move. I heard his footsteps racing toward the alley. Toward me. Perfect. I stepped into his path, blocking his only exit. He tried to pivot and change course, but it was too late. The weasel rammed into me, falling backward. Before he could roll over and scramble away, I grabbed his

shirt and yanked him off the ground.

“You’re not going anywhere.” My eyes narrowed as I pulled him even closer, his scent filling my nostrils. He was human. Apparently Nero wasn’t ready to risk another jaguar assassin to search for her. Maybe they were starting to believe she really had died at the fight in Lake Tahoe. “Tell me about Nero.”

“I don’t know nothin’.”

He wriggled like a fish, his feet struggling to touch the ground. I was at least six inches taller than him, and I had no intention of letting him get away. Instead, I head-butted him. Blood erupted from his nose, the thick coppery scent immediately bringing the wolf inside of me to full attention.

“Goddammit,” he shouted, kicking me in the shins while he yanked at my wrists. “Let go of me, you crazy son of a bitch.”

I kept my grip tight on his shirt. “I asked you a question.”

“And I told you, I don’t know nothin’.”

“You’re lying,” I said before slamming him against the brick wall of the alley.

He coughed, spewing putrid breath into my face. He reeked of week-old cigarettes and cheap vodka. “Please,” he stammered. “I don’t know nothin’ about any Nero.”

“Why have you been trailing the red-haired woman?” He started to shake his head, so I freed one hand from my grip on him and landed a solid punch to his stomach to joggle his memory. “Answer me.”

He stopped kicking his feet, and his stare met mine. Gradually the fear in his eyes faded. My patience was wearing thin, but before I could rattle his cage for a reply, he started to smile and whispered, “They know she didn’t die in that fight.”

Before I could respond, pain burst through my gut, setting my entire side on fire. *Dammit!*

The asshole had stabbed me.

I pressed him against the wall, forcing myself not to loosen my grip. Fear crept back into his eyes when I didn’t let him go. I held him up with one arm

and yanked his knife out of my side with the other.

His eyes opened wide. “What the hell are you?”

Using both hands I threw him across the alley, satisfied to hear his skull crunch against the bricks. He hit the ground like a rag doll while I clutched the new hole in my side.

“I’m a wolf, asshole.”

...

Usually Jason, our Pack doctor, patched up our wounds, but that wasn’t an option for me this time. My twin, Adam—our Alpha—would demand to know what happened.

And for the first time in my life, I had no intention of telling him. What could I say? I let the Pack believe I’d killed Sasha during the fight with Nero instead of admitting I’d pulled her to safety. And now I was still watching her. Even Adam wouldn’t—*couldn’t*—let that one alone.

Never in a million years would I have ever believed myself capable of betraying my Pack, my family. But I never understood the depth of my wolf instincts. Now they demanded I walk both sides of the line, leaving my loyalty torn into shreds.

I couldn’t risk going to the Pack with this wound. I had to sort it out without them. Besides I was at least an eight-hour drive from Reno. I’d have to risk a few stitches and be sure I didn’t allow any blood to be drawn. I could do that.

By the time I pulled into the urgent care center, I knew the stab wound wasn’t too serious. If he’d hit an artery or a major organ, I would have bled out by now. But I couldn’t ignore a gaping wound in my side either. Werewolves may heal a little faster than humans, but a nasty staph infection could take a wolf down just as well as the next guy.

The knife was wrapped and carefully hidden under the floor of the trunk with my spare tire. Maybe I’d be able to pull fingerprints from it later.

I got out of the car and winced as pain radiated up my leg. I sucked in a

deep breath through clenched teeth. My ankle was fucking killing me. Perfect.

I wiped the sweat off my forehead and limped into the brightly lit room. The triage nurse jumped up and rushed me to an exam room. Being covered in blood apparently trumped the other emergencies.

I hated the smell of hospitals. My acute wolf senses caught the cacophony of blood, urine, and disinfectant, morphing it into a disgusting scent of decay that turned my stomach. I got up on the exam table, slightly wobbly from the blood loss. The nurse laid a clipboard on the counter and scribbled something quickly before turning to face me.

“So what happened?” She snapped on a pair of latex gloves and reached for the hem of my shirt to inspect the wound.

“I’m all right. It’s just a little scratch.”

Her eyes widened when she found the source of my bleeding. “This isn’t a scratch. You’ve been stabbed.”

I forced what I hoped was a convincing smile. “All I need is a couple of stitches.”

She shook her head and stepped back. “You can smile all you want, but you’ll still need to speak with the police about your injury. It’s hospital policy with stabbings and shootings.”

“It was an accident. I fell while holding a steak knife.” This was exactly the reason none of the Pack went to hospitals. Too many questions. “Come on, I feel stupid enough as it is.”

She raised a brow and left the room.

Great. I raked a hand back through my hair and groaned. I was screwed.

I couldn’t talk to the police any more than I could face the Pack and tell them why I was in Las Vegas killing Nero informants. No self-respecting cop was going to believe my story. I needed something better than falling on a steak knife.

My gaze flicked to the closed door. Physically I was only a wolf one night a month, but I still had heightened senses while I was a man. My hearing and sense of smell were far stronger than any human’s, and right now I could hear

a woman's voice talking to the staff, followed by the click of determined footsteps.

I recognized that voice.

When the door opened the wolf inside of me howled.

"This is Detective Marsh." The nurse snatched my chart from the counter. "The doctor will be in shortly to check your wound."

Once the nurse was gone, I couldn't help but stare at the most incredible woman I'd ever seen. Tough, beautiful, resilient Sasha. Her full lips were pressed together as her dark eyes met mine. I struggled to remind myself that this was also the same woman who had Tasered me and then shattered my ankle with a single gunshot. She had threatened to kill Adam, and his mate, Lana, too. The Nero Organization had her under their control, or at least they used to. They bred jaguar shape-shifters and trained them as silent assassins for the highest bidder. Sasha had been bitten, changed, but she was in their employ nonetheless. So what was she doing here impersonating an officer?

I had every reason to hate her. Yet here she was, standing five feet from me, and not only was I not attacking her, but I was drinking in her scent. She didn't smell like most of the women I worked with, like flowers and lace. Or like any of the jaguars I'd encountered. Her scent was spicy, like leather and musk.

And I was more certain with each breath that I'd never be able to deny my instincts. I needed her.

When my brother told me he'd found his mate, I didn't understand how he knew. Wolves mated for life, so when Adam claimed a jaguar for his mate, I thought he'd gone insane. I wasn't sure I believed the old stories about finding that one mate to spend a lifetime with in the first place, but Adam and a jaguar? The bottom line was simple. We *don't* mate with enemies of our Pack.

But here she was, glaring at me in the urgent care room, and instead of killing her I caught myself wondering how her mouth might taste. I shoved aside the lust and dug deep for cold indifference.

"It's Detective Marsh now? I thought you'd sold your badge to Nero."

She dodged my barb without even acknowledging it. “Look, wolf, I’m doing you a favor by coming in here flashing a phony badge. I don’t know why, but you saved me at the lake, so I figure I owe you this.” She tucked the badge into her pocket and met my eyes. “If you came here to settle the score with me, then bring it on. I deserve it. But if you think you’re slowing Nero down, you’re not. I can fight my own battles.” She looked poised to say something else but just shook her head slowly. “I’m handling this, so back off.”

I laughed and sat up. It took all I had not to wince at the pain that burned through my abdomen. “You think I’m trying to help *you*? Is that it?”

Her chin lifted as she crossed her arms over her chest. I did my best not to stare at her breasts. “What I *think* isn’t important. What I *know* is that you’ve been following me, and this is the second Nero informant you’ve killed. Did you think I wouldn’t notice?” Her hands dropped to her sides again. “You don’t know who you’re dealing with, wolf. Nero has eyes and ears everywhere. Do yourself a favor and stay out of this.”

She spun on her heel and left, slamming the door behind her. I could hear her telling the nurse she’d sign off on my medical treatment. She confirmed it was a household accident. No investigation would follow.

I smirked. So Sasha, the jaguar assassin who tried to kill me twice, helped me after all.

Go figure.

Get tangled in Entangled Edge...

***Night Demon* by Lisa Kessler**

Gretchen Finch's job would be much easier if she weren't alone in the jungle with a brilliant recluse whose every glance sets her on fire. But the more she focuses on her work, the closer she gets to unlocking the mysteries of a terrible creature—the Night Demon—that threatens the world as she knows it. Though her scientific mind tells her it's impossible, she's beginning to believe the ancient Mayan tales as the sinister jungle comes alive around her.

Lukas Smith has spent hundreds of years searching for answers to his immortal Night Walker nature. As a series of ancient glyphs become clear, he's about to find out more than he'd ever hoped, but the more he learns, the more his fate intertwines with the Night Demon, and the harder it becomes to hide his immortal secret from the beautiful, intelligent Gretchen.

Together, they must find a way to stop the inexplicable violence and mass destruction surging across the earth before the Night Demon destroys more than just mankind.

***Undying Destiny* by Jessica Lee**

Kenric St. James is out for revenge. Over 300 years ago, an ancient female vampire turned him against his will and killed the woman he loved. He's spent more than a century building an Enclave of warrior vampires who have sworn to defend humanity against his evil sire and her minions. But when Kenric finds a woman he finally burns to claim as his own again, Kenric knows loving her means giving his sire another target.

Emily Ross just wanted a fresh start. She's a survivor, coming off the tail end of an abusive relationship, and craves time alone to learn who she is and to save the home that holds her heart. The last thing she needed was a controlling, alpha male calling all the shots.

Meeting Kenric might just have changed her mind, though. He is wrong for her in all the right ways. But in order to keep her heart from breaking, he first has to keep the hordes of evil vamps from stealing her very breath.

***Werewolves Be Damned* by Stacey Kennedy**

Nexi Jones—part witch, part guardian, and wannabe kick-ass warrior—can't throw a punch or conjure the simplest magic. But that doesn't stop her from hunting the werewolves who slaughtered her human family. She'll have her revenge, but only if Kyden, the elite guardian, would get the hell out of her

way.

Kyden can't decide if Nexi *wants* to get herself killed or if she just has no clue what she's doing. But her father made it clear: keep Nexi safe...or else. Of course, the more Nexi runs toward revenge, the more she needs Kyden's aid, and as she grows into her power and confidence, so does his desire to protect her. The only problem? She'd rather he dropped dead.

But when a vampire paints a bull's-eye on Nexi's back, she's hard-pressed to deny Kyden and the help he's offering. Even if it means getting her revenge will be a little bit harder. At least it will still be as sweet.

***Bittersweet Blood* by Nina Croft**

Tara's eccentric aunt raised her to be fearful of the world and follow the rules. But after her aunt's death, Tara is ready to take control and experience life for the first time. But she quickly discovers that everything she's been told is a web of lies. Determined to solve the mystery of who she is truly, she hires a private investigator to help her uncover the truth.

Christian Roth is more than your average PI. A vampire and ex-demon hunter, Christian lives among the humans, trying to be "normal." But recently, things seem to be falling apart. There's a crazed demon hell-bent on revenge hunting him down, and a fae assassin on the loose with an unknown target. And the Order he abandoned desperately needs his help.

As the secrets of Tara's past collide with the problems in Christian's present, she finds herself fighting her attraction to the dark and mysterious investigator. Falling in love does not fit into her plans at all, but Tara soon learns that some rules are meant to be broken.

***Temping is Hell* by Cathy Yardley**

When your coworkers are demons, anything can happen...

Kate O'Hara can't wait until this temp assignment is over. The woman who hired her is a psychotic pageant queen, her coworkers are convicts-turned-clerks, and it's so boringly corporate it makes her skin crawl. Even her sexy-as-sin boss, famed billionaire Thomas Kestrel, isn't enticement enough to keep her there. Once she makes enough to pay off her bills, she's out. Or so she thinks...

Next thing she knows, she's accidentally signed over her soul. Literally. And she's discovered Thomas's real mission: to kill thirteen bad guys in one year, in order to get his—now his and Kate's—souls back. From learning to

boost the morale of some paper-pushing demons to navigating her way through blood-red tape, Kate has to work closely with her super-hot supervisor and get her flaky act together, before somebody clocks her out—permanently!

***Stone Cold Seduction* by Jess Macallan**

Elleodora Fredricks is about to realize the normal world she lives in isn't quite so normal—and neither is she, thanks to her made-of-evil father, the devious king of the shadow elves. Discovering her own shadow elf powers is a wild ride, but thankfully she's got a few good men willing to help her along the way. There's her old flame MacLean the phoenix, able to wield fire. And then there's the handsome, mysterious Jax. Turns out his rock-hard body is exactly that—she's got a secret crush on a gargoyle.

Elle's been moonlighting as a cat burglar to right her dad's wrongs, but now that she can melt into the shadows—literally—she's set her sights higher: take down the evil shadow-elf king before it's too late. Should be a piece of cake, right? If only the king didn't want his daughter dead...

Now available from Entangled Edge