



THEY
CALL
ME
DEATH

MISSY JANE

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Missy Jane

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my loving and understanding husband. Without his support this wouldn't be possible. Also, to my four daughters who showed the utmost patience in letting me divide my time between them and my characters. And last but not least, my good friend Sandy, who introduced me to paranormal romance and added spice to my fantasies.

Prologue

It was an unseasonably cold day in May when the world as I knew it ended and all hell broke loose. No one expected it. No one predicted it. No one had even gotten close to the truth revealed on live television all over the world. I was standing in my kitchen, hands wrist deep in hamburger meat as I prepared my famous meatloaf. My husband of two years, Hank, was changing our son's diaper in the living room. We both froze at the sounds emanating from the television's evening news.

People were screaming. There were sounds of an animal snarling and ripping clothes, and possibly flesh. I ran into the living room where my husband held our son, Michael, tightly and watched in horror the live feed. Spots of blood on the camera lens tinted the scene a pale red. Through it, we saw the head of a news anchor resting on her desk.

It took a moment to wrap my mind around the scene. Then it hit me. It wasn't the cougar sitting on the newsroom desk, or even the way it looked at the camera with eyes that seemed too intelligent and understanding. It was the

newscaster's head lying on the desk while the rest of her body slouched against it.

I wondered why people were running away and not calling animal control, or the police or...someone. Then I realized the only other people in the room were dead. My husband was shaking while my son wailed in his arms, disturbed by his father's emotions.

"What the hell happened? How did that animal even get in the building?" I asked quietly, disbelief clear in my voice.

My husband turned to me slowly, almost dramatically so, as if we were in a bad horror flick. "It was human," he said. "That animal was the other news anchor one minute and then...an...animal the next."

I wanted to laugh and throw something at him, or just scowl and walk away at the ridiculous statement. But we'd lived together for five years before we got married, and I'd learned Hank well. In all those years, I'd never seen him truly afraid of anything or anyone. At six-foot-two, with a muscular build, he could probably bench press our car with one arm. Nothing ever intimidated him, but what I saw in his eyes and heard in his voice was fear and complete conviction.

We spent the next hour flipping from one channel to the next and on every one, the story was the same. Shape-shifters are real and they lived among us. In a world made up of billions no one had any clue how many of them there were at

the time, but over the next few weeks, as more and more people in high places revealed their true nature and wars broke out on every continent, it became painfully clear there were many. Too damn many. The small town we lived in was overrun. We were near a national park and many of the shifters chose to live close to the sanctity of the trees. Our battle was short lived and most of the humans died. My son, my husband, the only family I had left, were killed before my eyes. I killed my first shifter that day, but she was not my last.

It took three years for the worst of the battles to end and the lines to be drawn. Nearly a third of the world's population came out by then, and they were all stronger and faster than humans. Many of the third-world countries were completely overrun, turning into totalitarian empires with an alpha male ruling the land. They figured it out amongst themselves somehow and an uneasy peace kept them settled. In the States, the country was pretty much divided in half. If you looked at a map, it was like the Civil War all over again. The south was human, the north mostly shifters. I say mostly, because some bleeding hearts decided it was okay to let the shifters run the country and stayed up there with them. They had a real live-and-let-live attitude about the whole mess. I might have been that way too if I hadn't already seen so much death. By the time the country split and the two governments were

established, I had more blood on my hands than I could ever wash off, and I ached for more.

Chapter One

“Alexia, I need you to switch shifts with me tomorrow.”

I looked up with a scowl on my face as Tina came into view behind a voice as robust as her personality. Dawn neared and I thought of bed after my all-night duty on border patrol.

“Tomorrow?” I asked, my voice revealing my fatigue.

“Yeah, as in twenty-four hours from now. I know you’re on again tonight, but I need to switch. You work noon to midnight and I take tomorrow night for you,” she explained.

“So, I’ll get what, five hours sleep between shifts?”

“Uh, yeah, if you shower and eat quickly enough. But then after twelve hours on duty you’ll have the whole night off.”

Her enthusiasm made me want to hit her. I didn’t need the whole night off, but I didn’t necessarily need a full eight hours of sleep either, I finally relented.

“Yeah sure, whatever.”

“Great.” Tina smiled. “Thanks, and hey, if you ever need to switch let me know.”

I grunted again and walked off to find my bed.

Thirty hours later, I was on patrol for Tina after only four hours sleep. I guess I didn't eat or shower fast enough. Actually, I did both quickly, but it was my inability to put a book down that kept me awake. The only possessions I treasured, other than the photo of my husband and son, were my books. Paper was becoming a rare commodity before the species wars began. Now it was almost unheard of. The fact that I possessed over fifty books never ceased to amaze those around me, and they assumed it was the reason for the security on my building. In reality, I trust no one and nothing. I don't care how long I've known the men and women I patrol with. I only trust one person with my life and that's me.

I watched the sun set from atop the fifteen-foot-high, eight-foot-thick wall separating the newly formed cities of Circe and Georgetown with my hand on my gun. We used to have sniper rifles for wall duty, but some idiot thought it would be fun to pick off any easy targets within a few yards of the border. He was taken into custody and quietly reprimanded, then discharged. Last I heard, he'd become a bounty hunter. All he accomplished with his kills was stricter rules for the rest of us, which pissed me off. I normally don't condone killing innocent bystanders but he was killing

shifters. In my book, most shifters stop being innocent by puberty.

“Beautiful up here isn’t it?”

I turned to see one of the new recruits watching dusk with me. I couldn’t remember his name, but he made me think of a young Tom Cruise. I suddenly wondered what happened to that particular actor when it all went to hell. As far as I know, Hollywood was destroyed by shifter hands.

“Yeah,” I muttered.

“So, you’re Alexia, right?”

I looked at him but said nothing.

“I’m Scott.”

I felt more than saw him take step toward me and my shoulders tensed.

“I was just wondering ’cause I kinda heard some things,” he continued.

I began to walk away.

“Uh, I just meant about your weapons. Hey, I could really use some pointers you know? Alexia?”

I heard the desperation in his voice. It was almost as bad as the hero worship I’d heard in the hard-core killers we sometimes got. I never kill by choice, but the men don’t seem to realize that. Or if they do, they won’t admit it. They join because of the killing, trying to justify it with patriotism. If anyone had told me four years ago I would be walking around

in fatigues, toting a gun nearly every waking moment, I would've laughed myself into tears. Shows what I knew. My gun had quickly become an extension of myself and my army uniforms the only clothes I owned. But not by choice.

“Alexia, come on. I just wanna see the sword you carry. That's all, I swear.”

I turned around and drew my sword in one swift motion. The newbie froze in his tracks and stared. I could only imagine what he might've heard from our colleagues about me and my *toys*. My commander keeps denying my request to carry my submachine gun, a Ruger MP9, on wall duty. I'm only supposed to keep it for raids. Instead, I'm forced to carry a handgun, a Glock 18 in a shoulder holster. Of course, it's loaded with specially made silver bullets. At least part of the legends is true. I'm the only one who carries a short sword. Yeah the guys used to laugh at me too. That stopped when a reptilian shifter leapt onto my partner and I couldn't get a clean shot. Instead of drawing my gun, I decapitated the son of a bitch. No one laughs at me now.

“Seen enough?” I asked with a sneer. He nodded. “What are you even doing here, Scott? What do you expect to get out of this?”

He seemed to ponder my question as I silently waited for his response. I wasn't expecting much, and I wasn't disappointed.

“All I’ve wanted since the start of the war is to serve my country,” he said.

“And I’m sure the armed forces of the Combined Human States loves you for it,” I replied sarcastically.

“What else was I supposed to do when the world went nuts? It’s been four years since my family ran south to get away from the mangy animals.”

His steady gaze returned to the lingering rays of the sun slipping below the horizon. I remembered sunsets on the California coastline that brought tears to my eyes. The CHS is made up of all of the states from the west coast to the east coast south of Colorado, including most of California, and all of Latin America. The rest of the former U.S. and all of Canada now belong to the shifters, appropriately called The Federal Nation of Therianthropes, or FNT. The shifters have their own government, their own military, and their own laws to follow. We have a fifteen-foot-high, eight-foot-thick, steel and brick wall effectively separating us from one ocean to another, and still rogue shifters find their way into our country. The rules are simple. If you’re a human you don’t go into FNT without a permit or a sponsor. Some humans go north for business, some out of curiosity, others for adventure. However, if you’re a shifter you don’t enter CHS period. There are no permits, no sponsors, no exceptions.

“You didn’t answer my question,” I reminded Scott, as full darkness settled around us and I slid my sword back into its sheath.

“I wanna kill ’em, Alexia. I wanna kill ’em all.”

Luckily for him, our job doesn’t take much thought. The human government refuses to allow any type of shifter into this country legally for any reason whatsoever. That’s what makes our job easy. If I see a shifter on our side of the wall, I kill it, no questions, no red tape. It’s so simple. Some days I think my job might be too easy. But now they’re starting to get creative. Along with contact lenses to hide the telltale sign of a shifter’s animal eyes, they’ve found a way to trick the DNA scanners at the borders. Now we have to become more vigilant, more ready and willing to kill. Some days, I feel a little bit like a wild animal myself.

It was nearing midnight as I stood in one of my favorite spots, observing the activity below. One thing about shifters, they’re a horny bunch. Within feet of their side of the border you can get laid, watch someone else get laid or do any other perverse thing you can come up with. It always amuses me to take new recruits to the red zone and let them get an eyeful on their first night. This twenty-mile section of the wall is dubbed

the red zone because of the district it borders. It's basically the red-light district of the shifter border city of Circe.

I know what you're thinking. I said it's my favorite spot and now you must assume all kinds of terrible things about me. Well, you can stop. I hadn't thought about sex since I witnessed my husband's throat being torn out. But there are humans who don't have my qualms. Humans and shifters alike descend on the red zone in droves. That's what made it my favorite zone. It's a hot spot for kills.

For a Friday night, it was actually pretty slow. The usual bars and clubs were packed with activity, and I spotted about two dozen humans walking along the street. At the corner of the border road and Main, I saw a man in black looking at the wall from beneath a streetlight. I took note of him and continued my perimeter watch. Five minutes later, he still stood there, but his head turned as he followed me.

I did a mental tally of his features—bronze skin, ass-length brown hair with streaks of gold, eyebrows of golden brown, only a shade darker than his skin. His high cheekbones and narrow chin were almost feminine. He had broad shoulders and stood perfectly straight and still, like a statue on display. His long black coat hid his body well, but I was almost positive it would be athletic.

He appeared feline to me, though I was still trying to get the hang of separating the species. The canines are usually

easy to pick out, as many of them have overbites and the felines can't hide their teeth when they talk. As for the other species, only the reptilians can be spotted by their skin, and any of the water species who opt to walk on land can be discerned by their glossy eyes. They all have a membrane over their eyes to keep them from drying out, giving them the appearance of being blind.

I looked away from him and scanned the street and people below. He stood almost directly in front of me, though I was atop the fifteen-foot wall. I walked a few feet and repositioned myself so he would have to turn his head to keep me in his sight. I glanced back, and he still watched me. His blank expression, as if he didn't have a care in the world, didn't fool me. I considered it for oh, about a second, before pressing the button on my radio to signal my partner for the night.

Lance Ulrick walked over with his usual tough-guy swagger, blond ponytail swishing behind him. At just over six foot, he is one of the shortest men on wall duty at night, but the width of his shoulders makes up for it. Of all of the gung-ho "I love to be military" men in my unit, Lance is the worst. If he'd been born a shifter, he would surely be an alpha. I hate patrolling with him almost as much as he hates me. I'm the only woman in our unit he hasn't slept with. I know I get appreciative looks from the men around me when they think

I'm not looking, but there is no desire in my life, no joy. No peace.

“What’s up, Lex?” he asked, using my hated nickname with full sarcastic intention.

I met him halfway and smiled, freezing him on the spot. Anyone who knows me knows I never smile out of mirth. If you see me smile, you’d better have a weapon in your hand. Lance crossed his arms over his muscular chest, nonchalantly putting his fingers on his holstered weapon. My smile broadened.

“One o’clock, dark coat. Lover boy can’t get enough of me,” I whispered.

We stood downwind. Most shifters have enhanced senses, including the ability to hear from amazing distances. Lance returned my grin and leaned over as if to brush something from my shoulder, turning just enough to glance at the street corner. Then he quickly straightened and shook his head.

“Either I scared him off or you’re hallucinating, Lex. Ain’t no one there now,” he replied.

I looked over my shoulder and saw what Lance saw...nothing. The mystery guy was gone, and there was no sign of him anywhere.

“You wanna write it up?” Lance asked.

I thought on it for a moment. “Nah, I didn’t get much sleep before my shift. Maybe I’m just getting paranoid,” I said with no conviction.

He laughed and raised his thin eyebrows. He knows I’m the least paranoid person in the entire army. Many people accuse me of having no emotions whatsoever. I used to have them, and showed them quite often, but they died with my family, washed away with the gallons of blood.

“Yeah, okay. It’s after midnight, your shift’s over now. Go get some sleep,” he said over his shoulder as he walked away.

I waited ’til Lance was out of sight before looking back at the street corner again. The guy in black hadn’t reappeared. I shook my head and sighed as I walked to the stairs. Before I took more than two steps, I heard the sound of men arguing behind me on the Circe side of the wall. I glanced around and saw a group of about a dozen men, shifters and humans, crowding the nearest checkpoint between the cities. I stayed on the wall and walked over to take a look.

“I don’t give a damn what you said, human. I said we can go wherever in the hell we want, you got that? You’re nothing but cattle!”

I peered into the center of the crowd and saw a short, stocky guy with amber eyes. They were canine, as was the pronounced under-bite. He looked like a bulldog, sans the

leash he obviously needed. He stood arguing with the two checkpoint guards as the men behind him grew agitated. Though there were humans in the crowd, it was hard to tell if they were agreeing with the shifter or arguing against him. Overall, it appeared the situation was going from bad to worse.

I made my way back to the stairs and raced down them, hot on the heels of Lance and Scott. We were the three closest to the checkpoint and everyone was now on full alert. I pulled my gun from its holster as I approached the checkpoint and Lance laughed.

“Jesus, Lex. You think you’re gonna need that to handle a few drunks?”

“Beats finding out the hard way don’t ya think?” I asked.

He just laughed and yanked a baton from his belt. I kept my Glock in my right hand and pulled my flashlight with my left. The damn thing had to weigh at least eight pounds, surely it could do some sort of damage. Scott watched us both and produced a knife from a sheath on his leg. Lance and I both snickered as Scott began to sing the theme from “Rambo”.

“Look, sir, no unauthorized person is allowed past this checkpoint. If you have business in Georgetown we need to see proof of residency. Otherwise, you need to turn around and be on your way.”

The voice of the guard drifted over to us and we picked up the pace, reaching him within seconds. The group of men watched our approach and grew even more agitated.

“Oh, I see how it is. You gotta call in back up, eh, tough guy? It’s not enough to have a gun, but you gotta get one of your women involved too, eh?”

The crowd laughed and started shouting obscenities at us, most of them lewd comments directed at me. Or so I assumed. We ignored them and took up positions behind the two checkpoint guards, one of whom was locking down the gate. The canine shifter saw this and leapt forward, grabbing the guard’s arm before he pulled the wrought iron gate shut. I acted on instinct, shoving my way to the front and jabbing my flashlight into his ribs in one swift move. I caught both men by surprise, and suddenly there was chaos.

All around me, men were shouting and shoving, hitting and kicking at each other. I was trying to help the human guard shut the gate, but three shifters wedged their way in where the canine had fallen and were blocking the way. I lifted my right arm in an attempt to shove my gun in someone’s face and convince him to move. A bear of a man appeared before me, grabbed my arm and pulled.

Suddenly I was airborne, flung above the heads of the crowd and onto the Circe side of the wall. I hit the street hard and had enough sense to roll and gain my feet in a crouch. I

thought the abrupt silence came from hitting my head on the concrete, but when I looked up I saw how wrong I was. The crowd no longer shouted and pushed at the gate, because it was now closed. They turned their attention away from that lost cause and were watching me. All of their eyes predatory, and I was the prey.

“Fuck,” I whispered as I quickly calculated how much ammo I had and whether it was enough for the ever-growing crowd.

I felt naked without my Ruger, and pulled out my sword to compensate. I had dropped my flashlight at some point, but held onto my Glock. It’s nice to know I can get my priorities straight sometimes.

The big guy who’d pulled me into the crowd stepped forward and I realized he was human. That really pissed me off and I decided he would be the first to get shot. I heard Lance yelling at the checkpoint guards to open the gate but they refused. Once the lockdown is in place only the commander has the override code to reopen the gate. I knew that, Lance knew it too, but he was arguing anyway. I heard him shouting my name, but kept my focus on the crowd instead.

They were inching closer, as if waiting to see what I would do. I thought about shooting with one hand into the crowd, but it had grown too large to take down alone. My only

other option was to run, but where? I was in Circe, with nowhere to go on this side of the wall. I inched my way back toward the nearest building, and cast quick glances to be sure no one was sneaking up from behind. Amazingly enough, the threat stayed in front of me and nothing blocked my retreat.

“Where ya goin’, sweet thang?” the human asked.

“Yeah, baby. We just wanna have a little fun,” another taunted.

“My idea of fun is target practice, boys. You up for it?” I asked with a grin.

They didn’t seem to think it was as funny as I did.

“Don’t worry, pretty little human. We like to play with our food.”

I looked over at the new voice and saw a cougar in mid-shift. His legs and arms were human, but everything else was feline and feral. I tried to suppress the shudder of revulsion, knowing any sign of weakness would only excite them more. Then I heard footsteps to my right and turned to keep the new threat in my sights. I glanced over and saw a familiar face. It was the shifter in the long black coat. He nodded in my direction briefly before turning to face the crowd.

“What the hell do you want?” the human asked him. “You got no business here.”

“I can get you back over the wall unharmed, but you will have to trust me,” he said in a voice low enough for only my ears, though I was certain the other shifters still heard him.

“Yeah right,” I said, as my heart rate accelerated.

He turned his full attention to me and looked me up and down.

“I’ll help you fight if it will make you feel better, but I cannot guarantee your safety that way.”

His deep voice had a European accent I couldn’t quite place. It could’ve come from at least a dozen different countries. For a split second I had the oddest thought it was sexy. I frowned and pointed my Glock at him.

“I don’t trust you to guarantee anything, shifter. Now, back the fuck off.”

He looked at the crowd again, then back at me. Suddenly I felt pressure in my head and everything went black for a few seconds. The next thing I knew, I was landing on my back on a hard surface and heard shouting from somewhere below me. I sat up and realized I rested atop the wall, and the crowd in Circe was running away from the wall as if the hounds of hell were on their heels.

I put a hand to my head, feeling my gun still in a firm grip. My sword was on the wall beside me. I heard the sound of running feet and looked up to see multiple flashlight beams headed my way.

“Lex! What the fuck? Are you all right?” Lance hollered from a few feet away.

He ran to me and went to his knees, running his light over me head to toe.

“What? Yeah... I’m okay. I think. What happened?” I asked, feeling more than a little dazed.

“That fucking shifter threw you. I mean he just fucking picked you up and threw your ass up here. He was so fucking quick too. No one got close enough to stop him before he was running back down the street.”

I shook my head in disbelief and rubbed my back absently. I’d landed hard, but it was certainly better than the alternative. Those shifters were going to tear me limb from limb. Lance laughed, in what sounded like relief, and helped me stand. I was still reeling from being tossed in the air twice in one night as I made my way in to file a report.

Chapter Two

I was halfway to my place, passing between the darkened buildings where the new recruits are schooled on shifter culture, when I saw movement in the shadows. I had my gun in my hand on reflex as I stepped to the side.

“Alexia, I mean you no harm,” said a vaguely familiar voice in the shadows.

I pointed my gun there without a second thought.

“Yeah, sure you don’t. Why don’t you come into the light where I can see you?”

“Because you’ll shoot me, and though I don’t care much about death, I have something important to tell you first.”

I felt intrigued. I don’t know if it was due to meeting someone who cared as little for his own life as I did for mine, or curiosity over what he had to say. I lowered my gun, but kept both hands on it.

“I guess it would be asking too much for you to holster your weapon,” he said, sounding amused.

“You got that right, buddy,” I replied without so much as a grin.

“Fine. I’ll take what I can get. Is there somewhere we can speak without being overheard?”

“Nowhere I’m willing to go without seeing your face.”

He sighed.

“Can I have your word you won’t shoot me until after I’ve said my piece?”

I was even more intrigued. I couldn’t imagine who he might be if he thought I would shoot him on sight. I thought about it for a few seconds and nodded.

“Yeah, sure. But my promise only extends until you’ve said your piece.”

“Fine. Holster your weapon.”

“I don’t think so,” I said with a shake of my head and a humorless laugh.

“Alexia, I am weaponless, and I know your first instinct will be to shoot me.”

“You aren’t exactly gaining my confidence here, mister,” I replied, raising my gun a few inches.

He sighed and I heard his footsteps as he slowly approached the light. I saw his hands first, extended in front of him, palms up and empty. I began to lower my gun until I saw his wrists. His black sleeves extended up his arms into a full-length leather coat. Half a heartbeat later, I looked into his face, and saw the shifter who’d saved me...on my side of the wall. I raised my gun to his face, my finger on the trigger.

“I swear, Alexia, you will want to hear what I have to say.”

I heard desperation in his voice, and it warred with my instinct to shoot first.

“How the fuck did you get over the wall?” I asked through gritted teeth.

“That is part of what I need to explain to you. It happens a hell of a lot more often than you know.”

Of all of the things he could’ve said, he picked the one that stopped me from shooting him. I froze and cocked an eyebrow at him in question.

“Alexia, please. I don’t want anyone to see you pointing that at me. They might not wait to hear me out before shooting.”

For all his protests, I still didn’t think he sounded nervous enough for someone with my gun pointed at him. I nodded and lowered my gun, but I still refused to put it away.

“Where can we go to talk?” he asked.

I opened my mouth, but shut it again. When I thought I was dealing with a human I was going to take him to the nearest pub. No matter how loud we got, the drunks around us would be louder and no one would overhear anything. However, I wasn’t about to go out in public with a shifter. I couldn’t take the chance someone would recognize him as such any more than I could promise to keep my gun holstered.

We had to go somewhere private, and unfortunately that only left one place.

“Shit. We have to go to my place.” He nodded and took a step toward me. I tensed, but he kept his hands out and froze, eyeing me warily. I motioned to my left with my gun. “That way. I’ll walk behind you and tell you where to go. If you hear someone coming get into the shadows and I’ll stop and tie my shoe, but don’t turn around to face me or I’ll shoot you.”

He began walking away without a word. I followed close enough behind him to whisper directions, but far enough back to maneuver should he abruptly turn. I kept my gun out against my right thigh, my finger on the trigger. Luckily, the area I live in is nearly deserted after dark. During the day it’s used for training and research. At night, the buildings are empty of anyone but the cleaning crews and night security. They both stay indoors, depending on us to do our jobs on the outside.

We encountered no one on our way to the building where I lived. It was a warehouse after the war started, but outlived its usefulness within a year. I had bought the entire building and converted the second floor into a loft. My commander wanted me to stay in an apartment set up for military use, but I don’t like having neighbors. My warehouse was one of a few civilian-owned structures in the area. We no longer had military bases, just military zones. The civvies walked among

us freely, some even toting weapons to rival ours. Such a brave new world.

I held my gun on the shifter as I gave the voice command to unlock my outer gate. Then I turned for the retinal scan. He stayed completely still until it was complete, gaining a bit of my trust in doing so. Once we entered the gate, we approached the steel door that led into the building. I placed my hand on the ID scanner and didn't even wince as the needle took my DNA sample. The door unlocked when it verified my ID and I motioned the shifter inside.

He walked into complete darkness with a confidence that unnerved me.

“Lights,” I said, before stepping in behind him.

The overhead fluorescents came on slowly, illuminating the empty warehouse.

“You live here?” he asked, sounding skeptical.

“In this building, yes, but if you think I'm going to offer you a drink you're wrong.”

He shrugged and stepped further into the room, removing his coat. I raised a brow at the sight of his revealed body. His broad shoulders weren't his best feature after all. From my vantage point I would have to say it was his firm, perfectly sculpted ass. He wore a black T-shirt, stretched taut against his muscular chest and biceps. His black jeans were also tight enough for me to see the strength in his thighs. I mentally

shook my head at the waste. If only half the human men I knew looked as good I might not still be celibate.

I walked over to a darkened corner of the room where a collection of folding chairs resided in the dust. I used one hand to grab two of them, keeping my gun in my free hand. The shifter watched me without offering to help. Smart guy.

“My name is Andor Olavson.”

He took a chair from me and sat. I couldn’t help myself, I laughed.

“You find my name amusing?”

There was no anger in his voice, just mild curiosity.

“Actually, yes. When I first saw you I took you for a cat, not a bird,” I replied with a grin.

I instantly realized what I was doing and frowned, thinking I must really be tired to be joking with a shifter. He smiled and inclined his head in a slight bow.

“You know your names, Mrs. Williams.”

“And you know a hell of a lot more about me than you should.”

My amusement disappeared as I fought the temptation to point my gun at him again. I sat, holding my gun between my knees in both hands, pointed at the floor.

“I do and I apologize, as I know it will make you uncomfortable. However, I assure you it was necessary for me to know with whom I would be dealing. As I said, the

information I have to give is vital, and I need it in the hands of the right human.”

I frowned again.

“All right, Andor, spill. And this better be worth me letting you live. Though I appreciate you saving my ass out there, my gratitude will only last so long.”

He nodded with a resigned look on his face.

“What do you know of the Jamison Treaty?”

“What every other human and shifter knows. It’s the only reason there’s been a wall between us for the past year instead of a body-filled trench.”

He gave a short, humorless laugh.

“Aptly put, Alexia. You are quite astute. What you don’t know about the treaty is there are concessions buried deep within the writing no human was meant to see. As we speak there are shifters influencing your government, worming their way onto your side of the wall.”

“Even if that’s true, which I doubt by the way, why in the hell are you telling me this?”

Andor sighed and looked at his feet, rubbing his forehead as if he had a headache.

“Alexia, I’ve been alive for nearly three hundred years. I’ve lived through many things, fought in numerous wars, buried many loved ones. It wasn’t my choice to be revealed for the animal I am, and now I find myself on the side of those

I despise and resent. I used to have a human family and human friends who thought me the same. I can no longer go back to pretending to be human, but I can still help you if you will allow it.”

“You would betray your own people?” I asked.

His face turned to stone, and his eyes once again took on the feral look I’d noticed before. At that moment I would have sworn an oath he was feline, a fierce jungle cat at the least.

“The animals on the other side of the wall are not my people. Only my species, and sometimes I question even that,” he said quietly.

He spit the word “animals” as if it was a curse, and for the first time I considered it might be. I’d never met a shifter who resented what it was. Of course, I didn’t usually pause to hold a conversation with them. As I sat and considered his words, I realized he was the first shifter I’d said more than three words to. My favorite three words... Time to die.

“You said you would explain how you breached the wall,” I said finally.

“Yes, of course. The man who patrols with you, Lance, likes to watch over the red zone as much as you do, especially the dark corner near Drake Street. I flew over the wall while his back was turned.”

I frowned. We kept a patrol of one guard every two hundred yards. If Lance was standing on that corner, the

guards to either side wouldn't be able to see him in the dark. Normally, we shine our flashlights as we walk through that area, alerting the other guards to our position. I hate doing it because it also alerts the shifters. I don't like being a walking bull's eye. If Andor flew over that spot no one would have seen him, but Lance would have heard him. Andor saw the doubt on my face.

"I have the ability to throw attention away from my presence. By the time he was aware again I was well away," he replied.

"How in the hell can you deflect attention?"

Anger building in my voice, I fought to control my emotions. Andor looked at me in silence for a heartbeat.

"I have psychic abilities, Alexia, as do many other shifters my age."

I blinked.

"Bullshit."

"I promise you, this is the truth."

"We would know by now. Others have been captured, interrogated and examined. We would know," I insisted.

"*Your government knows, your people do not,*" his voice said in my mind while his mouth remained closed.

I stood so quickly my chair fell back. Andor sat up straight in his chair, hands on his knees.

"What the fuck?" I shouted.

I stared at Andor, my jaw somewhere in the vicinity of my knees as I tried to regain rational thought. I didn't doubt for a second he'd actually spoken in my mind without uttering a word aloud. How could I? I was watching his face at the time, and I know the voice I heard was his. Not only did I hear it, I felt it in my head as intimate as a caress, but much more sensual for being in my mind.

“W-w-why would they keep that from us? Especially on the front line? How can we do our jobs without that vital piece of information?”

I was nearly hollering now, my heart racing at his implications. I'd always loved my country. When we were the United States of America I was patriotic, the war didn't change that. To assume we on the front line were being betrayed at this level... I couldn't even consider it.

“How indeed? Think about it, Alexia. If they honestly expect you to keep all of the shifters out of the country they would have told you about our psychic abilities, as well as all of the other paranormal abilities some of my species exhibit.”

Though his tone was completely calm, his eyes stayed on my slightly raised gun.

“What other fucking abilities?”

My heart was racing and it took an honest effort not to shoot him.

“Levitation, telekinesis, precognition, telepathy, drifting between corporeal and non-tangible physical states.”

I stared at him in shock, my gun forgotten in my right hand as I absently lifted my chair with my left. I plopped back down in my seat and holstered my gun without thought. Andor visibly relaxed once my gun was put away, but remained sitting.

“I don’t understand,” I said quietly.

“Someone is allowing shifters to enter the Combined Human States unhindered, and once they enter they don’t come out,” he replied in a soothing tone.

“How do you know that?”

“I have many sources within my own government who have confirmed the missing shifters. I have witnessed some entering this country myself. It’s been happening over the past three months. Do you realize the significance of that?”

I thought about it for a few minutes, and he allowed me to think uninterrupted. I remembered a news bit I caught about three months ago, and stared at him wide-eyed.

“The opening of Castor Laboratory.”

Andor nodded with a grim-looking smile.

“And Mr. Castor is known to be a shifter sympathizer. Before the division, his house was a refuge for orphaned shifters. He seems to like the reptiles.”

“Son of a bitch. Why the hell is he over here if he wants to be over there?”

“Not everyone is on the side of the wall they’d prefer,” Andor mumbled.

I looked at him, but he was frowning at the floor. This had to be the single most unnerving conversation of my life. If what Andor said was true, our meager border patrol was meaningless. How could normal humans possibly keep out shifters with those abilities? It hurt my head to even think of the implications. I watched Andor for a moment, considering whether I should trust his word as truth.

“What kind of eagle are you?” I asked suddenly.

He looked as surprised by the question as I felt, but I noticed he sat a little straighter and lifted his chin.

“I’m a golden eagle.”

The evident pride in his voice made me think better of him. A golden eagle, I thought with awe. Before the war, eagles of all types had fascinated me. I loved to photograph them and read books about them; that’s how I knew what his name meant, and why I was surprised by it. I never realized shifters had birth names so close to revealing their animal selves. I stared at him for a moment longer, then took a deep breath to gather my courage.

“Show me,” I said.

He looked at me with a shocked expression.

“Are you going to shoot me?”

I might’ve been offended if he didn’t sound amused.

“No.”

“Promise?”

I nearly smiled, but caught myself.

“I swear, Andor. I won’t shoot you.”

He nodded, then stood and walked a few feet away from me. He began to remove his shirt, and I would’ve hollered at him but I stopped. Of course he couldn’t shift in his clothes, at least not without ripping them to shreds. I never considered the mechanics involved in shifting the human form into the shape of an animal. I watched in wide-eyed amazement as he toed off his shoes, removed his socks and began to slip out of his jeans. I couldn’t help but note his lack of underwear. The man had no shame.

His body was the perfection I had imagined it to be beneath the cloth. Luckily, his back was to me, or I might’ve blushed. As it was, I couldn’t pull my gaze above his waist... I promise I did try. His long, thick hair covered his entire back. When he straightened, the skin on his outstretched arms began to ripple. His hair appeared to dissolve into his back and in the next breath, it turned to feathers. They were the same hue as his hair and they began to stretch. His torso shrank a couple of inches and his legs disappeared behind two huge wings. He

threw back his head and squawked, and it took all of my will not to scream as I jumped out of my chair.

I watched half-fascinated, half-terrified, as Andor turned to face me as a golden eagle. He was six feet tall, with a wingspan of at least fifteen feet. His golden eyes peered at me with a predatory glare that had me reaching for my gun before I remembered my oath. My heart was racing and I heard my blood rushing through my veins. I was beyond terrified. Andor tilted his head to the side as if considering me for a moment, and in the blink of an eye he was human again. I looked him over, head to toe, his nakedness not affecting my fear.

“Alexia, I’m not going to hurt you,” he whispered.

I realized I was trembling, which just pissed me off, and I took a defiant step towards him as I dropped my hands.

“Fine. Put on your clothes,” I said, my voice amazingly steady.

He bowed his head and turned to follow my order.

Chapter Three

I turned away from Andor and walked to the stairs at the back of the large warehouse. All I could think of was getting into my kitchen and pouring myself a cup of hot tea. Mint tea always soothes me, regardless of what the problem might be. I reached the steps and all but ran up them, pulling the key from my pocket to reach my loft. I unlocked the door, walked inside and headed straight to my stove without shutting the door. By the time I pulled my favorite mug from the cabinet, Andor was in my living room fully dressed. I hadn't meant for him to see where I lived, but I was too shaken up to stop him, and all I could think of was my damn mint tea.

“Alexia, I’m sorry my change upset you. I assumed you’d seen a change before.”

I poured hot water into my mug, tossed in a tea bag and glanced at him. He appeared to be nervous, but not smug. It was such a human look, and so damn unexpected, I suddenly couldn't hate him like I wanted to. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes.

“It’s not your fault, Andor. I asked you to show me... I guess I just didn’t know what to expect,” I reluctantly admitted, a little surprised I did it out loud.

“You’ve never seen a change before? From any species?” he asked with disbelief clear in his voice.

I looked at him and bit my lip in indecision. I’d already shared more words with him than any other shifter ever. Did I want to continue this conversation? He seemed to honestly want to know the answer. The expression on his face decided for me.

“I saw a reptilian change once, but it was quick. Almost as fast as you changing back.”

I took a sip of my elixir of life, fighting the urge to moan in delight. Andor’s face reddened and he looked at the floor. For a moment I thought a moan had escaped without my notice.

“Again I must apologize, Alexia. My change is normally that fast both ways. I slowed it for your benefit. I thought you wanted to be able to see the transformation step by step as it were.”

I raised my eyebrows and tried not to spit out my mouthful of tea.

“You can control it to that extent?”

“Oh yes. I can even change partially if I so choose,” he replied, looking at me again.

I thought of the cougar from earlier, but decided clarification couldn't hurt.

“What do you mean partially?”

“Well, if I want to fly a short distance, I bring forth my wings while I remain human.”

I opened my mouth, closed it for a second in consideration and opened it again.

“Show me.”

He looked at me, doubt clear on his face as he unsuccessfully tried to suppress a grin.

“Show me, Andor. I won't freak out this time.”

He sighed and rubbed his face. I looked at how large his hands appeared and wondered why I stood with a shifter I barely knew in my space. The feel of my Glock still in my hand reassured me.

“Would it be too much to ask for you to place your gun...somewhere else?”

I considered it, but not for long.

“Yes. I shower and sleep with my gun, Andor.”

He grinned and nodded in understanding. He took a step away from my sofa into a clearer area of the room, removed his coat and shirt and dropped them to the floor. His wings instantly unfurled from his body, spreading across the room. I looked him over, and everything else about him remained human, or as human as usual. I took a step toward him before I

realized what I was doing. Placing my cup on the counter, I stretched my hand toward the tip of his wing and Andor froze. I touched the feathers tentatively at first, amazed at the sheer size of each one. They were soft and beautiful. I had a deep desire to see them in full sunlight, wondering if they would shine like gold.

I heard Andor's breathing speed up, as if he were panting from physical exertion. I still had my hand on his right wing when I turned to look at his face. He was watching me with completely male interest, and I became self-conscious.

"Can you feel this?" I asked, as I ran my fingers lightly over a feather.

"Y-yes."

He swallowed loud enough for me to hear, and I noticed beads of sweat on his brow.

I pulled my fingers back and turned away from him. I walked back to my kitchen counter and picked up my mug. By the time I turned to face him his wings were gone, and he was pulling his T-shirt back over his head. To say I was embarrassed would be an understatement, but I wasn't as humiliated I would've expected. Not only did I not tend to converse with shifters, I only touched them if I was fighting one off or moving the dead. For me the exchange we'd just had was weird.

“Okay, some of you can change partially as well as perform some other amazing feats. What does that mean for us, and why wasn’t it present during the war?” I asked.

Andor finished with his shirt and sat on my sofa, his coat in his lap. I sat in a chair across from him, sipping my tea.

“Not all shifters have these abilities, and some are stronger than others. It tends to be an age thing. As I said, I’m very old and, luckily for the humans, the revolution was the idea of the younger generation. As it is, most of the elders are still in hiding and may never come out in your lifetime.”

“In hiding?”

“You would be amazed how many of the mountains and rain forests are beyond even the most ardent human explorers,” he replied. I thought about it and decided he was right. “Not to mention the deepest depths of the oceans. There are creatures down there who are legends even among us.”

Just thinking about that one gave me a chill and I had to suppress a shudder. I had considered that possibility before. There’s a reason I don’t go snorkeling.

“You’re saying the wars were started by children? Is that why you guys came out fighting?”

I didn’t attempt to keep the sarcasm from my voice as bitterness tried to rear its ugly head. We were having a good conversation, but he was still a shifter.

“Essentially yes, to the first question. They called it ‘the great coming out’ as a joke to upset the elders who did not agree with it. But we are in the minority and lost the vote.”

“This was decided on democratically?”

“Well, not exactly. Each sub-species held a meeting and each pack or group within voted. From there a representative of the different subspecies gathered with his counterparts and it was discussed. I’m the last of my kind, not only golden but eagle shifters all together, so I had the final say for my sub-species. I was out voted by the others.”

This conversation was getting too weird for words.

“All right, and what about my second question?” I asked with a little attitude.

I watched him take a deep breath before he looked me in the eye.

“Of course, like any human who watches the news and relies on their government to feed them information, you assume we came out fighting. You think that bloody spring day was the beginning?”

I raised an eyebrow as Andor waited for my confirmation.

“Yeah, sure. Why would I assume any different?”

He looked almost disappointed in my admission and it made me feel stupid. I crossed my arms over my chest and barely suppressed an angry glare.

“Alexia, surely you realize not everything of consequence is reported in the news. The truth is shape shifters have been trying to reveal themselves peacefully for nearly a decade. In every major country on this planet, we’ve been divulged to leadership and dealt with those repercussions. A few countries, such as France and Switzerland, were extremely tolerant to the point of speaking on our behalf to others. Unfortunately, nations such as the U.S. and China were more interested in using us as guinea pigs. As aggressions became more unbearable, and shifters eased into higher positions in every government body, it was decided we had to reveal how strong of an enemy we can be.”

“And damn the innocent bystanders?” I asked, not even trying to suppress my anger this time.

Andor took a deep breath and gave me a sheepish look.

“Again, we did not all agree on this course of action. Both humans and shifters lost in the war, Alexia. I do not make light of your pain.”

I looked away from him to get a handle on my emotions. Hating shifters came as naturally as breathing to me now, but Andor seemed different. He almost seemed...human. I realized that was a dangerous line of thinking and mentally shook my head as I looked back at him.

“Okay, what does all you’ve told me mean for us...humans?”

“I wish I knew for certain, Alexia, but all I can say is I have a really bad feeling about Castor’s laboratory and the missing shifters.”

“Even if you are a human sympathizer and hate being over there, I still don’t understand what your involvement is in this. And how in the hell do you know my name, or that I would even care about this situation?”

“Alexia is a very unique name. As you knew mine, can I assume you know the meaning of yours?”

I suspected he was avoiding my first and possibly second questions, but played along anyway.

“It’s Greek, defender.”

“Yes. In another form it would be ‘defender of mankind’. I find that very intriguing. I know your name because I read your file.”

“What file?” I asked, my suspicion returning in full force.

“The one my government keeps on the most feared executioner of my kind.”

I actually gaped at him, and for a heartbeat was struck speechless.

“Come again?”

“How many shifters have you killed since the revolution began, Alexia?”

The look on his face told me two things, one he didn’t think I knew the answer to his question, and two...he did.

“I don’t keep a tally, Andor.”

“You don’t, but there is a very unique phenomenon which occurs when a shifter dies. You see, we are basically animals, not just in body but also in spirit. When we die our spirit is absorbed by the others of our kind, our sub-species. I have within me the knowledge of every golden eagle who ever lived. Not that there were very many.”

“I don’t understand—”

“What it means is, when we encounter a killer of our kind, we can feel it. We might not know who they killed or even how, but we know how many for the most part. It’s not an exact science so I can’t give you a number, but I have dealt with more killers than I care to count and you, Alexia... You are bloodiest of them all. You are known as Death to those of us who would know such things.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“There are probably men who will be in your grandchildren’s history books as having the most kills. But they are all dead. Right now, on this continent, you are the leading killer of our kind. I know you haven’t killed as many since the truce, but you still kill rogues who cross your path. The others around you, Lance, Tina and the rest of the border patrol, pale in comparison.”

I was shocked, and I had thought the earlier conversation was weird? What in the hell else would I learn before

bedtime? The thought sobered me as I realized I had a shifter not only in my building, but in my loft, my personal space. I never truly thought of it as a home. Home is a place you share with your family not just a building full of stuff that belongs to you. I would never have one of those again. However, I valued what I did have and Andor was smack in the middle of it. I might not hate him on sight anymore, but he was still a shifter. I wasn't sure if I could like him as a person, and I sure as hell didn't trust him.

“You need to leave now,” I said firmly.

“You're not going to shoot me?” The suspicion in his voice lit what was left of my short fuse and I got angry.

“Do you want me to?”

He surprised me by appearing to think about it for a heartbeat. He had sounded bitter and resentful earlier, but not suicidal.

“No. This is important to both governments. If I don't return to work tomorrow it would be a problem. Someone knows I was trying to meet with you tonight and it might stir up unwanted trouble for you.”

“Who?”

“One of the two people I trust.”

“Who is the other person?”

“Me.”

He said it with complete seriousness and I nodded my understanding. He rose and put on his coat as I watched with unexpected interest. He stood taller than most of the men I'd been spending time with on duty, and it bothered me how feminine that made me feel. I didn't want to be interested in him as a man. I didn't want to be curious about anything where Andor was concerned, but my mouth ran away from me.

“Who are you, Andor?”

I realized that should have been my very first question.

“Before the division I was an FBI agent for the American government. My alpha saw no reason to waste my skills, so I do a very similar job now.”

“You guys have an FBI?”

“Not quite, but it's the closest analogy I can think of to explain it in under two hours,” he replied with a grin.

I frowned as he turned and walked toward the door. Then he abruptly stopped and looked back at me.

“How far away are the watch towers from here?” he asked.

The watch towers were set along the wall every twenty miles and gave a view of the entire city on both sides.

“Why?”

“Can I fly from your roof without being seen?”

I considered it. Not only whether it was possible, but whether I wanted him to have that information. I thought of his abilities, and decided he'd get past my security if he wanted to no matter who saw him cross over the wall.

"Yeah, you should be able to at this hour."

"Great. I have photos of the missing shifters, as well as a few files I would like for you to read. May I return tomorrow night with them?"

"Yes. But you'd better be alone."

"Of course."

He walked over to one of my windows and pushed it open, leaning his upper body completely out. He turned toward the building and crawled out and up. I heard his claws on the outside of the building and a visual of him as the eagle flashed in my mind.

"Too damn weird," I mumbled as I walked over to shut the window.

I peered outside, but all I saw was darkness.

Chapter Four

I woke earlier in the day than I was used to. The sun blared high in the sky, and I knew I had too much time to kill. My shift started at nine and wouldn't end until sunrise. I realized I had no idea when Andor was supposed to show up. I expected him to wait until after dark, but that would only give him about a two-hour window before I went on duty.

"Not my problem," I muttered to myself as I stumbled out of bed and headed to the bathroom.

It wasn't too hard for me to ignore the events of the previous evening as I'd settled into bed for the night. However, as I was in the shower looking at my hands by the light of day streaming in the small window, I couldn't shake the feel of Andor's feathers. I closed my eyes and remembered the sensation of running my fingers over the silky softness and I shivered. It was starting to piss me off how attracted I was to him. As a man he's gorgeous, no doubt about it. But he isn't a man, he's a shifter, and I seem to have trouble remembering sometimes.

I finished my shower and dressed, considering why my opinion of Andor was so different from other shifters. He had the same animal eyes, the same feral presence I'd begun to notice in the stronger males. Even if I didn't know what a shifter was, one look at him would make me wary. So why in the hell was I thinking about him when no other man had created such a reaction in me since my husband? I had no idea, and I was trying not to think on it too hard. I braided my waist-length black hair to keep it effectively out of my face. The only time it ever gets this long is when I forget to have it cut off. I used to be very feminine before my life went to shit. Now I do the least of what it necessitates to keep my body clean and functioning. I don't think I even remember how to put on lipstick anymore.

There weren't a lot of things to do around my area of town at this time, something I realized since I actually had some free time. My normal schedule left little daylight for me to enjoy and I spent the evenings reading. I walked into the sun and blinked, holding a hand above my eyes for shade, deciding at once to wander around. I prefer schedules, always have, always will. Wandering aimlessly for any amount of time has never been my thing. But I suddenly had the yen to try it, so I stepped through my gate and gave it a go. It lasted oh, about five minutes, and then I was annoyed and looking

for something to do. Before I realized where I was going, I found myself looking up at Castor Laboratory.

The building itself looked like any slab of offices in a normal downtown setting. Sunlight glinted off the tenth-story windows and I stared, wondering why bars covered most of them. I suppressed a shiver and realized I felt uneasy standing in the shadow of the lab. I've never been one to rely on superstition, but when my gut decides to scream at me, I listen. I turned to walk away until I heard a familiar laugh on the breeze.

I stood on one side of the lab, around the corner from the main entrance that resembled an upscale hotel in décor and foot traffic. Behind me stood the back entrance for shipping and receiving, also a happening place on this sunny afternoon. As I rounded the back corner Lance came into view a few feet away, standing with his back to me as he spoke to a girl in uniform seemingly on a smoke break. I couldn't make out what they were saying, but I could read Lance's body language from a mile away. He was working it for all he was worth. I suppressed a laugh and walked away to find some food.

I only made it two blocks before I heard someone shout my name. I turned toward the voice with a frown, which deepened when I saw who it belonged to.

“Hey, Bruce, what's up?”

I tried to sound friendly but failed. He didn't seem to notice.

"Where're ya headed? Goin' for lunch?" he asked, as enthusiastic as a puppy.

"No."

"I am, wanna join me?"

"No."

I turned away and began walking, fully expecting him to take the hint. He didn't.

"So, where ya goin'? Mind if I tag along?"

"Bruce, I don't know where I'm going, and yes I do mind."

"Aww, come on, sweetheart. You shouldn't be walking all alone. I can keep ya company."

Bruce was one of the few men in my unit who actually tried to flirt with me. Most of the others knew I'd beat them in a fair fight, regardless of body mass. I'm five-eight and have what I like to think of as a Barbie on steroids look. I'm not saying I'm Wonder Woman, hell in certain outfits you can't even tell I have muscles. But I have trained in hand-to-hand combat as well as jujitsu for the past two years. I'm nowhere near the best, but so far I'm better than most of the men around me. I also refuse to take shit from any of them. I don't scream sexual harassment, but I let them know pretty quickly

what isn't going to fly. Some don't use the sense god gave them.

"Bruce, I want to be alone. Go away."

"You're always alone, Alexia. That just ain't good for anyone. Come on, baby, let's go grab some lunch."

I stopped abruptly and Bruce walked right into my back, pushing me forward a step. I whirled around and glared at him as he tried to keep his balance without touching me.

"Whoa, sorry, baby. I didn't mean to—"

I grabbed him by the throat.

"If you call me baby, honey, sweetheart or anything else that isn't Alexia again I'm going to knock you on your ass! Got it?"

He stared at me for a second, too surprised to speak.

"Uh-huh," he gasped, as I tightened my grip.

Luckily for Bruce, he was smart enough to not try and pull away. I glared at him and calmed myself. We'd made it as far as the pub and there were people watching us. I cursed under my breath and let him go.

"What's wrong, Alexia? I just wanna have lunch with you," he said, sounding too pitiful for words. I was even more tempted to deck him.

"She already has a date for lunch," said a voice in the small crowd.

We both turned to see who it was and my jaw dropped. Andor strode out of the crowd and walked towards us at a leisurely pace as if he had all the time in the world. He was dressed in a tailor-made, dark brown business suit. His long hair was pulled back into a thick braid, and he wore custom sunglasses.

I shut my mouth, with effort, as he stepped up beside me and stuck his hand out to Bruce.

“Andy Olson, an old friend of Alexia’s.” Bruce shook his hand and gave his name and rank as if Andor should be impressed. He didn’t appear to be. “Well, as you can see Alexia already has a date for lunch, if you would excuse us.”

Andor didn’t bother to wait for a reply as he grabbed my hand and pulled me in the opposite direction. I allowed it for the sole purpose of getting away from Bruce as fast as possible. As soon as we rounded a corner and were out of sight, I stopped and pulled my hand away.

“What the hell was that?” I asked.

Andor stopped and turned to face me with a frown.

“My apologies, Alexia, I thought he was bothering you. Did I misunderstand?”

He sounded so calm it just made me angrier.

“No. You didn’t misunderstand. What the hell are you doing here in the middle of the day?”

“I must travel north this evening so I had to come earlier than expected to give you the information I mentioned last night. I’m sorry to show up without warning.”

I took a deep breath to calm my rattled nerves.

“You just walked through the checkpoint?”

“Yes. I have my ways,” he said quickly as I opened my mouth to ask how.

“I’m sure you do,” I muttered with a frown.

“Here is the information.”

He held out three small round discs in one hand, each about the size of a half dollar. I took them and looked at him with a raised brow. Andor smiled and reached into his jacket. I tensed and took a step away, placing my hand on my gun.

“I’m giving you the device to use those, Alexia,” he said calmly.

I nodded, but remained on alert. Andor pulled a small metal device from his jacket. It looked like a digital voice recorder I’d had in college, except it was slimmer than most cell phones.

“Place a disc in here and point it at a blank wall or surface. Then press this button and an image will appear. The arrows will allow you to move through the information.” I took the device from him and slipped it into my pocket with the discs. “Someone is coming, I must go now. I will be gone

for three days then I will come see you again to discuss any new information. Do you have any questions?"

"No."

"Fine. Goodbye, Alexia."

Andor turned and walked away and I watched him, feeling a little upset we didn't actually have a lunch date.

"I must be losing my mind," I muttered under my breath, before I remembered he'd probably hear me.

I heard people walking toward me and I turned around. It wasn't anyone I knew, and they were too busy talking to each other to notice me. I looked back toward Andor, but he was nowhere to be seen. I sighed and shook my head, then went to find something to eat.

After a quick lunch, I returned to my loft to view the discs. It took three hours for me to read through all of the information Andor had given me. I don't know what I'd been hoping for, perhaps some sudden insight into the world of shifters. Maybe I thought I would be able to see something obvious to me that had eluded him all this time. Whatever I was hoping for, it wasn't there, and by the time I was done I had a ton of questions. I made notes, wrote down my thoughts and questions for Andor and took a nap. I dreamt of golden eagles and the softness of feathers against my skin.

Chapter Five

I was early for my shift as usual. When you live and breathe the job there never seems to be a problem getting there on time. When I climbed onto the wall Kotori was on duty, smoking a cigar and looking like a snake about to strike. His strong cheekbones and black hair announced his Native American heritage to every eye that gazes his way. I once asked him what his people thought of the shifters, considering their mystical ways. He laughed at me and said he never asked his people, since they were all dead.

“Hey, Kotori, what’s up?” I asked as I tried to slide past him.

There was more than enough room for three people to walk abreast, but he stood dead center, somehow taking up all the room and refused to move for me, ever the hard ass.

“Excuse me,” I said as I bumped into him.

He grabbed my right arm and pulled me to his chest. I stiffened, but didn’t dare go for a weapon. That’s what he wanted. No, Kotori and I had played this particular game too many times for me to allow him to trap me in the familiar

corner. If I went for a weapon it was like giving him permission to go for one too. I might be faster than him, and I might not. I was never curious enough to find out.

“Let go of me, Kotori,” I hissed between clenched teeth.

“What’s wrong, Alexia? You don’t like being touched by a man?” he whispered in my ear.

This was his usual question. Why is it any time a woman is strong enough to compete with the men they assume she’s a lesbian? Assholes.

“Of course not, Kotori. If only a real man would touch me, I would be perfectly happy,” I replied with a grin.

He gave a short chuckle and released my arm, taking a drag on his cigar.

“There ain’t shit going on tonight, Lexi. I was hoping you’d provide me some entertainment before the end of my shift.”

“Sorry to disappoint, Tori, but you’ll get over it.”

“Heh, yeah I guess.”

He looked away from me and threw his cigar butt to the ground on the Circe side.

“You’re early,” he said as he turned back to face me.

“Yeah, so?”

“So, you know Jack hates it when you show up this early for your shift. You always interrupt his fun,” he said with a knowing grin.

“Shit,” I muttered, as I turned away from Kotori and started running along the wall.

“Don’t tell him I said anything,” he called after me.

“I never do, you bastard,” I hollered back over my shoulder.

Jack had been our immediate superior according to rank my entire two years on the wall, and we all hated him. He was an asshole plain and simple. If anyone ever asked anything of him he would do the opposite out of spite, and he loved to inflict pain. He got off on it. One of his favorite hobbies was to pick up unwary shifters and torture them under the guise of “interrogating” them. Now I know it might seem odd I would be running to save a shifter from torture, but Jack had a particular taste I never agreed with. He liked young boys.

The first time I caught Jack in the act, I was torn between my hatred for shifters and my morals as a decent human being. I’ve never believed in torture. I just kill what needs to die as quickly as possible. My moral dilemma lasted all of five seconds and I punched Jack square in the face. The men on duty with me freed the shifter and sent him back over the wall. As far as I know they dumped him in the red zone where he was most likely to be found. I don’t even know if he is still alive.

Jack was pissed when he woke and he threatened to have me discharged. I laughed in his face. My record is squeaky

clean while his is so mud-splattered I don't know how in the hell he walks around free. He knew it was an empty threat as well as I did and he shut up about it. No one mentioned it and it happened again, and again. In my two years on the wall I've rescued eight shifters from Jack's clutches and I'm getting pretty damn sick of it.

I ran into the red zone and straight to the guard tower at its center. There was a guy at the door, but when he saw me coming he turned and walked off in the opposite direction. There I was, with big strong men who fought shifters and human criminals every day surrounding me, and I was the only one with the balls to stop a fucking child molester. Most of the others argued shifters didn't count and therefore I shouldn't waste my time and energy. I tried to listen to them sometimes, I truly did. But if you've ever looked into the big round eyes of a child shifter you would understand. They might have been bred from monsters but monsters they are not. Not yet.

I burst through the door and pounded up the steps, taking them two at a time. I wanted to draw my gun, but knew it would be a bad idea. I drew my sword instead. At the top of the stairs, another guard stood facing me.

“Hey, Sean, what's wrong? You man enough to tie them down but not to watch what he does to them?” I asked angrily.

He gave an exaggerated sigh.

“Whatever, Lex. You know I’m just following orders,” he replied.

“Yeah, the perfect little soldier. Move out of my fucking way.”

For a moment, I thought he might fight me. He gave me a look that said he was sizing me up. However, Sean and I had sparred before and he isn’t a fan of pain. He stepped past me and walked down the stairs to the door, raising his radio to his lips. I watched until the door shut behind him. I took a deep breath and strode into the room.

The first thing I saw was blood. There was a lot of it, and in the middle of it all stood Jack naked from the waist up. His chest and arms were covered in blood, as if he had dipped his body into it and tried to bathe. My stomach tried to rebel at the sight and smell and I froze in my tracks. Jack had a whip in his hands that had been black when he started, but now it was crimson and dripping.

“My God... You son of a bitch,” I whispered.

Jack heard me and looked up, his smile slipping away.

“What the hell are you doing here, Lex? It’s too early for your shift,” he said calmly.

“You know me, ever the overachiever.”

I looked at the heap at Jack’s feet, and that was all I could call it, a heap. It no longer resembled anything that ever lived, human or animal. The ropes were still on his hands, but he had

long ago fallen from whatever Jack had him tied to. He wasn't even moving any more.

“Jack, what have you done?” I asked, unable to keep the trembling from my voice.

“Done? Ha-ha, I did what you do best, Alexia. I killed it. I killed it and it screamed for me until its last breath. It sounded human at first, but near the end... Near the end it sounded like a cat.”

He started laughing. He laughed until tears streamed down his face, cleaning tracks through the blood, and all I could do was stand there staring at him. He was still laughing when Lance arrived with a half dozen other men. Jack let them take him into custody, all the while laughing.

I didn't know what to expect when I went in to file my report on Jack at the end of my shift. There was no one in the office when I entered, but the paperwork was laid out for me on the commander's desk. I filled in the spaces and made the necessary signatures, then stared at it for a few minutes. It was a little boy at Jack's feet in the puddle of blood. He was someone's son. The significance of that hit me hard and I doubled over in pain and grief. I felt as if I was going to pass out. I laid my head on my knees and shut my eyes.

“What the hell is wrong with me?” I asked the empty room.

Things like this weren't supposed to happen. I wasn't supposed to have to fight humans too. Within three days, I'd been taught who my enemies were as my husband and son were killed by the animals in our midst. Why now was I learning new rules? It pissed me off that Jack was a sadistic son of a bitch. It pissed me off that I was so damn attracted to Andor.

I hugged myself and tried to catch my breath. The sound of approaching footsteps pulled me from my reverie.

“Alexia? Is that you?”

I sat up slowly, rubbing a hand across my eyes, and looked into the face of Robert T. Wayne, our commander. He was a big man in his late fifties. His copper hair was graying gracefully, giving him the look of sophistication a few lucky men get as they age. He was the only guy I worked near with an actual beer belly hanging over his belt. But I'd seen him fight, and any extra weight he carried only enhanced his strength rather than slowed him down.

“Yes, sir. I just finished my report on last night's activities.”

My voice sounded calmer than I felt. He nodded and took his seat, oblivious to my inner turmoil.

“I was briefed before heading in this morning. I understand you were the one who found Jack Meyer in the middle of his...uh...activities.”

“Yes, sir, I am. However, I wasn’t the first on the scene.”

He raised a questioning brow, shuffled some paperwork on his desk, then sat back and clasped his hands on his stomach.

“I see. Sean Curtis also filled out a report. He admits to following orders and being on the scene for most of the event. According to him, he was given no choice but to participate. Meyer held a gun on him.”

I gritted my teeth. When I arrived it was Sean with the gun not Jack, but I knew Sean liked to play the perfect little soldier. For the most part he was an asset to the team. He’d saved more than one life in the time I’d served with him. I fully believed he’d turn a blind eye if his orders required it, but was that something he should be punished for?

“I’m not interested in he said she said with this situation, Williams. As far as I’m concerned Jack Meyer is the threat here, not Sean Curtis. Regardless of how it went down, I feel we have the right man in custody. Don’t you?”

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. I considered how much Commander Wayne hated messes in his unit. He was notorious for taking the easy way out whenever possible, especially if it kept his command looking clean and shiny. He had another five years until retirement and was doing his best to coast on by until then. If I tried to make a fuss he was as likely to throw my ass in jail as Sean.

“Yes, sir. Jack is the one who should be in custody. I believe I filled out all the proper paperwork.”

I stood without waiting for his reply, and turned toward the door.

“Well, um, yes. Good day, Williams.”

“Good day, sir.”

I had nightmares about Jack’s kill for two days straight. It was a little leopard boy of about eight or nine years. Jack was imprisoned somewhere, according to the gossip mill, but either no one knew where or they just wouldn’t tell me. I didn’t try too hard to find out, I was afraid to know. It had been a few weeks since my last kill. I might tend to kill only shifters, but if the opportunity presented itself I wasn’t above shooting a human child molester in the head.

Chapter Six

As the days passed, I wrestled with my concept of good and evil. The morning after I'd learned about shifters, my neighbor had come over to let me know she was one too. I'd liked Connie. We'd made grocery shopping trips together. Her husband and mine shared lawn equipment and power tools. I'd tried to question her about keeping such a secret from me and she'd become defensive. Her husband had arrived a few minutes later with a few of our other neighbors, all of them shifters, and an argument had ensued. Once my husband had gotten involved things had turned violent and the people I'd thought I knew became monsters from my nightmares. I'd seen true evil that day and the look on Jack's face had reminded me of it. When my thoughts turned to Andor, I realized I didn't fear him. How could a shifter so quickly gain my trust?

Andor returned in the evening, just before I left for my shift. We discussed the information on the discs, but there wasn't enough to draw any conclusions on the missing shifters. It was a short conversation as I had to head to the

wall, but he promised to return the next evening at sunset. He walked with me into the night, telling me about his uneventful trip north into what used to be Ontario. It was a part of his normal duties to look into a possible smuggling ring up there.

“What are they smuggling?” I asked. He laughed and shook his head, looking almost embarrassed for a moment. “What is it?” I asked again, even more curious after seeing his reaction.

“Well, you know how exotic animals were in high demand even before the division?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Now they are in even higher demand, as more and more of them are becoming extinct from shifters who hunt them as prey. Apparently there was a wildlife preserve of exotics in Canada that held quite a few different species and before the division the owners decided to harvest their sperm.”

“Oh.”

“Yes, well, sperm is now one of the highest priced items anywhere in the shifter world. It’s even more sought after than illegal drugs and weapons.”

“Really?” I thought it over with a frown. “Why?”

Andor seemed to think it over before answering me, and I glanced at his face for a moment. We were walking under a full moon and the silver rays caught his golden hair in a way

that threatened to leave me breathless. I turned away from him and put my hand on my gun for comfort.

“Some of the sub-species are dying out, Alexia. I can think of at least a dozen with only a handful of males left on this continent. Many believe they can use the sperm of the exotics to impregnate their females and save their species.”

“The shifters would use the sperm of full-blooded animals to procreate?”

Andor frowned and I worried that I might’ve offended him. It was becoming easier for me to think of shifters as humans the more time I spent with him.

“I guess in theory it should work just as well as mating with a full-blooded human. Some shifters I know choose to spend the majority of their life in their animal form. If their children are animals it might be easier.”

I let that idea sink in as we walked in silence for a few minutes.

“Do you think it’s true? I mean that they can procreate with the exotics’ sperm?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said with a shake of his head. “I guess it’s possible. Unfortunately the only way to test the theory is to try the artificial insemination and actually use the sperm, but of course there is only so much. Once it’s gone it’s gone, and with it the hopes of many species of shifters.”

It was almost a depressing thought. But of course, the death of the shifters meant the lives of humans would be easier and more secure. So why did I feel a sense of loss at Andor's words?

“Wanna know what I saw yesterday?”

I looked up at the familiar sound of Tina's voice, but she wasn't talking to me. Lance raised a brow in question, seemingly oblivious to Tina slowly wrapping herself around his torso. I shook my head and tried not to laugh at her blatant flirtation. As far as I knew Lance had already had her, and he wasn't the only one. I don't think he made it a habit to bed any woman more than once.

We were standing in the one of the locker rooms set along the wall for our use. I would've kept my Ruger in mine, but some idiot had started breaking into them. Now it's safely under my bed and all my locker stores is a change of clothes.

“What did you see yesterday?” Lance asked, and I tried not to notice the deep, seductive timbre he easily slipped into.

“A spotted snow leopard,” Tina replied.

I started to turn away.

“What?”

The shock in Lance's voice made me freeze and I stooped to tie my shoe unnecessarily.

“You know, a spotted—”

“Yeah, I know, but they’ve been extinct for a decade.”

“Well, I know what I saw.”

I pictured Tina’s infamous pout but doubted Lance would care.

“Where did you see it?” he asked.

“I was on the wall in sector eight. I got bored so I pulled out my binoculars and started checking things out further into town. A couple of guys were carrying a cage onto the docks behind Castor Lab, and I remembered you said to keep an eye out for weird stuff like that over there.”

Lance didn’t immediately reply and I started to have a weird feeling about his visit to the lab.

“Well, that’s kinda strange. If you were in sector eight you were still pretty far, even with binoculars. It might’ve been something else,” he said.

Tina huffed, and probably puffed, and I heard her boots scrape the tile as she turned away from him and headed out the door.

“Whatever. I know what I saw.”

I was a little surprised Lance let her go and when I looked up I caught him watching me. I raised a brow and he shook his head before walking outside.

I thought of my conversation with Andor and made a mental note to tell him about Tina’s claim on his next visit.

Over the next ten days Andor visited me every day at sunset. We would exchange ideas and go over whatever new information he had gained. More often than not he would walk me to work, leaving me a mere block from the wall. I continued to keep one hand on my gun and he continued to do nothing to spook me. It had always been my practice to eat before going on shift and I'd gotten used to eating alone. By the third night I was making enough for two and wondering if Andor liked my cooking. The realization made me angry, but I still took care with what I made. We fell into a semi-normal routine and seemed to be getting along okay. Some days I nearly forgot he was a shifter.

I was off duty and heading to my building for the day when I heard the swoosh of wings overhead. I automatically dropped into a crouch, gun out and ready. I heard the landing a few feet ahead of me in the shadows as I waited.

"Alexia, it's Andor," said a voice in the dark.

"Come forward slowly," I replied.

Andor stepped out of the shadows, stumbling against the wall. I immediately holstered my gun when I saw he was holding a bloodied arm against his side.

"What the hell happened to you?" I asked as I went to his aid.

“I’ve been stabbed with a silver dagger.”

I heard the pain in his voice and it worried me more than I wanted it to. I slipped my arm around his waist and let him lean on me as we hurried to my building a couple of blocks away. I tried to ignore the apprehension I felt at seeing his injury. I led him up the stairs to my loft slowly, every jarring step causing him to hiss in pain. Once inside, I led him to the sofa and he all but fell onto it. I gathered my first-aid kit and some wet cloths before returning to his side. He had removed his torn jacket and bloody shirt and lay on his back panting.

I had to stop and catch my breath at the sight of his masculine torso. The sight was marred with blood and many scratches and tears. As I watched, some of the lesser wounds began to heal before my eyes, but there was still blood seeping from his shoulder. Someone had broken the dagger when they stabbed him, and a jagged piece stuck out of him savagely. I ran to my toolbox for a pair of pliers.

It took five minutes for me to get a grip on the metal and pull it out of him, ripping away more of his flesh. He growled when it came out, but made no other sound as I cleaned and dressed the wound. I checked the rest of his injuries and saw they were nearly healed then I gathered the bloody mess.

“May I use your bathtub?” he asked.

“You can’t get your shoulder wet,” I replied.

“I know, but the rest of me would love to soak for a few minutes, if it’s okay.”

“Sure. I’ll draw a bath, just wait a minute.”

I went to prepare the tub, leaving him to struggle into a sitting position on his own. I had the water ready and was about to let Andor know, when he hobbled into the bathroom.

“Thank you, Alexia. I owe you my life. I’m sorry to show up here wounded as I was, but you were the closest of those who would help me.”

“I kill shifters for a living, Andor. Why did you assume I would help you?”

“I... I’m usually an excellent judge of character. Since you haven’t shot me yet, I decided the odds were in my favor.”

I grinned and shook my head.

“I hope you’re not a betting man, Andor. I have to admit I’m acting totally out of character around you, so you shouldn’t get used to it.”

“Why is that?”

“Because, I’m bound to come to my senses.”

He grinned, and I left the bathroom.

Andor was asleep on my sofa that afternoon, the fading sunlight highlighting golden streaks in his hair. I couldn’t help but watch him for a moment as I made my way toward the kitchen. I was tempted to wake him and begin barraging him

with the questions I'd held all night. My patience only goes so far, and I thought I'd already shown amazing restraint in allowing him to sleep first. After preparing some eggs and waffles from scratch, an amazing feat of domesticity on my part, I worked up the courage to wake him.

Andor looked at me with his golden eyes and smiled before I had the chance to reach down and shake him. I smiled back, but it turned into a frown when I noticed the missing bandage on his shoulder. I looked at the floor where the bloodied bandage lay, then back at his unmarked skin.

“You’ve got to be shitting me,” I whispered.

Andor chuckled.

“May I assume you are impressed with the healing abilities of my kind?” he asked with a grin.

“Yeah, you could say that. I saw you healing scratches last night, but that was a chunk of meat out of your shoulder. I expected a scar at least.”

Andor sat up and turned for me to see the back of his shoulder where the dagger had broken through. The wound looked as if it were a few weeks old. It was a dark pink mar upon his golden skin.

“The area where the silver rested is what scarred. Everything else was able to heal,” he replied.

“Oh, it sucks you’ll have another scar. Well, I made breakfast if you’re hungry, and you need to tell me what happened.”

He gave me an odd look, somewhere between a smirk and a frown, before he shook his head and stood. I ignored his stretching body and walked back into the kitchen.

“What happened? Hmm, that is still up for debate in my own mind, but I will relay the events as well as I can,” Andor said, as he walked to the kitchen table.

I loaded his plate with a little of everything and set it before him.

“Thank you, Alexia. I will begin with my departure from you a few days ago.”

Basically, he went over the wall into Circe, took care of his “business” that he didn’t explain to me at all, then got jumped on his way back.

“You don’t know who they were?” I asked twenty minutes later, once he’d finished his explanation.

“No, unfortunately I was too busy fighting for my life to check for identification,” he said between bites with a smirk.

“Har har, you’re too funny. I just wondered if you recognized them. You said they were shifters right?”

“Yes and do you know every human on this side of the wall?”

“Oh shut up. Maybe if I was in the FBI I’d know more than average, okay? Anyway, they had to know who you are or what you’re up to, right? I mean, unless getting your ass kicked is a normal occurrence for you.”

He looked up and frowned.

“I’ve never been one to be involved in fighting outside of war but getting my ass kicked, as you so eloquently put it, is not at all normal for me, no.”

“Hmm.”

“Hmm, indeed. I must point out also that had there been less than eight of them I would have stood a better chance,” he said arrogantly.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m sure fighting off five guys instead of eight would’ve made all the difference,” I said with a snicker.

“As a matter of fact, six seems to be my limit.”

I stared at him for a moment, but he appeared to be perfectly serious.

“You’ve got to be kidding. Six humans or shifters?”

“Shifters. But it does depend on their age and species. The older the shifter, the stronger he or she becomes both physically and mentally. Also, the canines and felines tend to be stronger than most of the other species with the exception of a few sub-species.”

“Such as?”

“Such as *Aquila Chrysaetos*,” he said with a smile.

“Golden eagles?” I asked skeptically.

“Of course. You don’t believe a bird can best a larger beast?”

I thought it over as I tried to recall years of watching Animal Kingdom.

“I guess I wouldn’t really know,” I admitted. He smiled and finished his breakfast. “Okay, if you can fight off six shifters—”

“How many humans would it take to subdue me?” he finished.

“Yeah.”

“I’m not entirely certain. The most I’ve ever had try me at once was five, but they were no match at all.”

I stayed silent, considering how I would have to remain armed in his presence at all times. Which wasn’t going to be a problem of course, as I remained armed at all times anyway. But for some reason the thought of never being able to let my guard down around Andor bothered me. But, the realization I would prefer to relax around him bothered me even more. Yeah, I know, I’m chaos on legs most days.

Andor stood the moment I was done and took both our plates to the sink. I was so surprised I think my jaw actually dropped. I clamped it shut and watched him wash our dishes in wonder. No, I’d never had a man wash dishes for me, much less a shifter who had been severely wounded less than twelve

hours before. He dried his hands and turned back to face me, I raised an eyebrow and tried not to laugh.

“What?” he asked.

“You washed my dishes.”

“You cooked, it only seemed fair.”

“Tell that to every other male on the planet.”

He grinned and shook his head.

“Somehow, I don’t think it would go over any better than my voting against revealing our nature. I’m just not an influential man,” he said with a bitter laugh.

“Still sore about the vote, eh?”

“You have no idea,” he mumbled, as he walked back to the table and sat.

“Who would want to have you killed enough to send eight shifters after you?”

He seemed to think about it for a moment, and I wondered if maybe it was a long list.

“I don’t know. I was assured no one knows I’m speaking to you, and my cover story back home is solid. There is absolutely no reason for anyone to believe I’m working for the government unless this particular investigation has been revealed.”

“What is the likelihood of that?”

“Almost nil. There are only two of us involved on my end and she would have told no one. Have you discussed this with anyone here?”

I gave him the look of shocked anger he deserved, trying not to notice the ridiculous flare of jealousy at the mention of a “she”.

“Andor, stop and think. What would my sudden partnership with you do for my career?”

“I didn’t mean to ask if you’d announced it at a meeting on the wall, Alexia. But your comrades, your friends or boyfriend... Did you mention me to anyone at all?”

I took a deep breath and looked away, feeling a blush creep up my neck. I wondered if I detected a change in his voice on the word boyfriend, and fought the urge to roll my eyes at the insane thought.

“I have none of the above and I told no one. I don’t tend to speak to anyone outside of work and then it’s only about work,” I said through gritted teeth.

To his credit he remained silent, and when I looked back at him his expression was not judgmental, just thoughtful. It made me feel a little better.

“Well, perhaps I have been compromised,” he said after a moment’s hesitation.

“And how are you going to find out?”

He gave a fierce, predatory smile that made me suppress a shiver.

“I shall have to speak with the only person who could have done it.”

I was suddenly very glad not to be “she”, and no longer jealous at all.

Chapter Seven

Andor walked with me away from my building and toward the wall that evening in one of my husband's old shirts. I tried not to notice how well it fit.

"I have something to show you. Come with me to the checkpoint," he said.

"Are you insane?"

"I know you don't trust me, Alexia, but try to this once. You don't have to walk beside me, but stay close enough to hear me."

I mumbled something negative as he quickened his pace to lead me toward the wall. He slipped his hand in his jacket and pulled out a band for his hair. He secured it in a tight ponytail at the nape of his neck and strode forward to the checkpoint. I watched as the two guards on duty, Tony and Brian, readied for his approach.

"Good evening, gentlemen. I'm a businessman from Circe returning home for the night," Andor said pleasantly.

I watched Brian and Tony carefully, my entire body rigid in anticipation of trouble. Neither one of them appeared to see

anything out of the ordinary about Andor. Tony checked his ID and Brian watched Andor place his finger in the DNA scanner. I waited, holding my breath with one hand on my holstered gun.

“Okay, Mr. Olson, you’ve been cleared to return to Circe,” Brian said calmly.

I remembered to breathe.

“Thank you, gentlemen,” Andor replied.

He walked through the checkpoint then turned and looked at me. Brian and Tony had already returned to whatever conversation Andor had interrupted and didn’t see the wink he gave me over their shoulders. I tried not to think about my racing heart as I let go of my gun and went to my post. Only once I was well away did I begin to consider exactly who I would’ve pulled my gun on if there’d been trouble...and I wasn’t sure I liked my answer.

Twenty minutes later I was strolling through the dark corner near Drake Street, flashlight in hand but turned off, when I heard a sound and froze.

“Alexia, how many times are you going to draw your weapon on me before it loses its appeal?” Andor asked with a laugh.

I frowned, uncertain if he saw it or not, and holstered my gun.

“If you would quit showing up unannounced it wouldn’t be an issue.”

“My sincerest apologies.”

“You must want someone to know I’m speaking to you to keep showing up like this, and here of all places.”

“I assure you no one can see me. Not even the one who watches you all the time with his binoculars.”

“What?” I asked through gritted teeth.

“I believe you mean ‘who’ and I think his name is Lucian.”

“The jerk! What do you mean they can’t see you? And how in the hell did you get through the checkpoint so easily?”

“I simply placed the suggestion in their mind that I was an ordinary human, and they believed what their brains told their eyes to see,” he explained, as if it was the most rational thing in the world.

My jaw dropped and I stared at him.

“Look casual, Alexia, I can hear Lucian’s curiosity from here. He is wondering what has you riled up and believes you have begun to speak to yourself.”

“The stupid son of a—”

“Lex?”

I swung around, stepping in front of Andor without a conscious thought.

“Yeah, Lance, what’s up?” I asked calmly.

He approached slowly, glancing over my shoulder for a second without appearing to actually see anything. I knew he should be able to easily see Andor's six-four frame behind my five-eight one. He had a frown of confusion on his face.

"Were you talking to someone?" he asked.

"Nope, just ranting out loud. I only like to have deep conversations with people of great intelligence, so I talk to myself a lot."

It took him a second to get the joke, but then he smirked.

"Yeah, whatever. Lucian said you were acting kinda funny and I told him I'd check on you."

"How in the hell would he know? Isn't he in tower five tonight?"

"Yeah, he is. Which means he's got a great view of you in this sector."

I thought it over for a moment while Lance watched the street below us. I didn't know much about Lucian. We never patrolled together and I rarely saw him in passing. I couldn't imagine being the object of anyone's obsessions. I mentally shook my head and glanced over at Lance. I was conscious of Andor beside me and realized I should take advantage of this situation.

"Hey, I saw you over at Castor Labs the other day. What's wrong, military girls aren't doing it for you anymore?" I asked with a smirk.

Lance looked up and I saw surprise and the hint of something else on his face before he smothered it with a grin.

“Well, you know how it is, Lex. Been there, done that. Since you won’t give me the time of day I guess I gotta get it somewhere else.”

I almost laughed, but froze at the low growl emanating from beside me.

“What the hell is that?” Lance asked and it took all of my restraint not to elbow Andor in the ribs to shut him up.

“What?” I asked, looking around in mock confusion.

Lance looked past me for a moment then at me, studying my face with a frown. He shook his head and turned away.

“Nothing. I thought I heard something.”

I remained silent, wondering what in the hell was wrong with Andor. I opened my mouth to question Lance again, but his radio crackled and we both stilled for a report.

“Ulrick, you’re out of your zone.”

We both frowned at the sound of Lucian’s voice and Lance shook his head. He voiced a response but made no move to leave my side.

“Lance, how long has Lucian been watching me?” I asked quietly.

Something in my voice must have sounded off if the look Lance gave me was any indication. He seemed almost

concerned for a moment. But he turned away and I thought he might not answer.

“I don’t know, Lex, but the last girl he took this much interest in learned the hard way he doesn’t like to be ignored.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

I was getting pissed, and didn’t try to hide it.

“Hey, don’t shoot the messenger. I’m just saying... I mean... Hell! Does the name Victoria Glass mean anything to you?” he asked with a sigh.

I froze and stared at him in disbelief.

“You can’t tell me he did that and got away with it,” I nearly whispered.

He drew a deep breath and let it out, then looked back at me.

“It was never proven, and she sure as hell couldn’t say, but there were only a couple of guys who were interested in her. They all had solid alibis for that night, all but him.”

I placed my hand on my short sword for comfort and fought the urge to look in the direction of tower five, which was nearly a mile away.

“Just watch your ass, Lex. Whether it was him or not, there’s something a little off about him. All I know is he’s been watching you for a while now and he’s been asking me about you a lot lately. If he ever does approach you... I don’t know. Just watch your ass.”

He abruptly turned around and stalked off.

“Well, isn’t that interesting,” said a voice behind me.

I shivered as Andor’s warm breath brushed over the back of my neck.

“Take at least three steps back, now,” I said through gritted teeth.

He laughed, and the sound came from a little further away.

“Don’t fret, Alexia, I merely wished to be available should you have need of my protection.”

I turned around, one hand on the hilt of my sword, the other on my gun.

“Believe me, Andor, I’ll never need protection from another human.”

“Not even the one who is even now watching over you from across the way?”

“I’m not worried about Lucian,” I said, the slight tremor in my voice belying my bravery.

Andor was silent for a moment, and I looked over to find him watching me.

“I know of Victoria Glass. I saw photographs of the remains. If it’s even possible he is the man responsible, you should certainly take heed. Some men don’t have to possess the DNA to become animals.”

I swallowed hard and looked away, over the red zone and the various species roaming the streets uncaring. In the past few days the lines between human and animal had begun to blur, and Andor was not the cause for it. Suddenly, the humans around me were revealing themselves as vicious beasts while the shifter in my midst was polite and civilized. He wanted to protect me from a human male, a man who may or may not have committed one of the most violent and brutal rapes and murders since the war. A fellow soldier, a brother in arms, who could be one of my greatest threats. What had my world become when I wanted a shifter to remain by my side through the night, so I wouldn't have to worry when my rounds led me to tower five? A very uncomfortable and fucked-up world indeed.

“I know how to handle human men, Andor. I'll remember your warning, but there is no need to worry about me,” I said, trying to convince myself as well as him. He didn't reply, but I could almost hear him thinking about the situation. “How is it you know of Victoria Glass?”

“As I said, I work for my government. The information was forwarded to us from your officials when the case remained open for several months. In fact, it is still an open case. We're to keep an eye out for the possibility of a serial killer who fits the M.O.”

“I haven’t heard of any other body being found in the condition she was since the treaty,” I replied.

“True. Either he is no serial killer, or he likes to take his time and pick out his victims carefully. We must hope you are not to be the next.”

“Gee whiz, Andor, thanks. You know how to make me feel all warm and fuzzy inside don’t you?”

“I don’t wish to instill warm feelings where he is concerned, Alexia. I wish for you to be on your guard.”

“Don’t worry. If there is even the chance he has his sights on me I’ll definitely be on guard.”

“I hope so.”

Andor didn’t stay with me through the night, but he suggested I have someone else head toward tower five. Even if I could come up with a decent excuse, I wouldn’t do it. I’m not a coward and besides, Lucian wasn’t supposed to leave the tower during his shift. I tried not to think about him as I approached the tower around 0500 hours. My skin was crawling as I walked as nonchalantly as possible under the thick glass window towering twenty feet above me. I had my gun in my hand, not giving a damn how it looked. My personal safety was more of a concern than everyone thinking I might be gun happy. I passed the tower door and began to breathe normally again, until I heard the door swing open.

“Alexia.”

I stopped walking and readied my weapon before turning around to face him, holding the gun against my thigh.

“Hey, Lucian, what’s up?” I asked with a steady voice.

“Not much,” he replied as he steadily approached me. “I saw you acting a little strange earlier, over in the red zone. You all right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

He looked at me, as if wanting an explanation. I didn’t give him one.

“Well, that’s good to hear. I saw Lance talking to you. I guess he thought you were acting kind of funny too.”

“Yeah, I guess, but he’s always hounding me so tonight was nothing new.”

He stiffened and his face turned serious. The look in his eyes suddenly resembled every insane shifter I’d ever fought against, and it caused my heart to accelerate.

“He bothers you a lot? What about the others? Are there other guys who mess with you?” he asked in an angry tone I’d never heard from him before.

“I wouldn’t really say Lance messes with me, or even bothers me much. He likes to joke around. I dish it out as well as he does,” I replied with a shrug.

Lucian closed the distance between us a lot faster than I’d ever seen him move. At six-two, his muscular frame resembled an Olympic swimmer from long ago. His dark

brown hair was loose and swinging across his shoulders in wild curls, making him look a little crazed. He grabbed my arms before I could react, pulling me against his muscular chest.

“What do you mean you dish it out? Is there something between you and Lance? What about Kotori? Have any of the guys touched you?” he asked angrily.

I fought for control, fearing a gun in his gut might just piss him off.

“Lucian, let go of me right now and step away.”

He looked at his hands, as if he hadn't realized what they were doing. Then he abruptly let me go, causing me to lose my balance and stagger away from him. It dawned on me I was a lot closer to the edge of the wall than I realized. I felt my booted foot step on the edge of the wall half a heartbeat before I began to fall.

“Alexia!”

I heard Lance and Lucian yell my name almost simultaneously as the air began to brush against my face. I took the time to consider that Lance used my real name, before fear gripped me.

Chapter Eight

I heard a sound like an animal rushing over the ground, but there was nothing I could see in the shadows. A heartbeat before I expected to hit concrete, I felt arms wrap around my waist and jerk me from the air. I gasped and involuntarily shut my eyes, panting and trembling.

“Alexia? Alexia, are you conscious?”

I heard Andor’s frantic voice and let out the breath I hadn’t realized I was holding, opening my eyes to look at him.

“Y-yeah. I’m okay,” I said, not at all certain if it was true.

“Did he hurt you?”

The anger in his voice threw me for a second and he shook me slightly to regain my attention.

“Alexia—”

“No. He grabbed me, but then he let me go and I lost my balance.”

I heard him release a breath before he ran a gentle hand over my head, threading his fingers in my hair. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been touched that way and it froze me as I looked into his troubled gaze.

“Andor?”

The look he gave me was full of heat and hunger, not to mention the anger he seemed to feel on my behalf. It was the most feral look I’d seen from him yet and easily pronounced the animal in him. A few weeks ago his look would’ve scared me and had me going for my gun. This time, it turned me on.

“Alexia! Lex!”

I jumped when I heard Lance shouting and saw a spotlight searching the ground near the wall, but we were standing a few feet away in a dark alley. I heard the sound of booted feet running from the direction of the nearest checkpoint, and knew they were coming to find me. I became conscious of Andor holding me against him, running a hand back and forth over my back in a soothing motion. I jerked away from him more violently than intended, but he just stood there watching me, his face a mask of indifference.

“They’ll shoot first and question later, Andor. You need to go,” I said, my voice shaky.

“Are you certain you’re all right? You don’t have to go back, you know. I can keep you safe over here.”

My heart sped up at the prospect of going home with Andor, and my brain began shouting at me for such an insane thought. *Do I want to go with him?* I asked myself. And I was shocked when the answer wasn’t immediately no. I knew I couldn’t, there was no way the others would stop looking for

me. The last thing I wanted was for Andor to be accused of kidnapping. But the idea of going back into Georgetown, the small border city that was now my home, was less appealing than it should have been.

“*Lex!*”

“They’re coming. I have to go,” I said.

“All right, but if you need me—”

“I won’t. Thanks, Andor, you saved my life.”

“What good will that be if he gets his hands on you?” he asked angrily.

“He won’t. Now that he’s tried I can file a formal complaint and he’ll have to stay away from me.”

“Somehow I don’t think a slip of paper will deter him.”

“Then I’ll have to use my gun.”

“Is that your answer for everything?”

I almost felt the frustration rolling off of him and had the sudden urge to reassure him in whatever way I could. But it was too soon, my conflicting emotions too new.

“It’s worked for me so far,” I replied.

The sound of boots grew closer, as did Lance’s shouts, and I knew he was with the guard heading our way.

“Thanks again, Andor, good bye,” I said as I turned and began to walk away.

“Good bye, Alexia, for now,” he replied.

I turned back to look at him, but he was already gone.

“Lex!”

“I’m here, Lance, I’m here and I’m okay,” I shouted as I jogged toward him.

There were four men with him, but none of them Lucian, for which I was grateful. They all froze at the sound of my voice and a spotlight was pointed at me.

“Get that fucking light out of my face!”

It immediately disappeared and all I saw were spots for a second. Lance’s chest appeared in front of me, his hands roaming over my arms and head.

“Are you okay? What the fuck happened? How in the fuck are you okay after a fall like that?”

“Get your damn hands off of me. I’m fine. Someone caught me. Someone or something. He caught me and then took off, I was searching for him when you came running,” I said, impatiently swatting at his hands.

I glanced at the faces around me, but they were all checking the street and the alleys around us. Lance was looking up toward the roof of the closest building, and I was impressed.

“Where the fuck is Lucian? The asshole grabbed me,” I said angrily.

Lance turned back to me, his face a mask of fury unlike I’d ever seen from him before. It shocked me, and I realized he shouldn’t have been as close as he was when I fell. He was

supposed to have been patrolling almost a mile and a half away.

“He’s on his way into BPC to talk to whoever’s in charge at this hour. He’s lucky I didn’t kick his ass on the spot.”

“Well...good. I guess I need to go in too. I’m filing a complaint on his ass.”

I brushed past him and headed toward the nearest checkpoint, the men falling in step behind me. I was pissed and there was no way I would let Lucian get away with what had happened. Lance came up beside me and I felt his eyes roaming over me, perhaps checking for injuries. We’d always had a wary understanding of sorts. He knew I wasn’t going to sleep with him and I knew we would never be friends. We were partnered at least twice a week and had always gotten along well enough for me to almost trust him, almost. However, this new protective streak he had toward me was unsettling, and I wasn’t sure how to take it. As we headed through the checkpoint, and he continued to walk with me toward Border Patrol Central, I realized he was acting like Andor had. But where I’d almost appreciated it from Andor, Lance’s behavior was getting on my nerves. What the hell was happening to me?

“Here, Lex. I found it on the ground beside the wall. You must have dropped it when you were caught by whatever in the hell caught you.”

I looked over to see Lance holding my gun. My eyes widened, more at the shock of me not realizing it was gone than of him having it. I took it from him gently and holstered it.

“Thanks,” I said quietly.

“You’re welcome.”

“You know, you don’t have to go in with me. I can handle this on my own, and if they need a witness someone will call you.”

He was silent for a moment, and I thought perhaps he would go ahead and let me go in alone.

“It’s cool. My shift ended at 0500 anyway. I’ll head in with you so they won’t have to wake me up later for my statement.”

I couldn’t argue with his reasoning, therefore didn’t try. We reached BPC and he reached out and opened the door for me, another first. I frowned at him but he was staring inside with a scowl on his face. I turned to walk in and froze. Lucian stood there watching me, the look on his face possessive and more than a little scary. I ignored it and walked into the small office with Lance on my heels.

“Lance, aren’t you supposed to be on the wall?” Lucian asked through gritted teeth.

“Where I should or shouldn’t be is none of your damn business,” Lance replied calmly.

“What the hell is going on here? Alexia, did you fall? That’s what I heard on the radio, but girl, you don’t look like anyone I’ve ever seen who fell off a fifteen-foot wall onto a concrete sidewalk.”

I glanced at Commander Wayne and wondered how many people he’d seen fall off the wall.

“Commander Wayne, I was rescued, though I didn’t see my rescuer before he or she ran off. But the person, or shifter, apparently caught me, sir,” I replied.

He gave me a slight grin.

“And you, Slavici,” he asked, turning his serious gaze to Lucian.

Lucian remained silent, his eyes going from me to Lance and back again.

“He grabbed her and when he let go she fell,” Lance said.

“This is none of your damn business, Lance,” Lucian hissed.

Lance tensed and opened his mouth to reply when Commander Wayne stepped between them.

“Lance, I would like to see you before this evening’s shift for a full report of this morning’s activities. For now you’re off duty, go get some much-deserved rest.”

Lance glanced at me as if deciding what to do. Then his instincts for self-preservation finally kicked in and he saluted the Commander, before turning and walking out the door.

Commander Wayne watched him leave before turning his attention to Lucian.

“All right, Slavici, you wanna explain what you were doing putting your hands on one of my soldiers?”

“It was a reflex, sir.”

“A reflex?”

“Yes, sir. I heard a noise and Alexia was standing beside me. I grabbed her with the intent to shove her out of the line of fire, but I was overly aggressive and she stumbled.”

“What were you doing out of your tower, Slavici?”

“I admit I was away from my post, sir. I went down for a breath of fresh air and to say hello to Alexia.”

I narrowed my eyes and glared at Lucian as he spouted off his lies. Unfortunately, it was my word against his. I knew Lance saw him grab me, but there was no way he would've been near enough to hear a noise or not. All Lance could attest to was that Lucian grabbed me, which he'd already admitted. Commander Wayne turned to me.

“Is that what happened?” he asked, his voice betraying nothing.

“I heard no noise,” I replied just as blandly.

“But Slavici did grab you?”

“Yes, sir, and I told him to release me. He did and I stumbled and fell.”

“So, he didn't push you over the edge?”

Lucian made a noise of protest, which the Commander silenced with a look.

“No, sir. He didn’t push me.”

Wayne was quiet for a few minutes as he walked around his desk and sat. Lucian and I watched him in silence.

“Well, it seems to me, though his intentions may have been honorable, Slavici had no right to grab you as he did. You’re both trained on how to deal with an attack on the wall and his actions go against your training. Therefore, Alexia, if you wish to file a report against him you may do so. However, be fairly warned it will go in as a first-time, unintended offense, and he will receive no more than a verbal warning.”

I fought the urge to gasp and shout obscenities at the outrage. Lucian stayed completely still and silent beside me and I felt his gaze. I considered filing the report but knew all it would accomplish was to start a new rumor within the ranks. Nothing would be done to Lucian and the others would view me as a rat. As unfair as it seems, that’s the way our world works on the wall. We depend on each other to watch our backs against enemies without a second’s hesitation. You can’t patrol with someone you don’t trust. But if I let it go, within a few weeks the incident would be forgotten and I could deal with Lucian in my own way. Oh yeah, that sounded much better.

“No, sir. I don’t feel a report is necessary. I’m sure it was just a misunderstanding and Slavici will keep his hands to himself in the future,” I said.

They both turned to me in shock, Lucian hiding his expression more quickly than the Commander.

“Well, okay then. If you’re feeling all right, I guess you can both go,” Wayne said, looking me over, head to toe.

“Yes, sir, I’m perfectly fine,” I replied.

“Good. Well, good day to you both and, Slavici, remember how this could have gone.”

Lucian gave a curt nod as he held the door open for me. I was tempted to slug him, but I fought it. He walked out behind me and I stepped aside as he came up beside me. I looked him in the eye.

“Don’t ever touch me again, Lucian. Next time I won’t hesitate to pull the trigger.”

“Alexia—”

“Shut up, you bastard. I don’t even want to hear you say my name. I never have and never will want anything to do with you, understand? There is nothing going on with me and any of the other men in this unit and there never will be anything between us. If you ever come near me again, I’ll put a bullet in your head without a second thought.”

“But...wait...”

I turned and walked away from him, feeling his gaze until I rounded the corner.

Chapter Nine

I had a fitful sleep all day tossing and turning. The possibilities of what might've happened ran through my mind. Sometimes my overactive imagination is nothing but a fucking curse. I still felt Lucian's hands on my arms, making my skin crawl. A shower didn't help. The vigorous scrubbing did nothing more than turn my skin red. I was staring at my ceiling, lying under a thin sheet in nothing but panties and a thin tank top when I heard a noise on my roof. My ceilings are high, about twelve feet from the floor, but the roof is metal. I love it when it rains, but hate it every other time anything hits those metal plates.

The noise was a screeching scrape, like nails on a chalkboard. Then I clearly heard footsteps headed for the edge of the roof. I grabbed my Glock and decided not to worry about my lack of attire. Sometimes feminine body parts can be an advantageous distraction. The footsteps stopped and I saw a shadow against the drapes as a figure leaned over and pushed the window open. My drapes are made of thick cloth, meant to darken any room. I stood in shadow at high noon, concealed

against a pillar in the center of my floor plan. I felt confident with my gun in my hands, aimed at the floor, my finger on the trigger.

My window opened and the drapes shifted out of the way as a large brown shape swung in and dropped silently to the floor. It rolled as it landed and stopped in a crouch, revealing nothing of its size or gender. I fought to control my breathing and heart rate, both of which would give me away if it was a shifter in my midst. The figure stood, arms extending to the sides, palms flat out and empty. It took a step back toward the window and into a shaft of daylight. I saw brown hair and recognized the golden skin of his bare arms.

“Andor,” I whispered, nearly breathless as I watched him, for he was naked.

“Alexia, I’m sorry to drop in this way but I fear you’re in danger,” he said.

He remained completely still as I approached, not even moving to cover his nakedness. I dared not let my eyes wander, knowing I needed to concentrate on what he said.

“What do you mean? From who?” I asked.

I kept my gun pointed at the floor and removed one hand to my hip. He relaxed and dropped his arms, perhaps considering my change in position less threatening.

“It is as I feared. My position has been compromised, and the information of my assignment has been leaked. Which

means any who delve into it will see your connection and may therefore come to silence you.”

He lowered his hands to his sides, but remained where he was.

“Why are you naked?” I asked, no longer able to ignore the obvious.

“I had to leave quickly and in animal form to get to you first. Is there anywhere you can go where you will not be found? Anyone who will hide you?”

“No. I’m not running away. Hell, Andor, I don’t even know what I’m running away from! Those disks told me nothing of a conspiracy between the governments or anything else that could be construed as worthy of killing over. What the hell is going on?”

I didn’t try to hide the frustration and anger from my voice and I knew he saw the wariness in my body. I was so tired of it all, and I had a feeling it was just getting started. All I wanted was to be left alone to live each day until I died. I didn’t want to be a hero. I didn’t want to try to save anyone, human or animal. I wanted to turn my back on Andor and the whole mess he had invited into my building, my sanctuary. Andor seemed to sense all of this because he walked up and pulled me into his arms. He placed a hand on my head and pressed my cheek against his bare chest. His other hand rubbed my back slowly.

“Alexia, I’m very sorry this has fallen upon your doorstep, but I truly do need your help. I’m as you are, alone in this world with no one to trust but myself and perhaps you if you will let me.”

I was too shocked by his actions to think of protesting. I stiffened at the feel of his skin against mine. Andor didn’t seem the least bit bothered by it, but I could barely string two thoughts together.

“H-how do you know I’m even in danger? How does anyone even know about me?”

He sighed, and ran his hands up and down my arms. I felt myself relaxing, melting into him, even as my common sense protested his touch.

“The person I feared betrayed me is dead. She was killed in her home where some sensitive information was hidden. When I went to retrieve it, it was gone. Your file was in the information as well as notes stating I planned to contact you. I must assume her killers will come after you. They already destroyed my home and nearly got me at my office. However, I sensed their presence and their intention and was able to escape. I came here as soon as I was able, to ensure your safety.”

I looked up, but didn’t know what to say. I could only stare into his golden eyes as I tried to ignore his naked skin pressed against me. He was looking into my eyes but I

couldn't read the expression on his face. I thought he might kiss me, or say something gentle. Instead, he let me go and turned away, making me feel bereft and cold. I crossed my arms over my chest, hugging his lingering warmth to me. He walked up to the window and closed it, pulling the heavy curtain closed. We were shut into darkness but I knew he saw perfectly fine. I couldn't.

“What do we do, Andor?” I asked, just to get a sense of his position in the room.

“We leave this place and find somewhere to both hide and sift through the information we have,” he replied from behind me.

I jumped slightly at the sound of his voice. I hadn't realized how close he was until I felt his breath on my neck. I fought the urge to turn back into his embrace and continued to stare into the darkness before me.

“And where in the hell is this magical fairytale land you speak of?”

He laughed and it sounded bitter.

“My home, of course. A place filled with emptiness and memories. No one will think to look for us there.”

“Are you sure? Won't they know where your former residence is?”

“Yes, but it is no longer the three story house it used to be. After my divorce it was auctioned off and turned into an

orphanage. That failed and the building has been abandoned for the past two years.”

“An orphanage? And it was closed?”

He was silent for a moment, and I thought he might not respond.

“It was an orphanage for shifters,” he replied quietly, his voice betraying emotions I hadn’t seen from him yet. “When the humans reached the site during one particularly vicious battle...they killed every living thing inside.”

I felt his fingertips against my arms and broke out into goose bumps. He ran his fingers lightly up my arms to my shoulders and gently pulled me back against his chest. My breath caught in my throat and I lifted my head. I felt him press his face into my hair and inhale the scent of my lavender shampoo.

“Let me protect you, Alexia,” he whispered.

It was hard to think of a response as he kneaded my shoulders in his strong hands, but I did nod my consent. He released a breath I hadn’t realized he was holding and wrapped his arms around my waist.

“Are you certain Lucian didn’t hurt you?”

I frowned at the abrupt change of subject, then realized it was essentially the same topic.

“Yes, I’m fine,” I replied quietly.

“I wanted to rip his heart out when I saw him grab you. I’m just grateful I stayed close enough to catch you.”

I was almost shocked into silence.

“You were watching me?”

He seemed to hesitate, but I placed my hand on his arm in preparation to push him away and his grip tightened.

“Yes. I’m sorry, Alexia. I know you still don’t trust me but please believe I value your safety.”

I closed my eyes, the words “I do trust you” on the tip of my tongue. But I couldn’t bring myself to say them. Andor released me slowly.

“I’ll go with you, Andor. And we’ll figure this out together.”

“Thank you. I promise you won’t regret it.”

I heard his bare feet padding quietly across the floor. I knew he was letting me hear him walk away, and took it as a sign he no longer wished to talk. He walked into my bathroom and closed the door. I heard water running as I went into my bedroom to dress.

I gathered only weapons and two changes of clothes. Andor collected as much food as he could carry on his back, which was damn near all of it, and we walked out of my building. Andor was dressed in a pair of my husband’s old jeans and a T-shirt. It hurt to see how well the outfit fit him, but I tried not to dwell on it. Saving a few outfits had seemed

natural at the time while I was grieving. I realized it was past time to move on. I didn't have any shoes for Andor, but he assured me his feet would be fine on any surface. I had to take his word for it.

We headed to BPC first so I could give notice of my leave. Andor was very much against the idea but I couldn't think of a way around it. If I just disappeared, I would either be considered AWOL or kidnapped, neither of which would bode well for us. I decided a little honesty couldn't hurt. Besides, I had three years of accumulated personal leave available to me. I wasn't sure exactly how much time off that amounted to, but it would be enough to get us out the door for a while without repercussions from the CHS army. Andor relented when he realized I was going with or without him, and dutifully walked beside me to the office door.

"Are you sure they won't notice your bare feet or your eyes?" I asked for the third time.

Andor gave me an impatient look and nodded.

"I promise you, Alexia, I have had nearly three hundred years to perfect my skills."

"Okay," I said with a sigh, pulling the door open and stepping into the office.

Commander Wayne was seated behind the desk, looking as if he hadn't moved a muscle in the past eight hours. He

looked up as we entered, smiling at me and then frowning as he took in Andor's rumpled appearance.

"Williams, what are you doing here? Your shift doesn't start for hours."

I took a deep breath, gave him a weak smile and wrapped my arms around Andor's waist. He placed his arm across my shoulders and pulled me into his side as if we were long lost lovers.

"Williams?"

"Commander, this is Andy Olson. He's my boyfriend—"

"Fiancé," Andor corrected.

"Right, fiancé, I'm still having trouble getting used to that," I said with a giggle, startling both men and myself.

"Fiancé?" Wayne asked in shock.

"Yes, sir, he popped the question this morning and I said yes."

"Oh. Well...congratulations."

"Thank you, sir. As you well know I've never taken leave before, sir, not in the whole time I've been active—"

"Yes, I know. You're one of my most dedicated."

"Thank you, sir. Well, seeing as how I need to prepare for my wedding—"

"And we wish to spend some time alone together before that craziness happens," Andor added helpfully.

“Oh yes, we want some time, so I’d like to take leave starting immediately.”

Commander Wayne continued to stare at us for a moment, and I almost began to panic. Then he blinked as if coming out of a trance and looked at a paper in his hands.

“Well, this is most unexpected, and a little unprecedented. I mean normally these things take time, and advance notice...permission, signed forms...” He mumbled to himself as he began to shuffle papers on his desk. “Well, luckily, Williams I was considering a transfer for you away from this zone,” he said.

“You were?” I asked in honest-to-goodness shock.

“Yes. After this morning’s activities with Slavici, I thought it best to separate the two of you.”

I was tempted to point out that making me leave wasn’t fair when it was Lucian who caused the problem, but I kept my mouth shut.

“I know you have your building to consider, but that can be taken care of. However, since you wish to take a leave anyway, I think doing so might allow this whole thing to blow over. And once you return, married at that, Slavici is bound to be a reformed man.”

I tried not to choke at his declaration, Andor’s grip on my shoulder tightened.

“So I can leave, sir?” I asked.

“Yes. Uh... How long do you need?”

I looked at Andor.

“A few weeks at least,” he said.

“Yes, a few weeks,” I agreed.

“Fine, fine. Let’s say four months?”

My mouth dropped open but nothing came out.

“Perfect,” Andor replied.

“Great. Williams, if you’ll sign here.”

Ten minutes and five signatures later, we were on our way out the door and toward the checkpoint. We convinced the Commander we were heading into Circe for some R and R, but I didn’t think the explanation would cut it with the guards. It took Andor one flash of his beautiful golden eyes to convince the guards we had legitimate business in Circe, and they were not to remember our faces. His powers of persuasion continued to unnerve me.

I realized Andor did have incredible power, but he also had amazing control. It would’ve been nothing for him to use those powers on me, but he never had. From the moment we met he’d remained honest with me in actions and words. I watched his wide, muscular back as we made our way through the checkpoint and into shifter lands and wondered...*what the hell have I gotten myself into?*

Chapter Ten

Circe, a city of shifters, what can I say to do it justice? During the daylight hours it looked like any other border city of its remarkable size. People bustled back and forth in the streets, presumably between work and home. It had a spread of suburbs like any normal city and even its own ghetto. I was surprised to see art galleries and even a museum in Circe. The human side of the continent was still trying to get its cultural base established again. I hadn't even heard of a fully formed orchestra in CHS. Circe had its own orchestra and dance company. They were the main attraction at the hub of activity in Circe, Animal Menagerie.

The Animal Menagerie was something between a nightclub and a circus. Shifters and humans alike converged on the place every night to rub elbows with each other and ogle the sights. Located to the east of the red zone, it was the only building open to both sides of the wall. There was a team of five men who guarded the gate leading into the Menagerie at all times. I'd pulled that duty once, and only once. It was enough of an eyeful to last me two lifetimes. The commander

and I had an unspoken agreement I would never guard that gate again. I'd added three kills to my scorecard that night.

Andor led me well away from Animal Menagerie and the red zone. We crossed the Serpent River and continued into the open wilderness that had reclaimed most of the shifter lands. I stayed close to Andor and he all but gripped me to his side. I got a few second glances in the city, but for the most part we were ignored by everyone. We were two more people trying to get through Circe without hassle, and without being noted by those around us.

It took three days of walking all night and sleeping a few hours during daylight for us to reach our destination. The first night had been hard for me. I hadn't been beyond the wall since it was raised, and sleeping in shifter lands unnerved me. Andor seemed to sense this even though I fought like hell to hide my emotions. He insisted on taking watch for most of the day while I slept, or tried to sleep. He only slept two hours for every twenty, and I wondered how long his body and mind could handle that kind of schedule. Luckily, I never found out.

As the sun began to rise on the morning of our fourth day, Andor stopped on a hilltop in the vast wasteland that was once southern Colorado. I stepped up beside him and looked into the tree-covered valley below us, noticing the brown shingles of a roof almost completely concealed in the woods.

“Is that it?” I asked, still panting from our latest five-hour trek.

“Yes,” he replied, before striding forward toward the tree line.

I followed him in silence as he walked an overgrown path which may have once been a gravel road. It wound through the trees smoothly, before stopping at an eight-foot wrought iron gate. The gate was locked with a thick padlock so rusted I knew there would be no removing it. However, it wasn't a problem for us as most of the fence on either side of the gate had fallen to the ground.

Andor stepped over the fence without looking back at me, his eyes focused on the building before us. It was a three-storied work of art, one of those modern houses that screamed expensive architecture. I couldn't help but gape at it as I followed him along the gravel driveway.

“This was my wife's idea, her design,” Andor said quietly as we walked up to the front door.

It was painted a bright red, with whorls of white hiding the doorknob. Windows were scattered all over the face of the house, giving the illusion there could be anywhere from one to five levels inside its walls. It was impossible to even guess at the number of rooms from staring at the huge building.

“Was she an architect?” I asked cautiously, not even certain if I should refer to her in the past tense.

“No, an interior decorator. However she did have quite an interest in fine art,” he replied.

He turned the knob and the door opened without the slightest protest, making me wary of our surroundings.

“Do you think anyone’s here?” I whispered.

“No. I’ve had someone taking care of it for the past few months, but he cannot be traced back to me nor does he know who I am.”

“Does he know to expect you?”

“It wouldn’t matter if he did. He died in his sleep six days ago.”

“And you don’t find that suspicious?”

“No. He was eighty-seven and human.”

“Oh.”

Andor closed the door behind us and locked it, then led me through the house. It had been nearly stripped bare of furniture and all the usual comforts of home. Andor gave me a tour of the entire building, before leading me to the kitchen pantry. It was the size of a walk-in closet and bare, causing me to frown as Andor stepped into it. I was about to question him when he reached for a top shelf and pressed the wall above it. A small panel in the far wall shifted, revealing a hole in the floor with steps leading down.

“Follow me,” he said.

I followed him, of course. What choice did I have? But I didn't like it. Small cramped spaces aren't my favorite thing, especially in the dark. My heart began to beat faster the farther down we went, until I was nearly choking on my fear. I had my gun in my hand without even realizing it and my eyes felt like they were bulging.

"Alexia, what is it?" Andor asked, stopping in front of me abruptly.

I stepped into him and then quickly backed up a step.

"N-nothing... Are we almost there?"

If my heart rate hadn't already given me away to his superior hearing, the tremor of my voice certainly did. I felt him turn toward me and take my free hand in his. He pulled me onto the step beside him, which was almost too narrow for us to stand together. I felt his strong arms come around me as he held me to his chest.

"Are you afraid of the dark?" he asked gently.

"N-no. Well, maybe... Y-yes, and the enclosed space," I confessed.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, closing my eyes and letting myself feel the strength in his arms.

"We still have a few feet to go, but we can walk together, all right?"

"Y-yes. Together would be good."

I felt Andor shift his weight and took the step with him, nearly plastered to his side. We walked together, step by step, in a rhythm unbroken by either of us. I smiled at the easy synchronization we found, carefully keeping my mind off his warmth. Within minutes, Andor pulled me to a stop and slid his free hand along the wall. He didn't let go of me until the room became flooded with light, and then he seemed reluctant.

“Whoa.”

It was all I could say as I glanced around the underground den hidden beneath the house. It was larger than my loft and full of dust-cover shrouded lumps I took to be furniture. Andor began removing the covers as I took a look around. There was a kitchen off to one side as large as the one upstairs. A dining table big enough to seat eight separated it from the living room, which housed two full sleeper sofas. On the far side of the room I saw a four-poster king-sized bed canopied in black silk. I looked away from the seductive sight quickly, hoping I wouldn't blush. There was only one other door, which I soon found led to the largest bathroom I'd ever seen. The sunken tub was big enough for ten people with a separate shower beside it.

“This room has remained hidden through the years. It was never included in the blueprints,” Andor said.

“I guess this was your home away from home?”

He laughed bitterly.

“I guess that’s one way to put it. Another would be to say it was my cage.”

“Quite a cage.”

“Yes. Well, as the saying goes about the gilded cage and all that.”

“It’s still a cage,” I murmured.

“Indeed.”

“Who made this your cage, Andor?”

He looked at me for a second, then away as he walked toward the bathroom.

“My loving and devoted wife, after she learned she’d married an animal.”

With that he walked into the bathroom and closed the door. I stared after him for a moment and wondered about the obvious story behind that statement. I was more than a little curious about Andor’s past, but it had long left the realm of professional curiosity. I began to think I might not want to know about his past as much as he most likely didn’t want to tell it. After all, I sure as hell wasn’t going to volunteer any information about my husband and son.

I sat on one of the sofas and removed my socks and shoes, relishing in the freedom of being barefoot. I wished I had a tub to soak them in, but I was too tired to rummage through the kitchen for anything that might suffice. Before I knew it, I lay stretched on the sofa and my eyes were closing all by

themselves. I felt more than heard Andor come out of the bathroom, the sight hidden beyond the back of the sofa.

“Alexia?”

I raised my hand to alert him to my position without bothering to get up.

“You can take the bed and I’ll sleep here,” he said.

“I’m too damn tired to move, Andor. Just take the bed,” I said with a yawn, my eyes now closed.

I heard him chuckle then felt his arms around me and the solidity of the sofa disappeared. I grabbed his shirt as he lifted me in his arms.

“Damn it! Warn me next time,” I yelped, my eyes flying open.

“Next time? You think I plan on making a habit of carrying you around?” he asked with amusement.

“You could’ve left me there. I was comfortable,” I replied, yawning again.

“Perhaps, but you will be much more comfortable here.”

He laid me on the bed and I couldn’t help the sigh of pleasure that escaped while I sank into the thick comforter. Andor chuckled again and pulled the edge of the comforter over me.

“Sleep well, Alexia. Perhaps after we’ve rested we can sort through this mess.”

I murmured my agreement, my eyes already closing.

Chapter Eleven

I don't know how long I slept, but I woke to the smell of cooking meat. I couldn't place it, and wasn't entirely certain I wanted to, but after days of dried food it smelled like heaven. I sat up and saw Andor's bare back moving around the open kitchen. His hair was pulled into a ponytail, and he was humming. I stood and stretched, wincing as my tired muscles protested the movement after my rest.

"Good morning," Andor called, leaving me momentarily confused.

"Morning?"

"Yes. It is currently 0300, which is technically morning."

"Damn. I slept the entire day away?"

"Yes, as did I. I only woke an hour ago. Why don't you take a shower to wake fully. This should be ready by the time you're through."

I looked at the open bathroom door longingly. A shower sounded like paradise.

"Yeah, all right," I murmured.

I grabbed my bag and went into the bathroom. Stepping into the shower, I moaned as the hot spray hit my back. It was definitely Eden. I closed my eyes and let the steam engulf me. It only took a few seconds for the reality of my situation to take over and leave me trembling on the floor of the shower. I was alone, with a shifter I barely knew, hidden underground in the land of my enemies. Even within the limits of CHS, I had no family and no real friends. The only people I spoke to were those I patrolled with, and then barely. Does anyone miss me, I wondered? Do they even know I'm gone? Lance's face came unbidden into my mind and I thought about his curious behavior.

"I'm nothing more than a conquest to him," I whispered to myself, certain it was the truth.

I began to question my reluctance to sleep with Lance. I hadn't been with a man since my husband's death, not even a stolen kiss. There hadn't been any time for dating right away, but the past few months had been almost peaceful. Why did I keep pushing the men away from me, especially the obvious one-night stands? I knew I would never love anyone like I loved my husband, but for the first time I considered it might be time to move on in that department as well.

"He would," I said with more confidence, and knew it was true.

My thoughts turned to the shifter in the next room. Despite not wanting to think of him in human terms, he was getting to me. Andor was so unlike any shifter I'd been exposed to. I'd been in kill mode where they were concerned for so long I didn't know what to think of my ever-growing attraction to him. I forced myself to stop thinking about Andor, and considered Lance more strongly. I vowed then and there if I ever did return to Georgetown I would sleep with him. I don't know why it felt like such a monumental decision at the time, but I swear a weight lifted from my shoulders. I felt lighter and calmer, as if the decision had been a burden for ages. In truth, I'd only given him a fleeting thought when we met two years before. He flirted with me and I brushed him off. Perhaps it was the illusion of control it gave me, or perhaps it was the promise of sex. Good sex if the rumors were true, and from the look of him in tight jeans they had to be. Most likely it was the thought of being with a human, while consciously ignoring a shifter. I ignored the spark of guilt that tried to flare.

I finished my shower and dressed quickly while my stomach began to rumble. I ran a brush through my hair without even bothering to look in the mirror, then opened the door. Andor was setting our plates on the table and looked up when I approached. The easy smile he'd been wearing froze on his face, and his brows suddenly bunched in a frown.

“What?” I asked, looking down self-consciously.

I was wearing my standard dress of a T-shirt and camouflage cargo pants, no socks or shoes. Andor seemed to come back to himself as I looked back up and he simply shook his head.

“Nothing,” he replied, but his body language spoke volumes.

He was pissed but I had no idea why. I walked to the table and looked appreciatively at the steaks and wine before returning my gaze to him.

“Why are you angry?” I asked.

He pulled a chair out and motioned for me to sit before taking his own seat. I watched him, waiting for an answer he seemed reluctant to give.

“I said it’s nothing. Do you feel better after your shower?”

“Yes, actually I do. But, I would feel even better if you would remain honest with me seeing as how we’re stuck together for now,” I replied.

He snorted.

“Stuck together...yes, I guess we are. Well, Alexia, since we’re...stuck together, I feel I should remind you of something,” he said before pausing to take a drink of his wine.

“And that is?”

“I’m psychic,” he said simply.

“Meaning?”

“Meaning I can read your mind, which is not something I plan on doing on a regular basis. However, when you’re thinking of something very hard, you project your thoughts, damn near shouting them at me.”

I frowned at the angry tone of his voice as I tried to remember what I’d been thinking of when I left the bathroom. Andor began to cut into his steak in quick, jerky thrusts, which only emphasized his bad mood. I picked up my wine glass and placed it to my lips deep in thought. Suddenly, I realized what I’d been thinking of and Andor’s head snapped up, his eyes glaring at me.

“Yes,” he growled. “You were thinking of Lance, and how you plan to fuck him.”

I sat in shocked silence while Andor drained his wine glass and refilled it. My steak didn’t look as appetizing as it originally had, and my stomach was protesting the sip of wine. I set my glass back down as I felt my face redden and Andor sighed.

“I must apologize, Alexia. It’s none of my business what you do with your body, or whom you give it to,” he said, his tone less angry.

“I’m sorry too. I didn’t realize I was shouting my thoughts at you.”

“I will teach you to guard your thoughts. It will be imperative while we are in shifter lands that you are able to do so.”

I nodded, watching Andor eat in silence. I lifted my wine glass again and took a timid drink, hoping my stomach would settle enough for me to eat soon. After a few minutes, I was able to cut into my steak and finish the rest of my wine. I felt a change of topic was in order to fill the weighted silence between us. I had no idea what to talk about until I looked back at my plate.

“Where did you get the steaks? I haven’t even seen real beef since the war.”

“There is a deep freezer hidden upstairs. This building has two different backup power systems so there was never a lapse in power. It is still well stocked, so we’ll have plenty of meat.”

“Well, that’s good to know,” I replied with a slight smile.

Andor looked at me for a moment then smiled back, but it didn’t reach his eyes. He was still angry, but trying to either hide it or fight it. I tried not to think on it at all, since the implications were more than I was ready to deal with. We both ate the rest of our meal in silence.

“Thank you for cooking, Andor. I’ll clean up,” I said, jumping to clear away our plates as soon as he finished his food.

“You hardly touched yours,” he protested.

“I’m not very hungry right now. I’ll eat something later.”

I felt his eyes on me as I walked around the kitchen. It was open to the rest of the room. I didn’t have so much as a cabinet to hide behind. Instead I kept my back to him as much as possible, my mind blank.

“You’re doing very well already for a human with no training,” he said quietly.

I turned to him with a frown.

“Excuse me?”

“Your thoughts, or lack thereof. You’re doing a good job of keeping your mind blank.” He chuckled. “Or you were until you assumed I was referring to your domestic abilities.”

I let out a breath and smiled, letting my immediate anger ease away.

“Yeah well, I was once known for my domesticity. I thought you were insulting me for a minute there.”

He laughed.

“Never, Alexia. I’m not that brave, nor that stupid.” I shook my head and turned back to the sink. “How long were you married?”

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. I’d never spoken to anyone of my previous life. I kept my husband and son buried deep.

“Two years. You?”

“I was married for ten years and have a daughter,” he replied quietly.

I stopped what I was doing and turned to face him.

“What happened to them?”

He looked away from me and seemed to be deciding on how much to say. After a minute, he rose from the table and walked into the living room to sit on the sofa.

“My daughter was ten years old when her mother started questioning my slow rate of aging. With my abilities I was able to give myself the appearance of aging, but it took deep concentration at all times so I didn’t do it with her. I tried to think of a suitable lie but I loved her, and decided to be truthful.”

He paused and looked at me, the remembered pain showing in his eyes.

“She didn’t take it very well. I tried to reason with her. I told her of my abilities and the better health of shifters. It occurred to her that our daughter had alien blood in her veins and she grew violent. For a few days, I thought I might have to have her incarcerated or committed. However, she came to her senses and we came to an agreement.”

He paused and looked away again. I waited, somehow subduing the urge to tap my foot.

“You agreed to live down here?” I asked.

He nodded.

“I agreed to stay here in this hole and arranged to work from here on my computer. She agreed to support any excuse I might make to our daughter when she began to question. It worked for four years, but then the war started and she panicked. I expected her to take my daughter and head north to her family, but she surprised me. She told me I had to leave. She said the shifters would leave her and Emily alone if I wasn’t here, and like the fool I am, I let her convince me... I left. A year after the war began, I discovered this place had become an orphanage for shifters and my now ex-wife was gone. I don’t know where she went, and have not seen her in all this time.”

“And your daughter, Emily?”

He took a deep breath and wiped a hand over his face. I thought he might not answer, as the question obviously upset him. But I waited, and once he seemed to have regained his composure, he continued.

“I discovered later that Emily had remained here in the orphanage. Had I known at the time I would’ve come for her,” he said quickly. “But by the time I found out it was too late. She was gone and no one knew where. I traced her to the wall in the red zone of Circe, and there the trail ended.”

Then it hit me. Emily was the first missing shifter on the information discs he gave me. Emily, his daughter, was the reason he’d begun this quest.

“Oh my...,” I whispered.

I covered my mouth with my hand and either by my actions, facial expressions or treacherous thoughts, Andor knew my heart was breaking for him and his lost child. I had to fight the tears threatening to consume me and immediately turned back to the dishes.

“Yes, this case of missing shifters is very personal for me, Alexia. You have no idea how grateful I am to have your assistance,” he said quietly.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

“I still don’t know what you think I can do.”

“You have natural instincts about shifters, and being human you may be able to get into places I cannot. I have many useful powers, but there are those who know of the abilities and will guard against them. Besides, all of the evidence so far points back to the humans. Theodore Castor and his team of scientists have broken laws in the past and received little more than a slap on the wrist. I doubt kidnapping is beyond them.”

“Oh. So we’ll be going back to Georgetown?”

“Most likely, yes. But we have plans to make and information to comb through. Knowing who it is isn’t enough. We need to know why.”

“Do you still have friends over here who can help us?”

“Yes. Amazingly enough I still have allies on both sides. They will give me what information we need once I consult with the alpha. The trick will be in doing so without alerting him to your presence.”

“Sandulf? What does he care about me being here?”

Andor chuckled and shook his head.

“He is the alpha of all FNT, Alexia. Everything that occurs on this side of the wall concerns him. You are currently enemy number one as far as he is concerned. However, I don’t believe he has studied you as I have. He may have made incorrect assumptions about you.”

“Enemy number one? You’ve got to be kidding. Little old me?”

He grinned. “We do call you Death.”

“Oh, shut up about it already. So I stay under his radar while you, what?”

“As I said, there are plans to make and information to go through.”

I bit my lip as I thought over what little he’d already shown me. He stood and walked to the far end of the room.

“There doesn’t seem to be much so far.”

“Yes, I know. I’m hoping we’ll learn more in the days to come.”

I frowned as I thought over everything I'd learned. Andor had reached the wall and was running both hands over it as if searching for something.

“Andor, what did you mean when you said you work for your government? Doesn't that mean you work for Sandulf? And what are you doing?”

“In most shifter countries the alpha is supreme ruler. However, FNT is a bit different in structure. We have Sandulf, but he keeps a ruling body beneath him similar to the US cabinet. The work I do is authorized by someone who reports back to him, but I don't answer to him directly.”

He stopped halfway down the wall and pushed with both hands. Part of the wall moved back, revealing a hidden doorway. Andor stepped through it. I dried my hands and then crossed the room to see where he was going.

“I see. Uh, what's in there?”

He looked over his shoulder at me with a grin, and I saw he stood in a large room filled with weapons.

“Here is the other reason we traveled all this way. Despite popular belief, not all shifters are vulnerable to silver, but I guarantee something in this room will take them down.”

I raised a brow and let out a low whistle as I looked around the room. There were various guns and swords of every size, as well as a few items I'd never seen before hanging from the walls.

“Well, this will certainly put the odds more in our favor.”

“I would hope so,” he replied with a chuckle.

I just shook my head and walked to the nearest gun. It was similar to my Ruger, but more compact and much lighter. I instantly fell in love with it.

“We’ll have to go topside to sight these in tomorrow. It’s been years since any of them have been used.”

I nodded. “What other information are we waiting on? I mean, we already know all we can on the missing, right?”

“Emily would be eighteen years old now and any abilities she may have inherited would have manifested at puberty. I don’t know what their interest is in those shifters who have gone missing, but there seems to be no common link between them.”

I considered the files he gave me as I put the gun back. There was a mixture of male and female shifters as well as a mixture of species. In fact, no two species were alike. I looked at Andor as I considered it, throwing the thought at him easily. He gave me a considering look.

“There could be something to that,” he said.

“It’s truly the only thing we have to go on. Do you know all the different shifter species there are? Can we figure out which have not gone missing?”

“Nearly every endangered animal has a shifter cousin, as well as the domesticated species.”

“That’s a damn lot of animals,” I murmured.

“Yes, and only eighteen eliminated from that total at the moment.”

“Well, most of them are feline and canine species, except Emily, of course.”

“Yes. She is the only bird species in the bunch. Also, most of them are predatory species.”

I thought it over for a moment.

“I don’t know, Andor. I can’t think of what connection the missing species have.”

“Well, then let’s let go of it for now. Besides, there are more important tasks to attend to at the moment.”

“There are?” I asked suspiciously.

“Yes. Let’s go get comfortable.”

Chapter Twelve

We spent most of the next three days alternating between speaking mind to mind and weapons practice. Needless to say it was enlightening. Andor seemed to be impressed by how quickly I took to the various guns he had on hand, and I impressed myself by not shooting him. I tried my best to delve into Andor's thoughts while he tried his best to ignore mine. I was vividly remembering a bikini shopping trip with some girlfriends on my eighteenth birthday when he finally broke. I have to admit, I'm not sure why I'd taken to teasing him in such a way. It was completely unlike me, especially with a shifter. But I'd grown comfortable with Andor, and he no longer felt like an enemy.

"Damn it, Alexia! Even the strongest man has a limit on his control," he groaned, rising from the living room floor where we sat facing each other.

I laughed and gave him a wink.

"Just seeing how much of a man you are, Andor. I knew you couldn't stay an ice statue forever."

He walked into the kitchen, as I remained seated on the floor cross-legged.

“*An ice statue?*” he asked in my head. Suddenly I felt fingertips running down my bare arms from shoulder to elbow. I glared at him and he smiled. “*Does this feel like a frigid sculpture to you?*”

I gasped as a warm touch traveled over my stomach and up my sides past my ribs. The warmth continued to my back and up to my shoulders, making me shiver. Andor chuckled at my reaction, the sound purely masculine and sexy as hell. I jumped to my feet.

“Cut it out! You’ve made your point.”

“Have I? Good. These mental exercises serve a purpose, Alexia. I have to know you’ll be ready when we leave this place.”

“To go where?”

“I’m not certain yet. But I’ll know soon.”

“Andor, you need to tell me what’s going on in your head. I don’t like being kept in the dark.”

He sighed and busied himself in the kitchen and I thought he wouldn’t respond. I turned away and headed for the bathroom and a shower.

“Alexia, we both have a ways to go in trusting each other fully. But please know I would never hurt you nor lead you to harm.”

I stopped at the bathroom door with my back to him.

“I have to receive trust to fully give it, Andor, especially when I feel so helpless.”

“So long as you are with me, Alexia, you will never be helpless,” he replied aloud.

And for some reason, I believed him.

Andor was gone when I finally finished my shower and left the bathroom. I walked into the living room and spotted a disc on the table with a note.

Alexia, this disc will answer any further questions you have about me. I apologize for waiting so long to give it you, but here it is. I will return within three hours with more meat and other supplies. Andor

I studied the disc in my hand for a moment, wary of what it might reveal. I was beginning to trust Andor, as well as feel more for him than I had for anyone in a long time. I didn't want to consider what had happened to him in the past four years to turn him into the distrustful man he now was. With a sigh I went to my bag to retrieve the device to play the disc, knowing my curiosity was too great to fight.

It was a videodisc rather than scanned files like the previous ones. Andor himself sat at a large black desk, speaking straight to the camera as if it was an interview. I saw

no one else. He simply spoke of his life like a storyteller, beginning with his birth and ending with his discovery of Emily's disappearance. By his account it had been nearly a year ago, but he'd told me the disappearances began three months ago. I frowned at the implied lie there and wondered what other things he may have lied about.

Shaking my head to clear away such thoughts, I watched the rest of the disc. Andor even spoke a bit about his childhood as a shifter. His parents raised him in Hungary where he was born. He didn't say much about either of his parents, but his love for them was evident in his voice. At nearly three hundred years of age, I suddenly wondered how many people Andor had outlived. I knew he was the last of the eagle shifters, but according to his taped biography those were his father's people. His mother was something else, human or shifter he didn't say. I wondered if many shifters chose human mates, but quickly decided that was a dangerous line of thinking.

Andor rose from behind the desk and began to pace. He was reciting his service record and I realized this disc may have been intended for after his death. He spoke of his extensive training, the secrets he kept from his wife and his fear for Emily. Then he stopped pacing and faced the camera directly.

“I, Andor Olavson, in the service to my people and my country have done many things I am not proud of. I pray that my death will be honorable and with it, I can be forgiven for some of the unspeakable acts I have participated in.”

I sat in fascinated horror and listened as he recounted mission after mission as a human operative where he took countless lives. He was an assassin, and the last words from his mouth were of his final assignment—to take out Death herself.

I wanted to run. I wanted to grab my bag with the few belongings I had and run back to Georgetown. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, surprised that I was fighting tears. Betrayal boiled in my belly and my chest hurt. He was supposed to kill me. After a few minutes of furious pacing, I calmed down enough to think rationally. Andor obviously had no plan to kill me or he wouldn't have let me watch the disc. He was hiding me from Sandulf, which only made me feel worse. I held onto my anger. He could've told me at any time over the past few days about his original intent. Instead, he chose to let me watch a disc while he stayed away. The coward.

Almost exactly three hours later, Andor returned. He held a cardboard box in each hand, which he took straight into the kitchen.

“Need help putting the stuff away?” I asked, as I kept my thoughts blocked.

Andor placed the boxes on the counter and looked at me. He concentrated on me a moment, staring straight into my eyes, and grinned.

“No, thank you. I’ll take care of it.”

I smiled. “You didn’t get through did you?”

“Nope. You kept me well blocked from your thoughts. That is excellent, Alexia. You have come a long way in a short time.”

“You could have if you wanted to though. Couldn’t you?”

He began to put the food away, keeping his back to me for a moment.

“Yes, but I would’ve had to force myself in and it wouldn’t be pleasant for either of us,” he finally replied. “Unfortunately there are others who will not be as cautious, so I’ll have to teach you how to fend off intrusion.”

“That doesn’t sound like fun. But will it hurt them as much as it hurts me to force their way in?”

“Yes. However, there are those who don’t care much about pain.”

I didn’t know what to say so I remained silent as he finished putting away the fresh supplies. I thought to ask where he went to acquire them, but shook it off as unimportant in light of the other topics concerning me. Once he was done,

he turned to look at me and I let the question of his mother's lineage fill my mind. It was hard to keep my anger hidden, but I succeeded. His brow wrinkled in thought and he shook his head.

"It's a bit of a mystery. She would never speak of it, and if my father knew, he never told me."

"Interesting. She never shifted in front of you?"

"No. As it was my father only showed me his other form once, and that was when my body began to show signs of shifting. He took me camping, deep into the woods near our home and shifted just one time. He was the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen, and I used to beg him to shift with me so we could fly together. But he refused and warned me against shifting after my first time. Until the war I'd only shifted a dozen or so times in my entire life."

I let the disbelief show on my face. I was shocked he had lived so long as a shifter and remained solely in human form.

"When I was a child the population was not as numerous, especially near my home. It wasn't as easy to blend and lose yourself in a crowd. If one of us called attention to ourselves, everyone around would know and remember. It wasn't safe to do so."

I nodded and walked into the kitchen.

"You had to suppress that part of yourself for centuries," I said.

“Yes. If there is anything positive I can say about this new world we live in, it’s that I no longer have to hide my other form. But as for whether or not the sacrifices have been worth it I cannot say. For myself, if I cannot find my daughter safe and whole then no, absolutely not.”

He turned away from me again, busying himself at the sink. I didn’t know what to say or think so I kept my mind blank and my mouth shut. I knew the pain of losing a child firsthand, though my loss was bloody and I still had nightmares about it. But to have your child gone and not know where she was or if she was all right, that I didn’t know. Such helplessness was a whole other level from my experience and I didn’t know how he was dealing with it as well as he was.

I pulled a bottle of water from the refrigerator, smirking at the image of a goldfish on the label. Shifter advertising cracked me up sometimes, it was so painfully honest. I heard Andor running the water in the sink and a thought occurred to me.

“Andor, what about the utilities? Won’t someone notice the water and power is in use again?”

“By the time it becomes obvious we’ll be well on our way somewhere else,” he replied.

I let the question of where hang in the air between us. Andor thought the image of Castor Laboratories at me and I frowned.

“What? Why there?”

“Because, it appears to be the only lead we have.”

“Because of the snow leopard Tina thought she saw?”

“I have no doubt that she did see one, and there are more than likely other endangered animals within those walls.”

I remained silent, still blocking my emotions behind an imagined brick wall. Andor finished in the kitchen and I felt him behind me where I stood near the sofa. He placed his hands on my shoulders and I tried not to tense as I fought the urge to pull away.

“Do you think that’s enough to cast suspicion on Castor?”

“Alexia, dearling, do not think you can hide so easily from me.”

“Hide?”

“I know what thought torments you and I swear there is no reason for it.”

He began to knead my shoulders and I felt the sting of tears again.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I whispered, fighting like hell to keep the tears from falling.

He pulled me back against his chest and put his arms around my waist. I felt him press his face into my hair and closed my eyes.

“I was hoping to gain your trust first, to prevent you from running away from me. Do you believe that I would never hurt

you? As soon as I read your file, I knew there was more to you than what was in those pages. I had to meet you. I had to decide for myself if you should be eliminated.”

I shivered and tried to pull away. His grip tightened.

“When did you decide to let me live?”

He chuckled and let me go, taking a step back. I turned to look into his eyes as he answered.

“The moment I saw you face down a human male twice your size and heard your thoughts that he would be the first to go. Then I knew you didn’t kill shifters indiscriminately. I decided to give you the benefit of the doubt. And when you tried to refuse my help, I realized you could help me. I needed a human with nothing to lose, who was strong enough to fight for the truth. You proved yourself to be that person.”

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. I had a decision to make. I could hold Andor’s secrets against him and fight him every step of the way from here on out, or I could get over it and move on. I reinforced my mental wall as I considered what to do. I guess in his shoes I would’ve made the same decisions. That didn’t make it any easier to swallow.

I was running along the wall, higher than fifteen feet above the rain-slick streets of Circe. At a glance, I would say I was at least a hundred feet from the ground. There were

footsteps pounding the wall behind me, but whether I was being chased or accompanied, I wasn't sure. I felt a sense of urgency unlike anything I'd ever known in my life and I began to run even faster. Images began to whip past me in a blur, but I was too intent on my destination to fully grasp what I was seeing. At one point I saw my old house, with my husband mowing the front yard. His shirt was red with blood, but he kept on mowing.

I finally saw tower five looming before me and knew it was my destination. I heard screaming from within the tower, but I couldn't tell if it was male or female, adult or child. I flung the door open and pounded up the steps, which seemed to grow more numerous as I raced up them. When I finally reached the top, I was exhausted, so very tired all I wanted to do was lie down.

“Just a short rest,” I panted. “Just a quick nap, please.”

“No! We need you, Alexia! You have to help us, please.”

I searched to see who had spoken but there was only Lucien holding out a hand to help me. I tried to turn away from him but he was blocking the only exit other than the stairs I'd climbed.

“Move,” I yelled at him, but he laughed.

“You have to get past us first, Alexia. Then you get your prize at the end.”

I looked behind him to see what he was talking about, and there stood Jack covered in blood like I'd last seen him.

"Hey, Lexi. Did ya come to play?" he asked with a taunting laugh.

I shook my head and tried to pull out my gun, but it wasn't there. I glanced down and saw I was in nothing but a shirt and panties, no weapon in sight.

"This'll be fun," Jack said.

He was holding a baby in his arms. The baby was screaming and when it twisted to get out of his grip I saw it was my son.

"No!"

I tried to run at him, but Lucien grabbed me and held me back. My attention was pulled to the floor before Jack's feet and saw a bloody heap there. It lifted its head and began to scream. It was Emily, and she was screaming my name.

"No! Stop!"

I tried to push Lucien off of me, but he wouldn't let go.

"No, Alexia. It's all right. It's over, dearling, you have to wake up now. Alexia, please wake up."

I felt tears streaming down my face as I turned to look at Lucien, but it had grown dark and I no longer saw his face.

"Alexia, wake up. You need to wake up."

"Andor?"

Suddenly I was awake, sitting in bed with Andor holding me by the shoulders and staring into my face.

“Yes, dearling. It’s me. You were having a nightmare, but it’s over now. It’s all right.”

Relief flooded me as I realized where I was. I began to cry harder and tried to cover my face with my hands. Andor pulled me to his chest and held me until my sobbing subsided. I sat in the cradle of his arms, absorbing his warmth as I listened to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

“You call me dearling. What does that mean?”

He chuckled and smoothed my hair back from my face.

“When I was a boy, my father always called my mother darling and my mother called my father dear. Thinking I was very clever, I began calling them both dearling and they took to using the term as well.” He sighed and held me tighter. “I’ve never used that endearment for anyone else. I hadn’t even realized I said it.”

I remained silent as I absorbed the implications of that statement. My tears spent, he tried to let go of me but I wouldn’t release him.

“*No. Please,*” I thought.

Andor said nothing else. He simply slid in beside me and held me as I slept.

Chapter Thirteen

The next morning, I woke alone. Andor was preparing breakfast and humming in the kitchen. I sat up slowly, carefully guarding my thoughts. I took a shower before joining him for breakfast where we had very civilized conversation. Neither one of us said anything about my nightmare or about sleeping together. We spent the day combing through the files on Castor Laboratories. I asked again why Castor was the prime suspect, realizing Andor had never answered my question.

“Theodore Castor used to live in the northern part of Maine, before the war and the division. He has been in the spotlight for many years as a leading voice for human cloning as well as the controversial issue of splicing animal and human genes. It was originally suspected that he was a shifter. However, Sandulf has met the man and spent time with him. Though it’s possible to hide your nature from the average shifter, no one can hide from Sandulf. He is the alpha because of his many strengths.”

I wondered if the time Castor spent with the alpha was by choice, then decided I didn't want to know.

"I wonder why he chose to move south of the wall." I mused.

"He wasn't given the choice. Sandulf arranged an escort of his most trusted men to ensure Castor left FNT before the ink dried on the treaty. As soon as we learned of his plans for a laboratory in CHS we began to watch him again."

"What actual evidence points to him specifically?"

"I have not been given that information. My alpha tells me he is the one and I act accordingly. Sandulf didn't take into account that I would have a curious little human to convince." I frowned at him and he laughed. "Those are very crude thoughts you are having."

"Well, just stay out of this little human's head if you don't like them."

I stood and stormed into the bathroom, his laughter following me the short distance.

My anger melted into nervousness as the day dwindled down to bedtime, and I began to feel apprehensive. I wanted Andor in bed with me plain and simple, but I had no idea how to bring it up. I wound up falling asleep on the sofa and woke as Andor was carrying me to the bed. He laid me down gently then slipped in beside me and held me close. For the first time in years, I fell asleep with a smile on my face.

We spent the next two days alternating between mental exercises and going over information on the missing shifters, trying to come up with any possible connections between them. I looked over the file of the missing leopard before switching to the coyote. Both were young men in their late teens. They lived on opposite coasts and had next to nothing in common...except for one little quirk that had previously eluded me.

“Andor, how old was Emily when you last saw her?” I asked.

He looked up from the file in his hand and wrinkled his brow in thought.

“Hmm, nearly fifteen. Why?”

“Most humans reach puberty well before their fifteenth birthday. Is it different for shifters?”

“No, not to my knowledge. If anything shifters reach puberty earlier than the average human. That is when their powers...” His look became thoughtful, then worried. “She’s a half-breed, and no powers or changes manifested by puberty for her,” he whispered.

I nodded. Andor began flipping through files in a frenzy, going from one to the next to look at two recorded facts only, age and manifested powers.

“Each of these shifters’ species is known because of their parents. All of them have mixed parentage, but only Emily has

a full-human parent. And the common link among all eighteen—” I began.

“Is not one of them manifested powers or shifted by the time of their disappearance,” Andor finished.

“Exactly, Andor. That’s the common thread. There must be a recessive gene among shifters which occurs every few generations or something. Emily had it, therefore she hadn’t shifted.”

“Do you know what this means?” he asked with excitement.

“We have another clue?”

“And, there may be a hell of a lot more shifters in the world than originally thought. What if this recessive gene is not obvious during a DNA screen? Hell, any human in CHS could be of shifter lineage and not even know it.”

My eyes widened in horror and I couldn’t keep the terrified thoughts from the surface of my mind. Since the death of my family, the nightmare of living in a world populated by a majority of shifters had plagued me. Andor knew my thoughts and it smothered his enthusiasm.

“I’m not saying its true, Alexia, but it’s a possibility. I find it almost amusing to be honest,” he said calmly.

“W-well. I’m glad one of us does,” I replied, rubbing the goose bumps on my arms.

He looked worried for a moment and took a step toward me, but I stepped way. I suddenly needed some space, the claustrophobic in me creeping out.

“Is it cool if I go topside for a little while? I think I’m getting cabin fever,” I said with a nervous laugh.

Andor studied my face for a moment and I knew he was rifling through my thoughts. I let my feeling of being smothered consume me, and his eyes widened.

“Yes. Of course, Alexia. Take your time but please stay close to the house.”

I smiled and nodded before grabbing my gun and walking to the stairs.

I walked the perimeter of the large house, though mansion would be a more accurate term. It towered over me, blocking the feeble light of the sun struggling through darkened storm clouds. I watched the clouds rolling by and wondered what it would be like to fly. It wasn’t something I’d ever given much thought to, but spending time with a winged creature was having an affect on me. Andor hadn’t shifted in front of me again, but I still recalled the feel of his feathers beneath my fingertips. I shuddered at the memory, careful to keep it behind the steel door I put in place to block Andor’s prying mind.

I was smiling to myself as I approached the front door, oblivious to my surroundings for a moment. In a flash of

insight, I realized how quiet the woods had become and I immediately stepped into a shadow near the house. There were no sounds whatsoever, no birds, no crickets, no skittering rodents in the leaves. All of which had been present for most of my walk. The hair on the back of my neck rose as I suddenly felt as if there were eyes watching me. I leveled out my breathing and tried to keep my heartbeat steady before I opened my mind.

“Andor, are you outside with me?”

I waited for the familiar warmth that filled me every time Andor entered my head. At first there was nothing then I felt him. He sent sensations into my mind of his arms around me, his chest pressing into my back. I closed my eyes and smiled, wondering if it was real.

“I’m still below. Do you need me?”

My eyes flew open and I was instantly on alert. I swept my gaze from left to right, then back again as I searched the area around me. I let Andor feel my apprehension through our open link and knew he was on his way.

“Show me where you are, Alexia, exactly where you are.”

His voice had taken a commanding tone I rarely heard from him, and I studied the area for him to see. As I looked to my left, I saw movement in the shadows at the same time I heard a rustle in the brush and I lifted my hand to my holstered

gun. There was a blur of motion and my arm was yanked away from my gun as I was pulled into the open.

“What the—?” I started to shout as a huge figure grabbed me.

I tried to raise my other arm, but he pinned it to my side faster than I could track. All I saw was hair and flannel as he moved quickly to subdue me. His auburn hair was nearly as long as Andor’s and fell in unruly waves around his shoulders and in his face. With a jerk of his head he sent it over to one side and I finally got to see him. He was mesmerizing, and terrifying at the same time. I found myself face to face with the first bear shifter I’d ever seen...and he looked pissed.

My instincts told me to fight. Everything in me rebelled against going down quietly. But he was a fucking bear. Even in his mostly human form, muscles rippled beneath the sleeves of his flannel shirt, and his strength held me as if I was a child. I heard a rumble of sounds emanating from his chest as he bared his teeth at me in a savage grin. A lesser girl would have pissed her pants right then, hell even a lesser guy, but I was too damn stubborn to give in to my fear.

“W-who are y-you?” I asked, as he began to shake me.

He growled louder this time, and threw me to the ground. I landed hard on my back and the wind was knocked out of me. I quickly rolled onto my side, gasping for air. Curling into a ball and pleading for my life were next on the agenda when I

heard the flutter of wings. I looked up and Andor was standing over me, human except for the huge wings covering me protectively.

“Bjorn! What is the meaning of this?” Andor asked in a low growl.

The bear-man took a step back, glaring at Andor as if he didn’t recognize him. I had a moment of panic where I thought he was about to charge us, but his face began to calm and the tension left his shoulders. He visibly relaxed and suddenly I was looking at just a man, no longer the angry bear.

“Andor, what are you doing here?” Bjorn asked through gritted teeth.

His demeanor had calmed, but his voice still sounded angry. I began to slide my hand closer to my gun as slowly as possible.

“Be still, Alexia. I won’t allow him to hurt you, but if you draw your weapon blood will spill,” Andor said.

I wanted to point out that spilling blood was the idea, but kept my mouth and thoughts quiet.

“This is again my property, Bjorn. What are you doing here?” Andor asked.

“I’ve been the caretaker in your absence. Why did you not send me word?”

“You? I left it in the care of Mr. Wales.”

“He lost the ability to care for even himself long before he died. I took over. You told no one of your return. How am I to know this is indeed yours again?”

Andor was quiet for a moment, and I tried not to squirm on the dry, itchy leaves.

“There was a time when my word was enough for you, Bjorn,” he said finally.

Bjorn snorted and gave a tense, humorless laugh.

“Yes, perhaps there was. But if you recall, Andor, that was before the war. Before betrayal and lies became commonplace among brothers. Before I knew the feeling of a knife in my back and the look of a mask on my kin.”

Andor took a deep breath and let it out slowly. I held mine.

“Bjorn Berendsen, my friend, my brother among the many who roam this world, I ask a boon of you, a favor of redemption against past grievances, and I pray you hear me in your head and in your heart, for these are times of war and strife, times of anger and aggression and without your friendship and forgiveness I stand as a man defeated.”

I looked at Andor as he spoke the words of a ritual of which I had no knowledge or understanding. He looked regal, like a prince among his people with the dying light of the setting sun glowing around his golden wings. He took my breath away and brought tears to my eyes that I didn't

understand. I shifted my gaze to Bjorn, who now looked taller, calmer and more thoughtful than before. He appeared to be considering Andor's words, which I took to be a good sign.

“Andor Olavson, my friend, my brother among the many who roam this world, my teacher, my mentor, kin of my ancestors, I will allow a boon and offer redemption of past grievances. We are indeed at war with our enemies as well as brothers, and I will stand beside you on this path to find peace. But hear me in your head and in your heart when I say you are as one alone. Until honor can be restored between us, we shall be as strangers.”

Bjorn's words echoed through the trees as I looked back at Andor. For a moment, he looked stricken before quickly hiding the emotion from his face. I knew something serious had happened between them and it had killed a deep friendship in the process. I was almost curious enough to bombard him with questions right then, but self-preservation took over and I remained silent. Andor bowed his head to Bjorn, who returned the gesture before his gaze fell on me.

“And this?” he asked with a flick of his hand in my direction.

I raised an eyebrow at the offending tone, but said nothing.

“This is Alexia, she is my guest,” Andor replied.

“Alexia Williams? You bring Death into our lands, Andor? You have become a changed man indeed.”

“How do you know who I am?” I asked from my prestigious perch, flat on my back on the ground.

It was damn near impossible to sound aggressive from my position, so I opted for aggravated instead.

“All shifters know of Death in these uncertain times, and Alexia is not a common name.”

“Not yet. Give it a generation or two,” I said with a smirk. Andor raised a brow, but said nothing.

“And why is Death here in our midst? To what do we owe this...honor?”

“I’m on vacation. Nothing like seeing the animals in their natural habitat.”

He growled and Andor shifted to cover me again. I sat up and pushed at the wing closest to me. Then his hands were beneath my arms, lifting me to my feet. Andor kept his hands on my waist, pinning me to his side with his wing folded neatly around me. It obstructed my view of Bjorn, but I felt safer.

“Why are you protecting her, Andor?” Bjorn asked angrily.

“She has done nothing to warrant your treatment of her, Bjorn. In fact, if you look at her history, every shifter death has been in self-defense.”

“Self-defense? She is Death incarnate. How can that be self-defense?”

“She is a member of the human military, however she has never been sent out as an aggressor. Every mission she has been a part of has been as a defense to attacking shifters, Bjorn. Trust me, I have checked thoroughly.”

His declaration surprised me. I didn’t know if I should feel pleased or offended by his research into my past.

“Checked? Yeah, I am certain you checked her out quite thoroughly,” Bjorn replied.

I heard the sneer in his voice and had a sudden urge to kick him. Andor’s grip on my waist tightened.

“Bjorn, we will be staying here a few days more, but we will remain within. What reassurance do you seek?”

Andor sounded tired, and I wondered how stressful it was for him to face an old friend as a new enemy.

“*Very, Alexia. Very stressful and painful indeed,*” he replied in my mind.

I placed my hands on top of his where they rested at my waist, and gave him a reassuring squeeze.

“Nothing, Andor. Your word is still on shaky ground with me, therefore I’ll take no reassurance. Just know I guard these grounds by order of the alpha. He has taken an interest in this property in your absence. I will allow you to remain inside since he never forbade your return,” Bjorn replied.

I heard the sound of crackling leaves and felt Andor tense beside me. My hand immediately went to my holster.

“It’s all right. He is leaving.”

I let out a tired breath and sagged against Andor. He remained completely still for a few more minutes, before his wing unfolded and he released me. I slammed the door on my thoughts as I felt regret at the loss of his touch. He didn’t turn to look at me. He kept his eyes trained on the woods and Bjorn’s quickly receding back.

Chapter Fourteen

The next day we discussed Theodore Castor again and I realized Andor knew a lot more about him than I did. Andor had seen him a few times in discussions with the governing body of FNT, but they'd never met. I didn't even know what the man looked like.

"You probably passed him on the street in Georgetown and never knew it," Andor said with a smile. "He looks like an average human male."

I laughed.

"I guess to you all human men look average."

He grinned, but didn't reply.

I opened my mouth to ask a question when he froze in the act of walking to the kitchen. I watched with apprehension as he faced the doorway to the stairs and tilted his head as if listening. I wanted to ask what he'd heard, but decided not to break his concentration and went for my gun instead.

"Alexia, are you afraid of reptiles?"

I wondered why he spoke in my head rather than aloud but answered in kind without hesitation.

“Not usually, no.”

“Good. We’re about to have a visit from an old friend. Don’t worry. He knows who you are but doesn’t share Bjorn’s prejudice.”

“Uh, good.”

I shrugged into my shoulder holster and slipped my gun inside, then stood waiting close enough to aid Andor if he needed me. The seconds ticked by and I was close to tapping my foot when I heard the sound of something sliding down the steps. It’s a good thing Andor warned me, and remained perfectly calm, or the sight of a twenty-foot python slithering into the room might’ve been a problem. I took a step back.

“Alexia, may I present a good friend of mine. This is Toril, a Burmese Python, as you can see.”

I nodded mutely when the python raised its head and stared at me for a moment. It carried a scroll that Andor plucked nonchalantly from its jaws while I stared at its enormous fangs. In my next breath, I was looking at a young Indian man with short dark hair and amber eyes. He stared at me with no discernable expression on his face while I tried to ignore his nudity. It wasn’t hard to do in comparison to when Andor had stood naked. Not that Toril didn’t have a nice form. He just wasn’t as well built as Andor. His tall, lanky body had muscles and no obvious fat, but he looked more like a teenage

boy than a man. I prayed my mental shields were holding and tried not to scrutinize him too closely.

“Alexia Williams, it’s an honor.”

He held out his hand and I stepped closer to shake it, keeping my eyes on his face.

“Thank you, Toril. Nice to meet you,” I replied.

I looked over to see Andor grin before he turned away and went to his dresser. He pulled out a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt and tossed them to Toril. The python caught them without looking, keeping his unnerving stare on me.

“Now that you’ve met, perhaps you could clothe yourself, Toril. I’ll pour the wine.”

The amusement faded from Andor’s voice. Toril still looked at me as he nodded, then turned and walked to the bathroom. I shivered and rubbed my hands up and down my arms. Andor walked over and pulled me into his embrace and I rested my head on his chest.

“He has information he feels we need.”

“About Castor?”

“Yes, as well as the missing. Does it bother you having him here?”

I thought about Toril’s entrance and suppressed a shiver.

“No. He’s a bit intimidating in snake form.”

I heard a chuckle behind me and whipped around, stepping out of Andor’s arms and placing myself in front of

him as I rested my hand on my gun. Andor placed his hand on mine gently and I relaxed. Toril sat on one of the sofas watching us. I knew Andor had seen his approach, but I still felt annoyed at the intrusion. I walked over to the other sofa and sat facing our guest. Andor went into the kitchen to pour the wine.

“Alexia, have you enjoyed your visit into shifter lands?” Toril asked.

“Well, I haven’t seen much. We’ve stayed indoors since we arrived.”

He raised a brow, but didn’t comment.

“He knows of our activities since we arrived, don’t you, Toril?”

I watched Andor bring the wine into the sitting area and hand Toril a glass. The man was still watching me and it was starting to get on my nerves. I accepted my glass from Andor with a smile and took a sip, trying to ignore Toril’s watchful gaze.

“I have been watching this house since your arrival,” he admitted.

I looked back at him and found his eyes on Andor. It made me breathe easier.

“Anything of importance to note?” Andor asked casually.

“No. Other than your encounter with Bjorn, there has been nothing. However, your wife was here two months ago.”

I didn't like the stress he placed on the word "wife" one bit.

"She is my ex-wife. What did she do here?"

I did like the stress Andor placed on "ex".

"She removed the remaining furniture and spoke with the alpha, but he never entered the house. She remained for less than a day."

Andor sipped his wine and seemed to be pondering the information. I fought the urge to lean against him, but did shift so our thighs were touching. He reached over and placed a hand on my leg. I surprised myself by not only allowing it, but welcoming the warm touch.

"What other information can you give us?" he asked.

Toril finished his wine and set his glass on the table between us, then went back to staring at me.

"Do you remember the boy you saved last year, Alexia? The human, Jack, had him. You interfered and he was returned to Circe with no more than a fractured arm."

I thought back and realized I did remember. He was one of the few I got to before Jack had time to inflict serious damage. I was grateful the boy was well enough to walk away without help.

"Yes. He was reptilian," I replied.

"He is my brother. For your interference I am helping you today, do you understand? Andor and I have known each other

for many years, but this issue with the missing is closing many doors and turning friends into enemies quickly. I am risking much in being here, but you bought this information with my brother's life."

I didn't know what to say, so I simply nodded and sipped my wine. Toril bowed his head as if we'd reached an agreement and turned his attention back to Andor.

"You know the alpha's been restless? He's been hunting rebels himself lately rather than allowing his men to do so, and there are rumors among his trusted. We don't know what the problem is, but there is dissention and it leads back to the humans. This Castor calls on the alpha as if he has power. Sandulf allows it but no one knows why. Emily was not the first to disappear as you thought, and Sandulf is aware of her absence, but he drags his feet for unknown reasons and they lay inside the lab."

"Who was the first? We have files on eighteen, is that all of them?" I asked.

"You know Emily is within those walls?" Andor interrupted.

Toril kept his eyes on Andor while answering my question.

"There are twenty confirmed in the last twenty months, one a month like clockwork but never the same day or place.

Circe is not the only city they use to crossover, though it holds the lab.”

“And we know they’re going to the lab?” I stressed.

I almost wished I hadn’t when those amber eyes came back to me.

“Yes. We have a man on the inside who has confirmed this. He’s seen them for himself, but only after they are through...using them.”

I felt Andor tense beside me, and knew he was thinking of Emily.

“Using them?” I asked.

Toril looked at Andor.

“They are doing something to them in the lab, but what we cannot say.”

“Do you think Sandulf is allowing this?” Andor asked, and I heard anger and disbelief in his voice.

Toril shook his head, but his expression remained neutral.

“The alpha has no reason to allow the humans to harm his pack. I’ve known him as long as you have. What does your heart tell you, Andor?”

Andor sighed and ran a hand over his face.

“Right now it’s saying I need to find my daughter at any cost.”

Toril nodded and rose to his feet.

“I agree. You have the blueprints and that is all I can give you for now. There will be a convention at the laboratory in a few days. That will be the easiest way to gain entry. I must go and if I learn more before you leave I will return.”

Andor rose but I didn't. I knew Toril was about to go legless again and decided I didn't want to watch this time.

“Thank you for your visit, old friend. We shall see each other again,” Andor said.

Toril bowed his head to both of us and walked toward the door, pulling Andor's shirt off. I concentrated on finishing my wine when I heard him slithering up the stairs.

“Well, that was interesting,” I said. I placed my empty glass on the coffee table.

“Indeed. We need to leave soon,” Andor replied.

I knew he was right, but somehow returning to Georgetown didn't sound as appealing as it would've two weeks ago.

Two days later we had a plan and a timeline. It would be our final night within his former home, and possibly the only real semblance of safety I'd felt in a long time. Andor was cooking dinner, steaks again, while I went over the blueprints of Castor Laboratories. I'd already marked our route in, as well as several routes out again, but I was still trying to

memorize every detail. My eyes began to lose focus, telling me I'd stared at the damn thing for much longer than was safe. I folded it with a sigh and slid it into my backpack.

"Tired?" Andor asked from the kitchen.

"A little. I think I began to grow complacent in this cozy den of yours," I replied with a grin.

He smiled and shook his head. "That's not good. Perhaps I should've had you in the woods running drills every day."

"Ugh. Don't remind me of home. I don't miss the obstacle course one bit, or all the physical activity it entailed."

"Was that the only physical activity you engaged in?"

I blushed at the intimacy of him in my thoughts, as well as the question, and turned my face away from him.

"That's none of your business."

I busied myself with straightening the sofa cushions and keeping my gaze off Andor.

"There are other ways to work out your idle muscles before we make the long trek back tomorrow."

"Indeed."

"Such as—"

"Don't even—" I began, with a shocked expression as I turned to look at him.

"Dancing," he said with a grin.

"Dancing?"

He laughed at the suspicion in my voice.

“Hmm, where were your thoughts, Alexia? Surely you don’t plan on seducing me tonight?”

I snorted and rolled my eyes, before plucking a cushion from the sofa and throwing it at him. He plucked it neatly from the air and laughed.

“You’re terrible. Such a man,” I said with a huff, crossing my arms over my chest.

“But, my dear beautiful lady, I’m not a man.”

I shivered as Andor walked toward me with the pillow in his hand and a slight grin on his face. He dropped the pillow onto the sofa and stopped a breath away from me. I had to look up to meet his eyes and my pulse sped as he smiled at me.

“This may be our last night of true rest,” I said, unable to muster more than a whisper.

“Or our last night of peace,” he whispered back.

He wrapped his arms around my waist slowly, giving me time to push him away, but I didn’t. Instead, I unfolded my arms and laid my hands on his biceps. This was what I wanted. We’d been sleeping together for days, but he was always the perfect gentleman. He would hold me through the night but never anything else, and my body was aching for his.

“Alexia, I’ve wanted to kiss you from our first meeting, but I know what you think of my kind.”

“You are unlike any shifter I’ve ever known, Andor.”

His smile broadened.

“Is that permission?” he asked, eyebrows raised.

I began to say yes, but the word was lost in his mouth as he placed it against my own. He moved his lips gently but firmly against mine as he licked my lips into opening. I closed my eyes and gave in, allowing him to invade my mouth and knock down the many barriers I’d built around myself. With a kiss, I suddenly didn’t give a damn about his DNA or anything else. I fell into his warmth and was lost in passion, completely caught up in his arms. After a few seconds, the kiss began to deepen and he started to move his hands all over me. My hands took on a life of their own as they ran up his arms, over his shoulders and down his back. I loved the feel of hard muscles beneath his shirt, and ached to feel bare skin.

Andor heard my thoughts easily, as I didn’t attempt to shield them. He played with the hem of my shirt for a heartbeat, before slipping beneath and sliding over my ribs. He stopped with his fingers spread beneath my breasts, barely touching the underside of my bra, and causing my breath to catch. Then his hands were gone from my bare skin and I felt him lift me, and knew he was carrying me toward the bed.

“Is this truly what you want?”

The tenderness in his voice was astounding, but I also heard the hesitation. I was too far gone to think twice, and there was no way I was letting him back out either.

“Yes, Andor, I swear it is.”

“Thank the Gods!”

He placed me gently on the bed, never breaking our kiss, and I felt his hands everywhere on my body. I began to tug on his shirt, knowing I couldn't get it off fast enough. I had both shoes and one sock off, and Andor was finally shirtless when he froze. His head jerked up and he looked toward the stairs, before spinning around, his entire body rigid and ready. I sat, panting, both confused and furious at the interruption. I wanted to ask him what was wrong, but knew better than to distract him. I reached to the nightstand and grabbed my gun instead. I'd stopped walking around armed after our second day together, and kept my gun on the nightstand instead. My knives were on the coffee table and my machine gun was beside the dining room table.

As I checked my ammo, I finally began to hear the footsteps Andor had already picked up on. They were still at the top of the stairs, but whoever it was had obviously found their way into our hidden sanctuary. Andor motioned for me to crouch behind the sofa. He strode to the foot of the stairs while pulling his shirt back on. He stood to one side of the open doorway, weaponless. Andor himself was as deadly a weapon as I could hope for.

Once the footsteps reached about the halfway point to the bottom, a familiar voice called to us.

“Andor, it is Bjorn. We must speak...now. I have news.”

Andor visibly relaxed, but didn't move from his spot, so neither did I. He looked over at me, saw me peeking around the edge of the sofa and frowned.

“Alexia, go wait in the bathroom.”

“Huh? I don't think so. Whatever in the hell he has to say to you, I want to hear it too.”

“I'll tell you all once he leaves. Please, go now.”

“No.”

“Damn it woman—”

Whatever Andor planned to say next was lost as Bjorn appeared in the doorway. He took two steps past Andor without turning and seeing him, then froze. He raised his hands into the air, showing they were empty. I stood with my gun pointed straight at his head.

“That is not necessary, Death. Andor, tell your woman to put down the gun,” Bjorn said with more than a little malice in his voice.

“I'm not his to command, but I may be death for you unless you explain why you're here unbidden,” I replied.

“Is this how you welcome one you wish to call friend, Andor?”

“I thought you said that was no longer an option for him,” I replied sarcastically.

“She speaks for you now as well?”

“Enough,” Andor growled.

I shut my mouth, but didn't lower my gun. Bjorn didn't so much as flinch, confirming my suspicion he knew exactly where Andor was.

“Alexia, please lower your weapon. Bjorn, we were about to have dinner, would you care to join us?”

I smirked as I tucked my gun into the back of my pants.

“That is so not what we were about to do,” I teased.

“Of course it is, after I thoroughly ravaged you. Not mine, eh?” Andor replied, keeping his expression serious.

It was much harder for me not to laugh, and I turned away from them to hide my grin.

“That is much better. Dinner would be good, but I fear there is no time,” Bjorn replied.

Andor walked over to me and put his arm around my waist, whether for my closeness or to hold me back, I'll never know.

“Why is that, Bjorn? What has happened? I must admit I didn't expect to see you again. We planned on leaving in the morning,” Andor said.

“The morning? Hmm, that may not be soon enough. I was at the edge of the property not an hour ago, and saw someone you may not wish to encounter. Sandulf is heading this way, and there is no other house in the area. It is my opinion he is on your trail.”

“Sandulf? *The* Sandulf, leader of the Theodereiks pack and alpha of FNT?” I asked, disbelief clear in my voice.

“The very same, and that is not all. He is traveling with a woman, and if my eyes are not failing me after all these years, the woman is your wife, Andor.”

“His arrival could be very bad,” Andor said.

“You think?” I nearly shouted.

I was terrified. It was one thing to know we might be in danger from nameless, faceless thugs who were doing the bidding of the leader of a corporation, but to have the leader of an entire nation of shifters, the alpha, on our backs, knowing how he felt about me... I was sweating bullets.

“Calm yourself, Alexia. I can smell your fear, and so can Bjorn.”

“I don’t give a fuck if he knows I’m scared! It’s all I can do to stay in this house right now.”

“And what would you do otherwise?”

“I don’t know...run?”

“Soon. Therefore you must remain calm as we plan our escape.”

I knew he was right. Both he and Bjorn looked at the food on the stove as I worked on calming my heart rate and my nerves.

“What will you do?” Bjorn asked.

“We will leave tonight. Immediately,” Andor replied, his calm voice never wavering.

“I hoped you would say that. Your wife was always a foolish woman. I do not think it would be wise to encounter her again.”

“She ceased being my wife years ago, Bjorn. She is nothing to me now,” Andor said in a low voice.

To me it almost sounded as if he was angry at Bjorn’s mention of her. I wondered if it hurt him to hear of her, especially if she was betraying him somehow. I still didn’t understand his relationship with Sandulf. From what little he’d told me, I didn’t have a very pretty picture in my head of the former Mrs. Olavson either. Any woman who would intentionally abandon her child simply because of her bloodline was nothing more than a bitch in my book. I might not like shifters a whole lot, well okay, that was rapidly changing as far as Andor was concerned, but as a woman who’d lost her child, I couldn’t fathom purposely giving one up. I missed my son more than words could ever express, and I would have gone through the fires of hell to keep him by my side.

I realized I hadn’t done a very good job of guarding my thoughts when Andor tightened his grip on my waist. He gave me a reassuring squeeze, but kept his gaze on Bjorn as they discussed escape routes. I wanted to jump into his lap and let

him hold me until my melancholy thoughts drifted away. Unfortunately, we didn't have the time or privacy for that, and if I ever did break down in such a way Andor would probably think I'd lost my mind.

Chapter Fifteen

I clamped down on my thoughts and packed our food. I began to clear away the pans but Andor stopped me.

“There’s no need. We must go now, grab your pack.”

I went to do as he said without question or hesitation, feeling Bjorn’s gaze on the back of my neck. I was tempted to whirl around and flip him off, but fought my juvenile tendencies. Within ten minutes we were ready to go, loaded down with food for three days and more weapons than I’d ever carried in my life. Bjorn led the way up the stairs and through the kitchen. We didn’t go out the front door or even the back door as I expected. Andor led us through the living room to a large den with a fireplace big enough to cook a bull. He walked straight into the cold, empty fireplace and pressed his hand against the back wall. It immediately slid inward, revealing a man-sized gap which Andor slipped into. I followed him into the darkness quickly, ever wary of Bjorn at my back. Once we were all inside what turned out to be a hidden passageway, Bjorn pushed the wall back into place.

“This is one nifty house,” I said.

“If we had more time, I would show you all the passageways, but alas our vacation has come to an end,” Andor said with a grin, as he took my hand in his.

We walked down a small flight of stairs and into a hallway single file, though Andor kept my hand firmly in his. It was dark but my eyes adjusted to see pinhole shafts of light from various heights along the walls. After a minute or two we began to walk steadily downhill. I felt the air growing damp and colder around us. We walked on for longer than I’d expected, and the scarce light disappeared completely. All I had was the sound of our footsteps and Andor’s hand in mine. My other senses took over and I fought my rising panic. I smelled damp earth and water. I knew we were underground somewhere, but exactly where I could only guess. At that point I realized how much trust I was placing in both shifters.

We walked on and on until finally, Andor led me around a corner and abruptly stopped. I opened my eyes and was surprised I could make out a steel door before us. It had a combination lock and Andor opened it with ease. I was taken by surprise when I was met by sunlight, and even more shocked to see where we came out. The door was attached to what appeared to be an abandoned utility shack. The outside was nondescript and blended in well with the surrounding woods. I looked around but couldn’t see any signs of Andor’s house.

“I will circle around to the west and make my way back towards the house. Go to the river as I said, Andor. It is the only chance of losing them. Any other way and they will be sure to track you,” Bjorn said.

“I will do so, Bjorn. Thank you, old friend, may the gods guide your path.”

“And may you never stray into darkness,” Bjorn replied.

They shook hands, both looking as if a simple handshake was inadequate. Then they released each other abruptly and Bjorn left. Andor watched him for a moment then looked at me.

“Time to go, Alexia. Are you ready?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” I replied grimly.

He took my hand and we began to run.

The trees whipped by my head as we ran further and further away. I felt like I’d been taken back four years to the beginning of the nightmare, once again running through the woods for my dear life. I was alone the last time though. My husband and son had been dead for two days. I’d stayed at our house long enough to burn their remains and bury the ashes in our backyard before I left my entire world behind.

I thought of my son’s beautiful smile, my husband’s strong hands, not calloused like Andor’s, but smooth and gentle. He’d been an accountant, and had never seen a backbreaking day of work in his life. I didn’t mind at the time,

of course. He was all I'd ever wanted. As I ran through the woods with Andor pulling me along behind him, I knew it was time to let my husband go.

I know, stupid time for such a revelation, but it's amazing what thoughts run through your head when you think you might die soon. When I fought off my first shifter, our next-door neighbor who'd attacked my husband, I was thinking about my son. But when I'd hunted the piece of shit who'd ripped my son from my arms and mauled him in front of me, as I lay on the ground trying to hold onto consciousness, I kept thinking about my flower garden. I was thinking about fertilizer and whether or not shifters would make my bluebonnets grow. There wasn't enough of that shifter left for a flowerpot, much less a garden, but those same thoughts went through my head as I hacked him to pieces with an axe.

My thoughts turned away from that scene, and Andor squeezed my hand. I realized I was letting him through again and fought to clamp down harder. Keeping him out was a necessity, but I was beginning to struggle with why. It still seemed like I barely knew him even though we both knew the facts of each other's lives. We'd just spent a couple of weeks alone together as well, something I hadn't done with a man in four years. But emotionally I wasn't ready to be connected to Andor. I was attracted to him and was more than ready for sex but not much else. Or at least, that's what I kept telling myself.

We continued to run for what felt like an eternity, but in reality was no more than a couple of hours. Andor slowed to a walk until finding a place for us to rest. We were deep in the forest, the tall pines sheltering us from the sudden rain. I was cold, damp and hungry, the worst combination. Andor didn't want to build a fire, afraid it would be a beacon. We huddled together as we ate. It would've been romantic if I wasn't exhausted from our sprint through the woods, and it wasn't over yet.

"We can rest for a little longer but we cannot sleep through the night," Andor whispered in my ear.

I shivered as his breath gave me goose bumps where it slid across my skin.

"Not even if we take turns keeping watch?" I whispered back.

"No. Most shifters are more powerful in the darkest hours. We don't wish to give Sandulf any advantage."

"I agree. You don't think he'd be willing to talk to us first? I mean, I know he sent you to k-kill me, but—"

"It wasn't his decision alone, and it wasn't done in haste. I'll need to convince others as well as the alpha that you are not the threat they fear you are. For now, our best bet is to get back into Georgetown before he catches up to us. That is the only way I can guarantee your safety."

I shivered again and his hold on me tightened, though it was no longer the cold that made me shake.

“I still can’t believe he would come after us himself. It hardly makes sense, even if we are enemy number one. What kind of leader would endanger himself to capture us?”

“You’re thinking in human terms Alexia,” Andor said with a slight smile. “In your culture the leader often surrounds himself with guards and allows others to face danger for him. That is not the way of most animals. For us, a strong leader is just that, a leader. He does not ask others to go where he will not. We don’t have a democratic system and any sign of weakness will be challenged.”

“You’re not surprised Sandulf is here?”

“A little. I didn’t realize we had his attention already. However, knowing we do, no, I’m not surprised he would come after us himself. He is the best tracker I’ve ever known. If he truly wants us found, find us he will.”

“Hmph, your power to make me feel better is amazing.”

“My apologies, darling. I wish I could both be truthful and make you feel better. Unfortunately, it must be one or the other and I don’t wish to be deceitful to you any longer.”

“Any longer? Since when has your truthfulness policy been in place?”

Andor looked at my lips for a moment, making my mouth go dry and my pulse race.

“Since the first time you touched me. I will forever carry the feel of your fingertips upon my wings.”

My breath caught as he leaned in and took my mouth with his. The kiss was as sweet as our first one had been, but too short for my liking. He pulled back and looked into my eyes, a slight grin on his face.

“It’s so hard to stop once I start kissing you, Alexia, but we must move on,” Andor said as he stood.

“Okay,” I agreed breathlessly, allowing him to lift me to my feet.

We put our packs back on our shoulders and Andor pulled me close.

“We must run again for a ways. I can smell Sandulf on the wind and he is gaining ground fast.”

“And your ex-wife?”

“I don’t believe she is with him any longer, which is cause for concern.”

I tried to ignore the small bite of jealousy.

“Because he might’ve hurt her?” I asked, trying to make my voice as neutral as possible.

“No, because she will no longer slow him down. Tell me, Alexia, have you ever encountered an alpha wolf in animal form before?”

I couldn’t even voice my response as the image filled my mind. I just shook my head.

“I have. And you should trust me when I say it’s not an experience I look forward to repeating.”

I nodded in agreement as he took my hand.

“Good. Then let us be off, and pray Bjorn bought us a decent lead,” Andor said with more enthusiasm than I could muster.

He pulled me after him as he began to run. I didn’t look back, but I could’ve sworn I felt the hot breath of an angry alpha werewolf on my neck.

I woke to the sound of rain on the leaves of the canopy above us. It was nearing dusk, but the light had long ago left the floor of the forest where we hid. Andor was standing nearby, keeping watch as I slept. I felt guilty about it. He was able to last much longer on watch than I was. He told me not to fret and I tried not to.

I rose slowly, trying to be as quiet as possible. Stretching, I turned around to peer into the surrounding trees, but my human eyes couldn’t penetrate the deep shadows. I felt Andor near before he took me in his arms. He held tight for a moment, before releasing me as I turned to face him.

“Feel better?” he whispered.

I was still exhausted, but now felt as if I could run again.

“Yes, thank you. I’m sorry we had to stop.”

“Don’t be. You cannot hope to keep up with an animal such as I.”

I hated to hear the bitterness in his voice for something he had no control over. It made me feel guilty for ever holding it against him.

“You’re not an animal, Andor,” I replied, trying to discern the look in his eyes, but the light was too weak.

He said nothing for a moment, just gave a slight grin and shook his head.

“Perhaps. When I’m with you I feel more human than ever before, but there is still an animal inside of me, Alexia. Never forget that.”

I opened my mouth to speak when he became very still. I recognized it as a sign of warning and slid my hand to my gun. Andor sniffed the air almost imperceptibly, before turning around to face behind us. I heard nothing, no footsteps, no breathing but my own. Then a voice straight from my nightmares.

“Andor Olavson. Why is it you run from me now, old friend? Have I done something to warrant such action?”

He sounded amused, but there was an undercurrent of malicious intent. I shivered at the sound and placed my hand on Andor’s back without conscious thought.

“Sandulf. I must admit I was not expecting to encounter you on my journey through these woods. To what do I owe

this honor?" Andor asked, sounding a hell of a lot more respectful than I would have.

I kept my mouth shut by a sheer force of will. Inside I was screaming in terror. Andor reached back and clasped my fingers, giving me a reassuring squeeze.

"Honor indeed. You bring Death among your people, Andor. I must say this is most unexpected."

I was beginning to hate my nickname.

"She is only death to those who ask for it, Sandulf."

"Why is she in my lands?"

"We are leaving."

"That doesn't answer my question, *fugol*. Tell me why she is here with you now."

"I brought her to see my former home. We are now returning to hers."

"*Fugol?*" *I mentally asked.*

I was trying to be invisible, but my curiosity got the best of me and it slipped out.

"*A name meaning bird in an older Germanic language. He is attempting to insult me.*"

Sandulf began to pace in front of us until Andor's body no longer blocked my view of him. I couldn't make out details in the dark, but his restless pacing reminded me of a caged animal. A huge caged animal. He stood a bit downhill but I judged his height at easily six and a half feet. His long dark

hair flowed to his waist in loose curls that would've looked feminine on anyone else. The only detail I easily made out in the dark was the color of his eyes. The ice-blue orbs seemed to glow as they glared at us.

“What brings you to this part of the woods, Sandulf? Am I to believe you were just passing through?” Andor asked.

Sandulf stopped pacing and stared at him.

“Do not tempt my anger, *fugol*. You do not want your human to see which of us is the stronger animal.”

“*Sie ist unter meinem Schutz.*”

Sandulf laughed, a short bark very near a growl. I tried to remember my German but high school was too long ago, and I barely knew it then.

“She is under your protection, eh? Are you willing to die for her, *fugol*?”

I slipped my gun from the holster as silently as possible, knowing he'd hear it anyway.

“I don't wish to fight you, Sandulf. It would prove nothing. Tell me what you want,” Andor replied.

I had my gun in my hand but with his pacing I couldn't get a bead on the alpha wolf.

“I want your precious human, Andor. I have questions for her. You're welcome to come along of course, but she has no choice but to come with me.”

“Ask your questions here, wolf. We can resolve your curiosity and be on our way.”

Sandulf growled at Andor, and I was able to determine his position. I wanted to let Andor know I had silver bullets, but I wasn't sure if I would broadcast to Sandulf as well. We'd never gotten around to blocking out shifters of Sandulf's ilk.

“Is this human worth more than your life, *fugol*?”

“She is worth much to me, Sandulf. Will my life be the payment for her passage through your lands? Have you forgotten your debt?”

Sandulf howled, the sound making me gasp. I was trembling in fear, not only for myself but for the sacrifice Andor was implying.

“I forget nothing, *fugol*. A life for a life? Is that your wish? Think on it before you reply, Olavson, for once the deal is made there will be no going back on it.”

Sandulf came close enough for me to see the sneer on his face and he sniffed the air around us. He was a ruggedly handsome man, with a day's growth of stubble on his strong jaw and a scar across one thick eyebrow.

“And I see you have not mated with this human female. There will be others, Olavson. There are always others. Any woman you wish for could be yours.”

“A life for a life, Sandulf. The deal is done.”

Sandulf looked into my eyes with a ferociousness I'd never before encountered. "So it is. You have two sunrises to leave my lands, Death. Your bird has bought your passage with my debt to him. After the second sunrise I proclaim the debt paid in full and if you are still in my lands I will hunt."

"We will be gone by then, Sandulf. You have my word," Andor replied.

Sandulf made an abrupt jerk with his head in agreement before he turned and ran off. His departure was so quick I barely saw it. If not for my accelerated heartbeat and Andor's sudden death grip on my hand, I might've doubted he'd ever been there. I holstered my gun and turned to look at Andor. He was looking the way Sandulf departed, but then turned to me.

"We must go, quickly now."

We turned and began to run in earnest.

Chapter Sixteen

As the second sunrise began to top the buildings of Circe, we ran through the streets as fast as we could. We hadn't stopped much in the time allotted us by Sandulf, and we were both exhausted. But every time I felt my energy waning, Andor would lift me into his arms and continue to run with barely a pause. I tried to protest the first time but he silenced me with a look. After that I learned to relax and take the reprieve he offered. He offered to sprout his wings to save time, but just the thought of flying made me nauseous. He set me on my feet for the last time as we entered the city, my time running out like the sands of an hourglass. I wondered if Sandulf had been tracking our exit, and knew Andor would be aware of it. I was afraid to ask.

I was sure of our destination until I saw the wall looming before us and Andor made an abrupt turn into the red zone. I thought about pulling away from him and running through the checkpoint, but he held my hand in a death grip. We soon came upon the entrance to Animal Menagerie and Andor pulled me inside.

“Will this be safe?” I asked for more than one reason.

Andor didn't know about my previous exposure to the place, but he did know my personality. I assumed he'd run the possible scenarios through his head without me having to spell it out.

“This is neutral ground, Alexia. Though we're not officially out of shifter lands, while we are inside the Menagerie, we're also not 'in' shifter lands either. Sandulf can do nothing within these walls, and we'll have time to rest before entering Georgetown.”

I had no choice but to agree since I didn't have a better plan. He pulled me through the loosely guarded entrance without a single glitch and led me to an area I'd avoided like the plague on my previous visit, the Pleasure Caves.

Animal Menagerie was set up like a group of nightclubs housed in a single large building. There was something for everyone within those walls. The Pleasure Caves were a group of rooms designed for discreet trysts among the customers, human and animal. Set up like a hotel, each room boasted a king sized bed, mirrored walls and a private bathroom. I'd heard some of them were even designed to cater to various fetishes. Because of the diverse clientele you never knew what you might find waiting in one of those rooms.

Andor got a room, while I tried to look everywhere at once. I felt eyes on me from all directions. Can we say

paranoid? Oh yeah, I was freaking out. I barely noticed as Andor pushed me down a dark hallway and into a room. I turned on every light in the place, even the red one above the bed, and dropped my bag on the floor.

“Now what?” I asked.

I heard the fatigue in my voice and marveled that I was still upright.

“Now you rest and I’ll keep watch.”

“I know you’re tired too. Don’t you think its safe enough for us both to get some sleep?”

He seemed to consider it for a moment.

“Perhaps. However, I don’t think we would rest if I joined you in bed, Alexia, and you need it. Take a shower then sleep. I’ll wake you in four hours to take my own rest.”

It was a sign of my fatigue that his words only ignited the slightest spark within me. I really was tired. Rather than argue, I dragged myself into the bathroom to shower. Washing my hair was a feat to be proud of and I leaned against the wall once finished. The cold water startled me, and I realized I’d fallen asleep standing. I got out, threw on a shirt and somehow found my way to the bed. Andor watched me slip between the sheets without a word.

I woke to the sound of someone pounding on the door. I would’ve sat up but a steel band held me in place. I looked down to see it was Andor’s arm, as he lay behind me.

“It’s not for us,” he said.

I listened and realized he was right. The pounding wasn’t on our door. I settled back and tried to relax, but the very presence of Andor behind me kept me tense. My eyes slid to the clock beside the bed and I saw I’d slept less than three hours. My body was exhausted but my mind wouldn’t shut down.

“I thought you were going to keep watch.”

He chuckled. “You looked so cozy, I couldn’t resist the temptation to join you. By your snoring I knew you wouldn’t wake easily but I’m a light sleeper. Nothing will harm you while I’m here.”

“I don’t snore,” I protested as my eyes began to drift closed.

“I beg to differ. I’m surprised no one pounded on the wall in protest.”

I began to wiggle out of his arms with the intention of turning to argue face to face. His grip on me tightened and he pressed a kiss against the back of my head.

“Just relax, Alexia. The morning will come too soon as it is.”

Knowing he was right didn’t help. I stopped struggling and began running over the laboratory’s blueprints in my mind. Soon, I was fast asleep.

Deep bass drum rolls woke me. For a moment, I just lay there, trying to remember whose bed I was in and why. It came to me slowly and I realized I was lying in Andor's arms. I felt the movement of his breathing against my back, his warmth seeping through my shirt. The last thing I wanted was to get out of bed and away from his arms, but we had a schedule to keep. The Annual Conference of Human Scientists was beginning that day at Castor Laboratories and we had to sneak in.

As soon as I moved, I realized he was awake. His arm was still around my waist, his hand resting beneath my breast. I placed my hand in his and moved it up as I pressed back into him.

"Alexia," he whispered, and it made me smile to hear desire in his voice.

"I know, we don't have time," I whispered back, not even trying to hide my disappointment.

"Soon. This will be over and I'll spend hours worshipping you as you deserve," he replied before suckling the back of my neck.

It sent a shiver up my spine and made me gasp. His hand squeezed my breast through my thin T-shirt and his leg settled between my thighs. I realized he was naked and moaned my approval.

“We truly don’t have time for this,” he whispered as he slid his hand beneath my shirt.

I’d foregone panties after my shower because digging them out of my bag seemed like too much work. I was suddenly very happy about my laziness as his hand rested on my naked hip and I felt him press his erection against my ass.

“I don’t need finesse, Andor. This can be a quickie,” I said with a breathless laugh.

He made a low sound like a growl before I felt his fingers comb through the curls between my legs. I gasped as he slid a single finger in to test my readiness and I opened my legs more.

“Next time—”

“Yes,” I agreed as I began to wiggle against him.

I felt his hand between our bodies as he positioned himself and held my breath as I felt him prodding. He slid in and I closed my eyes, moaning his name.

“Oh, sweetheart,” he gasped as he settled inside me fully.

He began to thrust slowly at first before settling into a rhythm similar to the drumbeat pulsing outside the room. I reached back and gripped his thigh, encouraging him with moans and thrusts of my own. He began to move faster, making me gasp in pleasure. I felt his hand reach between my legs again, and he began to rub in small, determined circles, bringing me closer to climax.

“Oh, Andor,” I gasped, my orgasm building.

He thrust even harder and faster, while rubbing in the same steady rhythm until I felt the spark inside me ignite and explode. I screamed his name while digging my nails into his thigh, and felt him tense and bite the back of my neck. I felt a second orgasm shoot through me and Andor’s seed filled me with its warmth.

“Alexia, oh, my sweet,” he murmured against my skin, holding me tightly to his chest.

We both lay panting, and I fought the seductive pull of unconsciousness. All I wanted to do was fall back to sleep in his arms and forget everyone else. I was tired of the running and the worries. I wanted sleep after the amazing bout of sex. I felt Andor’s arms wrap around me as he rolled me onto my back and leaned over me. One hand threaded through my hair while the other held onto my hip and I looked into his blazing eyes.

“Next time will be better,” he said.

I grinned and stretched my arms to wrap around his neck.

“Any better than that and you might kill me,” I replied.

He smiled back before kissing me senseless and slipping out of bed. I sighed in disappointment, though I admired his naked ass when he walked to the bathroom.

We dressed and readied to leave, barely speaking. I don't know what he was feeling and I was shielding my thoughts as hard as I could.

We might die today kept running through my head like a mantra, and everything I did to keep it out failed.

“Are you ready, sweetheart?”

His question pulled me from my melancholy thoughts and I nodded. We grabbed our bags and headed out the door. It was nearing midnight and the Menagerie was packed. Andor grabbed my hand as we threaded through the crowd to the Georgetown exit. I watched his back to keep my eyes from noticing the staged acts going on around us. It kind of worked. I only saw the various sexual acts in wire cages from the corner of my eye.

The exit was in sight when Andor stopped so suddenly I walked into his back. I was about to ask what was wrong when I looked over his shoulder and saw for myself. There was a line of five shifters standing in front of us, blocking our way to the exit. I tried to remember how many Andor claimed he could take alone, as I moved my hand toward my gun.

No one appeared to be talking, but I felt the tension in Andor's grip on my hand. The music seemed too loud and I vaguely wondered if my ears were bleeding. I slipped my gun from the holster and held it between our bodies, out of sight

from the shifters before us. They still hadn't moved or spoken, all eyes trained on Andor.

"They want to take us to Sandulf," Andor said in my mind. Then it dawned on me he'd been speaking mind to mind to the other shifters.

"Should we go?" I asked, though my vote was a definite no.

"No," he confirmed. *"We're on neutral ground, but if we go to him he will say we failed to leave his territory in the time given. No, we'll have to fight our way out of here. We're lucky he chose not to come himself."*

"How many did you say you could take on your own?"

"All of the ones in front of us, but I don't know how many will come from the crowd."

"I'll watch your back. I have silver bullets in here. I take one down and the others will think twice about interfering."

"I hope you're right. Once I start, I won't be able to help you until I'm down to one or two."

"Don't worry about me. I might be only human, but my bullets pack a punch."

"Certainly. I just hope you have enough bullets."

I felt Andor leave my mind abruptly as he took a step forward.

"We were leaving," he said to the men.

All five of them looked like wolves to me, but in human form I couldn't be certain. The one in the middle was the shortest of the five and the leanest, with more of a swimmer's build than the others. He stepped forward when Andor did and laughed.

"Sure you were, birdie, but now you're not. Sandulf has unfinished business with the human. We mean to take her to him," he replied with an evil grin.

"I'm afraid their visit will have to wait for another day. We have a schedule to keep."

Andor took another step forward and I eyed the crowd around us. Most of them stepped back as soon as the shifter started speaking, trying to stay away from the obvious confrontation. We were now in the middle of a wide-open circle. There were a handful of interested bystanders, mostly women. I gave them equal scrutiny, knowing damn well we tend to be the more dangerous sex.

The leader stepped forward again and now only a foot separated him from Andor. They were still talking, but I couldn't hear their conversation anymore. I divided my attention between the surrounding crowd and the other four men who were inching towards Andor. Then someone leapt forward and the fight was on. I heard clothes ripping, skin hitting skin and bones breaking. I kept my gun out before me and spun in an arch with my back to Andor and the fight. No

one else seemed interested in joining—just watching the men beat the hell out of each other. I turned to see Andor’s progress and smiled.

Three of the shifters were on the floor unconscious, one in wolf form. There was blood on Andor’s back and his shirt had been ripped off. He stood between the remaining two shifters, one being the leader, and traded punches and kicks alternately. I considered shooting one of them, but he almost looked like he enjoyed it. I decided to wait.

Then, I saw a blur from the corner of my eye and instinctively took a quick step back. Something heavy and furry hit me in the arm, nearly knocking my gun loose. However, if there’s one thing I’m good at it’s holding onto my weapon. I’ll let my clothes be ripped off before I’ll drop my weapon and this time was no exception. I fell to the floor and rolled, landing on my back with my gun out. I had a leopard on top of me with my gun in her face.

I had a heartbeat of indecision, where I wondered who she was in human form, before I pulled the trigger. Her face disappeared in cloud of red, as the echo of the gunshot rang through my head. I felt more than saw the crowd still around me, and every eye turned my way. The leopard’s body slumped onto my stomach and legs, trapping me beneath her. I looked to Andor and saw him and the lead shifter frozen, watching me. Then, as if suddenly remembering what they

were doing, Andor turned and punched the other shifter in the face, knocking him unconscious.

I used my arms and legs to fling the body off me and quickly got to my feet. My gun was still in my hand, and people were trying to back even further away from me. Andor grabbed my arm and his pack as he pulled me to the exit. I kept expecting to be stopped again, either by the shifter guards or the humans. After all, I just shot someone in public. I glanced behind me, but the parted crowd moved together again, blocking my view of the bodies.

We made it to the exit without further incident and Andor did his mind tricks on the four human guards. Walking into Georgetown unchallenged, I was in shock. I wanted to question Andor on our somewhat easy escape, but couldn't even think of the words. Watching Andor didn't faze me anymore, and that in itself worried me a bit. At what point would his animal characteristics begin to feel normal to me? Would I still think in human terms? The past few weeks in his company had done something to me and I wasn't entirely happy about it. However, the real problem was I wasn't entirely *unhappy* about it either.

We walked away from the border and Andor pulled me into a dark alley. He pushed me against the wall gently and looked into my eyes.

“Alexia, are you all right?”

I stared at him for a second and nodded. I felt how wide my eyes still were. I smelled the blood on my face and neck.

“You can put your gun away now, my sweet. We should be okay from here to your place.”

I nodded again but made no other movement. Andor kept his eyes on mine as he reached for my gun. When he touched my hand I flinched, but allowed him to take it. He put it in the holster then took my face in his hands.

“She would have killed you, Alexia. You had no choice but to shoot her.”

I began to shake and Andor pulled me into his arms.

“Wh-what’s wrong w-with me? I don’t even care that I sh-shot her. I-I don’t.”

“Shh, all will be well. You just need to relax after having so much adrenaline pumping through you.”

He sounded so calm, and reasonable. I tried not to think about the fact that I’d seen and done worse. I tried not to feel the blood covering the front of my body. The situation boiled down to me or her, and I’m gonna pick me every time. Why was I freaking out? I had no clue.

I finally stopped shaking and we left the alley. It began to rain, washing the blood from my face and neck as we walked. Andor kept his arm around me until my building came into view...or what was left of my building. I felt Andor draw me tighter into his body and lift his free hand to my face. Perhaps

he meant to shield the sight of the blackened husk from my eyes, but I swatted his hand away. I began to walk again toward the pile of blackened bricks that once made up my haven. It had never truly felt like home before, but the shock of losing it almost dropped me to my knees.

“Alexia, come. We’ll find a place to clean up and return to see what is salvageable.”

I felt my head nod in agreement without meaning to. Then Andor wrapped his arm around my waist and steered me away from the sight. I leaned into him as we walked away, feeling hot tears slip down my face.

The nearest hotel was only four blocks away. Andor got a room quickly and steered me inside without a word. I immediately kicked off my shoes and headed to the shower, not caring what Andor chose to do in that moment. I felt so dirty and all I wanted to do was feel clean again. As the hot water cascaded down my back I thought again of shooting the leopard. My reaction still puzzled me and I replayed the events in my mind.

What was I thinking? Why am I so uneasy? I wondered, shielding tightly to keep Andor from my thoughts.

I remembered the leopard coming like a blur and the feel of her slamming into me. Then I remembered the thoughts going through my head.

Andor! Have to protect him! Have to *get up!*

My mind filled with the sight of blood on his bare back, his shirt in shreds on the floor. The image of the wolves hitting and slashing at him with half-clawed hands gave me goose bumps. Nausea and anger flared through me again.

That's it. That's the problem, I realized. My reaction had nothing to do with killing the shifter, and everything to do with fear...fear of losing Andor. I took a deep breath and looked at myself in the mirror. My wet hair lay loose against my back and I had circles under my eyes. I looked pale and thinner than the last time I remembered studying myself. I noticed something on the side of my neck and turned to see bite marks. I remembered the feel of Andor's mouth on my skin as he filled me and my face flushed as heat infused me. I closed my eyes and smiled, knowing I wanted Andor again. And I meant to have him, soon.

When I stepped out of the bathroom, I smelled food and heard soft music. Andor was suddenly my favorite person in the world.

"I heard that," he said with a laugh.

I smiled as I walked to the small table and surveyed the room service selection.

"I didn't know what you would want—"

"As long as it's warm it's a feast," I interrupted. The last thing I deserved from him was an apology of any kind.

He laughed again.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

I thought about it for a moment. The near panic of before was gone, but I still didn’t feel calm. I shrugged.

“I’m okay I guess. Sorry for freaking out earlier. I don’t know what the hell that was all about.”

“It was about being human, Alexia. It’s what separates you from the animals around you. Never be sorry for that.”

I looked up at the sadness in his voice, but he was walking to the bathroom. I tried to think of a response but couldn’t. I began to eat.

“I’m going to take a shower,” he said before closing the bathroom door.

I finished my meal and sat to meditate as Andor showered. We had mere hours before our plan to infiltrate Castor Laboratories would begin. Andor seemed confident of our ability to gain entry through the front door but I had my doubts. We did have a good, solid plan, but things hadn’t been going my way and I was getting rather sick of the surprises.

“Ah, nothing like the smell of blood to kill one’s appetite. Now, I can eat.”

I opened my eyes and watched in fascination as Andor walked to the table and helped himself to what was left. He wore a pair of faded jeans and nothing else. His long thick hair lay damp from the shower against his golden skin. I wanted to run my fingers through that hair and lick the moisture from his

back. I allowed the image to roam freely through my mind and toward his consciousness. I knew the moment he received it by the tensing of his body.

“Alexia—”

“It occurred to me we’re about to do something very dangerous.”

He sat to eat.

“Yes, and the last thing either of us needs is any type of distraction.”

I grinned while eyeing his luscious body.

“You are already quite a distraction,” I confessed.

He smirked, but continued to eat. I watched in fascination as the movement of his throat became erotic. His fingers looked so strong when he placed a grape in his mouth, it made me blush. Andor lifted his eyes to lock with mine and a new warmth invaded me.

“*Alexia.*”

His voice in my head was so sensual it gave me goose bumps. I rubbed my hands up and down my arms, holding his gaze. He continued to watch me while he placed another grape in his mouth and I decided to take control of the situation. I grabbed the hem of my shirt and began to lift it over my head. I was at the point of blindness with it over my eyes when he lifted me. By the time I dropped it to the floor he had me pinned to the bed.

“Alexia,” he whispered in my ear, before running his lips over my skin. I shivered and wrapped my arms around him, almost afraid he might try to leave me wanting. “Never, my sweet. You have me, never doubt it.”

I smiled as he ran his hands over my face and hair reverently, making me feel cherished and wanted. He kissed me and I sensed all of the passion we’d lacked in our last interlude. It had been almost primal and rushed, this was so much more.

I lost myself in his kiss, holding him to me with one hand while I roamed his warm skin with the other. I couldn’t hold back the moan escaping into his mouth as I wriggled against his strong body. His arousal pressed into me and urged me into wrapping my legs around his hips.

The kiss became more heated and he moved his hands over my skin with a singular purpose. Within heartbeats we were both naked and Andor’s mouth was traveling down my body, learning every curve and crevice along the way. I was panting, sounding more animal than human as I slipped my fingers into his hair. I closed my eyes and remembered the sensation of his feathers beneath my fingers and how erotic it was. Suddenly I felt feathers and opened my eyes to see Andor’s wings spread above me. I laughed and reached for them, gasping as Andor’s wicked tongue finally found its mark.

Never in a million years would I have thought I'd have sex with a shifter twice in a matter of hours, much less in mid-form. Andor laved and suckled, driving me to a frenzy. I ran my hands over his back and wings making him tremble. My climax approached and his wings wrapped more tightly around us, making me feel safely cocooned. Andor's broad shoulders spread my thighs, keeping me open for his feasting. And with one final, strong lick I exploded while shouting his name to the heavens.

Then he was staring into my eyes with such intensity it made me shiver. His hardness pressed against the softest part of me, demanding entrance even while I still quivered from climax. I rubbed against him and felt a tremor through his frame, making me feel powerful. He said my name, but aloud or in my head I couldn't say, before surging forward and entering me in a single thrust. I climaxed again.

Andor held my gaze with his blazing golden eyes, demanding my full attention when he thrust into me relentlessly. I continued to run my hands over his wings urging him on with words and soft kisses. He urged one of my legs higher onto his hip to change the angle of his penetration and I moaned at the new sensation. His facial expression, as well as his body, told me he would finish soon and I continued to meet his thrusts. I threaded my fingers in his hair and pulled his mouth to mine. With a final soul-searing kiss Andor thrust

into me and held me tightly against him, shouting my name in my head. I felt his release fill me before his wings disappeared.

Andor rolled onto his back and pulled me over him. I lay like a blanket on his chest, intertwining my legs with his. He held me as I tried to catch my breath and I heard his racing heartbeat beneath my ear. It matched mine and made me smile. Then I realized...I felt happy.

Chapter Seventeen

Originally, I'd wanted to break into the lab, but a full review of the security system changed my mind. Not only did they have the standard human security, but quite a few shifter touches as well. One of Andor's contacts confirmed Castor's use of psychics within the building solely for security purposes. Their job was to scan the perimeter of the building continuously for a breach of any kind. Aside from that, the building had motion detectors and heat sensors at every possible entrance, including the air vents and drains. We couldn't think of a sure way through every obstacle so we scrapped the break-in idea and decided to crash their party instead. All of his nifty weapons were left behind in the motel.

Castor was holding a conference of the top human scientists from all over the world. He tried to get the government's permission for shifters to attend as well, but there'd been enough opposition to deny it. I'd never met Castor or, as far as I knew, any of the conference attendees. Hiding in plain sight seemed safe. Andor was able to acquire

credentials and forged identification for both of us. By eight o'clock that morning we were married scientists from France.

"You know, I don't speak a lick of French," I said as we walked down the street.

I was trying not to squirm at the sensation of air on my bare calves. Andor snuck out of our room as I showered again to buy more suitable clothes, and he'd chosen a sundress for me. I couldn't remember the last time I wore anything other than my uniform and felt a bit exposed. But he looked good enough to eat in his polo shirt and slacks.

Andor looked at me from the corner of his eye and smiled, well aware of my discomfort and wayward thoughts. He was holding my hand and I was enjoying the warmth of his skin.

"That's all right, ma chérie, I shall speak for both of us," he replied with a flawless accent.

I laughed. "You don't know me well if you think I can remain silent for any length of time."

His laughter was sudden and complete, such a joyous sound I nearly stopped walking so I could stare at him.

"What?" he asked while still laughing.

"I don't think I've heard you really laugh till now."

He smiled at me and shook his head.

"I guess nothing seemed funny till now."

This time I laughed, until he silenced me with a kiss that took my breath away.

“Andor, we’re on a public street,” I protested with a half-hearted shove to his chest.

There was a flash of regret in his eyes that he immediately masked with a grin.

“Feeling scandalized by the animal, dearling?”

I frowned and opened my mouth to object but he placed a finger on my lips and shook his head.

“We’ll have this discussion later, sweet. Right now we must concentrate on the task ahead.”

I closed my mouth until he removed his finger.

“Damn right we’ll discuss it later,” I grumbled.

He chuckled as we resumed walking. I took a deep breath and pushed away my anger and frustration. Here I was finally warming to the idea of having a shifter in my life and he was still full of the same hang-ups. I knew it would take some time for him to get over it but prayed it wouldn’t take too long. I didn’t know how long I could wait.

Rather than dwell on those thoughts, I ran through our plan. We would sneak into the heart of the laboratory and find our way to the lower levels, the ones not on the blueprints. Andor’s remarkable and nameless resources assured him there were three sublevels of the Castor compound only the most

trusted employees had access to. He felt certain we would find the shifters there, if they were in the compound at all.

“Andor, once we’re inside how will we find them? I mean the sublevels are sure to be as extensive as the upper floors, don’t you think?”

He frowned at me for a second, looking oddly uncomfortable. Then he shrugged and gripped my hand a bit tighter.

“There is something I haven’t told you yet about shifter telepathy,” he replied.

I felt a chill go down my back. Every time he revealed a shifter secret it seemed to spell more trouble for humans.

“What’s that?” I asked, trying to sound only mildly curious.

He ran his thumb over my knuckles before bringing my hand to his mouth and kissing the inside of my wrist.

“Do not fret, sweet. It’s nothing that would affect you and yours. Basically, shifters have a psychic link to their offspring until death. If Emily is in the building I’ll feel her once we get through the initial barriers guarding the place.”

“Oh. Well, that’s a good thing.”

He smiled at me and kissed my knuckles.

“Yes, my dear Alexia. It is a very good thing.”

I smiled back, reveling in his warmth.

Castor Laboratories was located in the heart of downtown Georgetown, a half-hour walk from the hotel. We talked about what we would do once inside and decided remaining together was our best bet. Castor's labs covered ten city blocks, not including the attached hotel and restaurants. Splitting up might make our search faster, but we proved to be stronger together. I could pass through all of the scanners with my human DNA, and Andor could get us through most situations with his telepathy and other mental abilities. Plus, he should be able to feel Emily and go straight to her.

Andor also let me know in no uncertain terms he didn't want me out of his sight for a minute. I had a heartbeat of anger at the implication of being a defenseless human female. But then Andor filled my head with his true emotions and I realized he cherished me enough to want to protect me. I was thrown a little off balance but stopped bitching about it.

I was amazed by how easily we slipped through the doors. The security was tight but Andor's illegal credentials held up against the scrutiny. I tried to calm my nerves as we walked arm in arm through the brightly lit corridors to a large conference room full of a few hundred scientists. No one paid any attention to us. We were two more in a sea of unknown faces.

Andor wrapped my hand in the crook of his arm and began to mingle. He was a natural at polite conversation with complete strangers and I remained silently in awe of his efforts. After a few minutes of bullshit with true scientists, he led me to a table covered in refreshments. I didn't recognize a single thing as actual food so I refrained. Andor picked up a cup and pretended to drink while speaking to me through the side of his mouth.

"We'll wait until the speaker begins then slip out the side door," he whispered, eyeing a door to the left of the podium.

I surveyed the area and noticed the low lighting and extra chairs stacked close by. If we moved just right no one would notice our departure. I nodded and began to head in that direction slowly, as if by accident rather than design. I felt Andor's heat at my back, a comforting presence to soothe my nerves. If we were caught Andor would suffer greatly. I had no clue what might happen to me.

As I made my way across the room, I greeted the passing faces with a smile and nod of professional courtesy. They were mostly men, though I saw a few women interspersed in the crowd. I was nearing my target area and feeling more confident when a familiar face caught my attention. I froze and turned back to find him, but he was immediately lost in the crowd.

"Francesca?"

I heard Andor's questioning voice but it took a second for me to remember my alias and answer.

"It's nothing," I murmured, not certain if it was the truth.

"What is it?"

"Hmm?" I asked distractedly, still looking even as I continued my forward motion.

"You know what."

I heard the barely suppressed anger in his voice and realized he was worried.

"Nothing. I thought I saw someone I knew but it's impossible. This is the last place he would turn up."

Andor said nothing else as he followed me toward the corner of the room. I went to stand beside a stack of chairs mere feet from the door when the speaker reached the podium. He was an older man with white hair that brushed the shoulders of his crisp gray business suit. He walked straight and tall, with a confidence telling of years of public speaking. I had no clue who he was.

"Hello, ladies and gentleman. If everyone will take a seat, I would like to welcome all of you to Castor Laboratories."

I felt Andor pass behind me and move toward the door. With a quick glance around, I verified no one was paying any attention to us before following him.

"As some of you may know, I'm Theodore Castor, founder of Castor Laboratories."

I froze at those words and turned to look at the mysterious Theodore Castor. He was wholly unremarkable, a man I might have passed on any street without a second look just as Andor had said. I felt Andor grab my hand and pull me toward the door. After a final look at the man on stage I turned to follow him.

I don't know what I expected to find once we infiltrated the laboratories, but multicolored walls covered in finger paintings didn't quite fit. It looked like a preschool hallway that continued on in both directions before dead-ending into complete darkness.

"Which way?" Andor asked, and I suddenly remembered studying the blueprints.

"To the left until we come to a right turn. We should find a hallway full of doors."

We both turned in that direction and headed down the hallway. I studied the "artwork" as we passed and began to notice a theme.

"Yes, they do all resemble various animals," Andor said.

I tightened down on my thoughts in case we happened upon another shifter. I no longer minded Andor in my mind. His presence was a warm comfort after all our time together. However, I didn't want anyone else in my head. Andor kept

my hand in his as we walked. I realized he kept finding ways to touch me and I liked it. The thought no longer made me frown.

“Now where?”

His abrupt question pulled me back and I realized I was letting myself get distracted. This was so unlike me and dangerous for both of us. I strengthened my resolve and faced the hallway ahead of us.

“Third door on the left. It’s a closet but there’s a hidden door in the back to the elevator.”

He pulled me behind him down the dimly lit hallway, shielding me with his larger body. I scanned the ceiling, surprised at the lack of video surveillance.

“Who needs it when there are psychics in the house,” he murmured, making me realize I wasn’t shielding well enough.

I clamped down on my thoughts again, erecting the imaginary brick wall he’d taught me to raise. He glanced at me, a smile flickering over his face. We found the closet and slipped inside. It was full of cleaning supplies and a floor-to-ceiling metal shelf. We both stared at the obstruction for a moment.

“Well...I guess the elevator might be behind it?” I ventured.

Andor remained silent as he studied the scene before us. He reached out a hand then suddenly pulled it back as if shocked.

“What? What’s wrong?” I asked, grabbing his hand to inspect for injury.

He clasped my hands in his and rubbed his thumb over my palm.

“It’s nothing, sweet, merely an illusion and a good one at that. I’d forgotten how easily a good illusion can sting the unsuspecting.”

“An illusion?”

“Yes. Open yourself to me and I will help you see through it. If you can see the truth for what it is, the illusion will no longer affect you.”

I took a deep breath and looked at the shelf before us. I knew what he meant about opening myself up to him because we’d practiced it once or twice. I cleared my mind, dismantling my wall brick by brick until there was a clear path for him to enter my thoughts. I closed my eyes and let my mind wander to Andor and his warm presence behind me. I let my heartbeat match his and began to see through his eyes.

He looked at the wall but there was no longer a shelf. In its place stood a normal-looking elevator door. I saw Andor’s hand reach past me to press the lone button on the wall and the doors slid open silently. He nudged me forward and we

stepped into the metal box. I opened my eyes as the doors slid closed and Andor pulled me behind him and to the side, out of the immediate path of the doorway. I imagined the surprise we'd all get if the doors opened to reveal a lab employee.

I was more nervous than before. Because of the security, and Andor's choice of attire, I'd had to leave my gun at the hotel. I felt naked and vulnerable without a weapon. Andor assured me he was all the weapon I would need, and felt I would have a better chance if caught unarmed. After all, I was still an active member of the military, just on leave. I could probably talk myself out of the situation with relative ease. I had no idea what he would do if he couldn't use his mind tricks but decided not to dwell on that concern.

I felt the elevator drop and my stomach went along with it. Andor reached back and skimmed his fingers over my abdomen, making my stomach flip for an entirely different reason. He chuckled and I slapped his hand away. The elevator stopped and I tensed, my hand going for a holster that wasn't there.

"Damn it," I whispered.

"All is well. We remain alone in this hallway," he replied.

The doors opened and I saw he was right. We were in a blindingly white hallway which stood empty. Andor stepped out and I followed close on his heels. He took two steps and

froze, lifting his face as if sniffing the air. I waited silently for him to lead.

“She’s here,” he whispered, and there was so much emotion in that mere statement I don’t know how he suppressed it.

He began to walk briskly down the hallway and I followed, looking everywhere at once as he kept his sight straight ahead. The hall seemed endless without a door or window to break up the monotony of the white brick. Andor’s pace increased until I was jogging to keep up with him.

“She’s hurt. I can smell her pain, Alexia. I swear to all of the gods there ever were I’m going to spill blood this day,” he hissed between clenched teeth.

I saw the tenseness of his muscles in his back and wondered if he felt Emily’s pain as well as smelled it. We ran on down the hallway until it ended in a sharp turn. Andor immediately stopped and threw out his arm to keep me from running past him. We stood at the end of the corridor, a blind corner ahead of us. I knew, just knew there would be someone around the corner guarding the entrance to the labs.

Andor must have known as well, because he pushed me behind him until I was up against the wall pressed into his back.

“Alexia, I don’t know what’s around this corner, but it knows we’re here.”

“It? I knew this was too easy so far.”

“Don’t be frightened, my sweet. I’ll distract it. I need you to get past it and find my daughter. She is in the room beyond, I know it without a doubt.”

“I don’t want to leave you, Andor.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll join you shortly, I promise.”

I took a deep breath and wished again for my gun. *“You better, birdman, or I’ll never let you forget it.”*

I felt him smile in my thoughts before he stepped away from me and began pulling off his clothes as he ran around the corner. There was an inhuman screech and a feline roar. I had a moment of self-doubt before remembering Andor was counting on me. I slowly rounded the corner to face hell.

Chapter Eighteen

The first thing I saw was blood. The crimson splatter lay everywhere, a stark contrast to the pristine white hallway. Andor stood as a full golden eagle, looming larger than when he first showed me his animal form. He was fighting something my eyes couldn't quite make sense of. I didn't stay to ponder the creature bleeding in his claws. I heard the rattle of a snake as I ran to the bolted metal door before me, but I ignored it. I released the lock and yanked on the heavy door with all of my strength, only opening it enough to slip inside.

I found myself in a cavernous room filled wall to wall with rows of steel cages. The highly polished metal gleamed beneath the harsh fluorescent lighting twenty feet above. Each row varied in height, anywhere from three to eight feet by my guess. I approached the smallest row of cages, knowing the scent of my fear and nervousness would precede me. There was no way to hide my presence at any rate and I didn't waste time or effort trying.

I considered looking around for a weapon but there wasn't so much as a wooden chair as far as I saw. I decided

not to bother. Emily was most likely in one of those cages and Andor had said she was in pain. I needed to find her and assess her condition for myself. Andor was counting on me and I realized I didn't want to let him down.

The first cage stood empty, but only recently if the fresh puddle of blood on its bottom was any indication. I moved on to the next and soon discovered the same state for the entire row of ten cages. I heard movement somewhere in the room and prayed it was from a cage and not reinforcements. I missed my gun.

I quickened my step as I rounded the corner into the next aisle. These cages reached my waist and held all manner of domestic animals. They were mostly canine with a feline here and there. They all appeared to be sleeping, their shallow inhalations the only sign of life. I was about to pass on to the next aisle where the cages reached my chest when I heard a sound that froze my blood.

The too-familiar rattle of the creature from outside echoed through the room ominously. I ran back around the corner to the smallest cages, deciding to use one as a weapon if they were light enough. I grabbed the nearest one and laughed in relief when it proved to be light and sturdy. The rattle sounded again, closer than before and I ran to the next row.

I climbed onto the cage of what looked almost like a Chow, but it was shaved to the skin and covered in welts. It

lifted its head when I unintentionally rattled its cage, and I saw nothing but despair in the eerily human eyes. I stayed frozen for a moment, held captive by his desperate gaze, until quick movement from the corner of my eye caused me to react on instinct. I rolled onto my back and over to the top of the next cage as the head of a huge animal struck where I'd been standing.

“Shit!”

The thing hissed in response as it reared back in preparation for its next strike.

“Ohmygodohmygod,” I mumbled while fear tried to cripple me.

Like the one in the hallway, the bottom half of the monstrosity resembled a large rattlesnake. From the waist up it almost looked human but with no obvious appendages. The head was covered in dark, coarse hair that somewhat resembled a lion's mane. But the face... The face was the stuff of nightmares. It was black and shriveled like old, hardened leather and the small, beady eyes were entirely silver. The mouth took up the entire bottom half and was filled with razor-sharp teeth. I was trembling.

I fought it using the past two years of training as my guide to stop and think of how to get past the monster. The cage in my hand was only a little larger than its head and I didn't know how to use it to my advantage. Unfortunately, it was the

only weapon I had so I opened the door and faced it toward the creature.

“Hey, ugly, wanna play?” I asked, trying to sound a hell of a lot braver than I felt.

The thing’s hiss sounded a lot like laughter. I grinned and tried to anticipate the strike. It moved its head from side to side, toying with me as I followed its movement with the cage held before me. I was concentrating so hard on its head I forgot about its tail. That cost me when it whipped around and hit me in the back, propelling me forward toward its open mouth.

Searing pain shot up my spine but I kept enough wits to shove the cage forward, trapping the head snugly within. It began to swing around wildly, almost pulling me from my feet as I held on for dear life. I wrapped my legs around its torso and, praying it was close enough to human to have a spinal cord, wrenched the cage sharply to the left. I felt a spasm arc through the body before it stilled and fell forward. I found myself flat on my back on top of the Chow’s cage with the creature dead on top of me.

It took all of my strength to push the monster off me, but as soon as I did, I jumped off the cage. I glanced at the Chow, but it didn’t seem to be conscious. I considered opening the cage door but feared that might do more harm than good if there was anything else slithering around. I ached from head to

toe but felt an even greater urgency to find Emily now that I knew there were guards. I limped over to the next aisle of five-foot-high cages that were long enough to hold several animals. The first three stood empty and filthy with blood and excrement, but the fourth held what appeared to be a small girl curled into the fetal position. She lay naked and covered in fresh bruises. She was whimpering and trembling like an abused animal.

I stepped to the bars and tried to find a way to open the cage. The door was on the top and consisted of a simple latch. I wondered why she hadn't tried to escape and touched the metal carefully, worried about being shocked, but there was no reaction. I considered the snake thing and decided it would have been enough of a deterrent. I looked back at the girl. Her dark hair was cut to the scalp but not shaved. It looked as if someone had taken a dull knife and hacked at it, pulling clumps out to the skin here and there. She was bleeding from various places on her body including her head, and I saw needle tracks on her legs.

“Hey, I’m here to help you. Can you stand?” I whispered.

There was no visible reaction to the sound of my voice. I stopped talking and reached for the latch. As soon as I pulled the door open she froze. I saw the stillness only a shifter can truly manage and prayed she would realize I was friend not foe. After a few seconds of indecision where she remained

still, I decided to climb on top of the cage and drop into it to get her out. That move saved my life.

The second I dropped I felt the world tip sideways as a heavy body slammed into the front of the cage. The girl was thrown into me and I realized she was bigger than she looked. I was suddenly looking into the golden eyes of a frightened shifter and realized I'd found Emily.

“Andor, she’s alive!”

I only had time for that thought before the cage was attacked again and I looked past Emily to see a huge head full of sharp teeth and two red eyes glaring at me. I couldn't help myself, I screamed. The werewolf threw its head back and howled and I don't know how my panties stayed dry. I pushed Emily off of me and she curled back up in a corner of the cage as I stood. Once again, I was completely defenseless as I stared at the huge black wolf eyeing me like I was his favorite entrée. I stood weaponless with an injured girl to protect and I had no idea how to get us both out alive.

The wolf stood on its hind legs and set its front paws on the top of the cage. At full height it would be eight feet, reaching the cage door easily. I crouched low, covering Emily with my body as I watched as the wolf pulled the door back open with its teeth. I heard my heart racing in my chest. I smelled blood on the wolf's hot breath through the bars of the cage. I heard Emily crying as she trembled below me. I felt

numb. My mind was well beyond rational fear and into the realm of utter terror. I knew I faced my own death.

The only indication I had of the cavalry arriving was the wolf tensing above me, then he howled again. As I watched, an orange dart appeared in his neck, cutting off his noise and making him lose his balance. He slipped off the cage and landed in a heap on the floor, struggling to regain his feet. I heard the sound of booted feet running towards us and stood to look past the rows of cages. Emily was silent and I vaguely wondered if she'd passed out.

“Damn it, Lex! You get into more trouble.”

“Lance?”

I couldn't believe my eyes as Lance of all people ran toward me dressed in a suit and tie while carrying his gun. I nearly burst into tears. Never had I been so happy to see him. He led a full team of men in standard CHS uniforms, but I didn't recognize a single one of them. I stood frozen as he holstered his gun and climbed onto the cage, dropping beside me. He immediately went to Emily and began to examine her with an efficiency I'd never seen from him before. I was at a complete loss for words.

“She's still alive. Someone better tell the eagle before he tears this place apart,” Lance said to no one in particular.

“I already have,” I replied, earning a startled look from him as he considered how.

“Uh, good. Let’s get you two out of here. She needs a medic.”

He lifted Emily into his arms, exhibiting more gentleness than I’d seen from him in all the time I’d known him. One of the other men climbed onto the cage with a blanket. Lance looked at Emily with such tenderness I almost felt like a voyeur. It shocked me as he seemed reluctant to hand her to the other man. As soon as the other soldier lifted her from the cage and wrapped her in the blanket, Lance pulled himself out and dropped onto the ground. Then he took Emily back into his arms and walked away, holding her tightly to his chest.

For an insane moment I was almost angry he didn’t seem the least bit concerned about me. But I shook the thought away and looked at the hand in my face. I realized the soldier was still on the cage offering me a hand. Normally I would’ve balked at the idea, but I was still in shock and automatically placed my hand in his. He lifted me without any help on my part and stood me on my feet on top of the cage. I wobbled a bit as my back tried to protest the movement and he grabbed my arms to steady me.

“Need help down?” he asked with a grin, and I remembered I was wearing a dress.

I frowned and brushed past him to leap off the cage, landing neatly in my sandals. Falling on my ass at this point would’ve been par for the course and I was grateful I didn’t

give him the satisfaction. I heard him chuckle behind me as I looked around at the rest of the team. They were opening cages all along the aisle and pulling out bodies in various states of abuse. I couldn't tell if any of them were alive, but there was one I was most concerned about.

“Andor?”

I reached for him, but felt absolutely nothing. I've never felt so alone in my life.

It took two hours for me to find Lance in the chaos that followed. There were CHS soldiers all over the compound and no one seemed to know who was in charge. I watched them wheel eleven bruised bodies out of the room of cages in the time it took me to reach the door. The outer hallway was covered in gore and the creature Andor fought lay in a heap against the wall. There were men in CHS uniforms photographing it and collecting samples. I shuddered as I walked away. I saw a few golden feathers on the floor, but no other sign of Andor in animal or human form.

Lance was standing in front of a seated and cuffed Theodore Castor when I finally found him in the conference room. I watched in silence as he questioned the madman who stayed stubbornly silent throughout. Lance spotted me and

motioned another soldier over to take his place. I felt nervous as he headed my way.

“Well, if it isn’t the missing Alexia Williams. Girl, do you have any idea what a can of worms you opened with your disappearance?”

“Disappearance? I told Commander Wayne I was taking off.”

Lance chuckled.

“Yeah. To get married to some mystery man none of us had seen hide or hair of in all the time we’ve known you. He believed you for all of two seconds and called me in to follow you, but by the time I reached Circe you were long gone. Then your place gets bombed for no obvious reason and all hell broke loose. I called in a few favors from over the wall and, with the descriptions of Andy Olson, found out who you actually took off with. An old friend was able to trace what Andor was really up to and we checked it out over here.”

“And it led you to Castor Labs?”

“Yup. Andor wasn’t the only one to notice the missing shifters, Lex. He’s the only one with a personal stake in it because of Em...his daughter, but there were others looking into to it too.”

I considered questioning him on his obvious connection to Emily, but thought better of it. If there was anything going on,

I probably didn't want to know. Not to mention there were more pressing concerns.

“What the hell is this all about, Lance? Why were they being kept here?”

Lance took a deep breath and eyed Castor with obvious disgust and anger. He shook his head and turned back to me.

“The fountain of youth for one, Lex. The idiot wants the shifter's secret to eternal youth. He's convinced he can isolate the gene and manufacture it for human use. He's insane.”

I repressed a shudder and looked around at all the people milling about. There were still a few scientists curiously watching the military comb over the place. A woman in a navy business suit stood across the room staring in our direction, a soldier on either side of her keeping her in place. At first I thought she was checking Lance out, but he took a step back and I realized her eyes were on me.

“Hey, do you know who she is?” I asked with a tilt of my chin in her direction.

Since she was staring, I decided not to even hide my attention. Lance glanced over at her and ran a hand across the back of his neck. I raised a brow at the nervous gesture.

“Uh, yeah. That's Lillian... Lillian Olavson. She's Andor's ex-wife.”

“Emily's mother?” I asked as shock settled in.

I couldn't imagine what the wicked bitch of the north was doing in the same place her daughter had been held prisoner, appearing pristine and unbothered.

"That's the one. She's being held for questioning in Emily's kidnapping and torture. I plan on seeing to it the bitch gets what's coming to her."

"Did she have anything to do with all this?" I waved a hand to indicate the mass chaos.

"It's unclear at this time. But we've begun to go through the electronic files and she is Castor's personal assistant."

I felt my jaw drop and my body tense. I turned to go to her and Lance grabbed my arm.

"It's cool, Alexia. Believe me when I say she won't get away with this. If there's even a scrap of paper indicating her involvement, I'll find it."

I shrugged out of his loose grip and he dropped his hand.

"You do that," I said quietly.

"I will, Alexia. I swear it."

I took a deep breath and felt my body willing me to find a place to lie down. I felt the absence of the one person I most wanted to see and turned back to Lance.

"Where is Andor? Have you seen him?"

Lance frowned and gave me a curious look.

“He left with Emily to the shifter hospital in Circe I believe. I told him she needed medical attention when he took her from me, but he didn’t say anything.”

I heard aggravation and anger in his voice and again wondered about him and Emily.

“Oh.”

“You all right, Alexia? You look pretty beat.”

I glanced at my bloody dress and realized it was torn in a few places.

“Uh, yeah.”

Lance seemed unconvinced as he looked me over head to toe.

“Commander Wayne found new quarters for you the day after the explosion. You can probably find him in the cafeteria where they’re questioning the convention scientists. Why don’t you go ask him where he set you up? Then you can go home and rest.”

“Yeah, sure,” I replied distractedly.

Lance appeared a little worried when I walked away from him to find Commander Wayne. I knew the old Alexia would’ve told him off for even suggesting rest when there was work to be done. But I had changed in the past couple of weeks and I no longer felt like the woman the shifters called Death. I was suddenly tired down to my soul and I wanted to curl up somewhere and cry my eyes out. Lance may have

thought I was acting strange but he didn't know the half of it. I felt strange too and I no longer knew myself. I thought Andor might know me but he was gone and I had no way to find him.

Chapter Nineteen

The next two weeks were a blur of emotional upheaval. Andor remained silent in my head and all attempts to contact him fell on deaf ears. Commander Wayne put me in a building with other soldiers and I felt claustrophobic in my small apartment. I had absolutely nothing to call my own but my gun. The clothes Andor bought me went into the trash as bloody rags as soon as I returned to the hotel where Andor and I had left our things. I showered, changed and went to the front desk, knowing it was pointless but asking about messages anyway. There was nothing. Andor's bag of clothes still sat in the room and I took it with me to my new apartment. It stayed in my closet untouched for weeks.

I fell back into my old routine of work, sleep, eat, work, sleep, eat. I became even more antisocial than before as depression settled over me. Lance tried to talk to me but I couldn't bring myself to respond. I vaguely noticed he was soon the only one who even tried. Lucien still patrolled with us and he tried to talk to me one day. I decked him the moment he stepped close enough and he landed on his ass. I

walked away without a word and haven't encountered him since.

I was lying in my bed trying to fall asleep after a fourteen-hour shift on the wall. The day had been hotter than any in recorded history for our area and I felt grumpy and restless. The air-conditioning unit in my apartment kept going out in random increments leaving me sweaty for a few minutes then chilled once it kicked back on in full force. I felt like crying again. That kept happening and I was worried about my sudden mood swings. I hadn't had morning sickness and there were no other telltale signs, but Andor and I hadn't been thinking of protection back in the Pleasure Caves or in the hotel room when we thought death might be approaching. Now I might have to face the consequences alone.

I heard the air conditioner die and gave a frustrated sigh before rolling out of bed. I went to the window and slid it open, then stood there to admire the moonlit view below. My apartment was on the top floor of the fifteen-story building. I almost saw over the wall into Circe and the lands beyond. It was a beautiful sight in the darkness, almost peaceful. A slight breeze whispered over my damp skin, creating goose bumps along the way. I felt warmth on my cheeks and realized I was

crying again. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, leaning my head against the window sill.

“Sweetness, why are you crying?”

I jumped and my eyes flew open, staring out the window in every direction trying to find the sight I’d been starved for.

“Andor?” I whispered, half-convinced it had been my imagination rather than his voice in my head.

“Alexia,” he whispered from behind me and I froze as I felt his breath on my neck.

My heart was racing and I closed my eyes as more tears spilled down my face. I felt his chest press into my back and his hands on my hips as he pulled me to him. I stiffened.

“What are you doing here?” I asked with a shaky voice.

I never hoped to hide my emotions from him while they were in such turmoil. I was elated to feel him against me and furious at his assumption. Two full weeks had passed without a word and he thought I would let him waltz back into my life where he left off as if nothing had changed? I simply couldn’t do it, especially if what I feared was going on in my body proved to be true. His hands left my hips and I felt a second of loss before they met on my abdomen and pressed down slightly. I immediately spun on my heel and shoved him away with all of my strength, his surprise evident as he stumbled away from me.

“Alexia—”

“What. Do. You. Want?” I asked through gritted teeth as all of my feelings coalesced into outrage.

“You,” he answered, and the simple admission dropped me to my knees.

I was sobbing like a baby when he pulled me into his arms and ran his fingers through my hair. He was pressing kisses over whatever bare skin he could find and I lacked the strength to stop him.

“Alexia, my love, please. Forgive me. Please, forgive me.”

I thought I heard tears in his voice but I couldn’t find the strength to care or even look to see for myself.

“Sandulf found us, Alexia. I was nursing Emily back to health when he found us and detained us until all of his questions were answered. I had to keep you out or he would’ve sensed your presence in my mind. I swear I did it to protect you.”

I hiccupped as I thought over his explanation, but quickly realized something.

“You started blocking me while we were still in the lab. That was before you even left for Circe.”

I refused to look at him, though he tried to tip my chin up with one of his elegant fingers. I turned away and tried to get out of his lap. He held on and we wound up with my back to his chest, both panting from the struggle.

“That is the truth and I have no explanation. I barely recall my mind then. I was panicked, thinking I would lose my daughter, though I knew you were safe. I felt Sandulf on the wind even then and I fled as soon as I had Emily in my arms. I knew you were safe, Alexia. I saw Lance head back to find you and I knew he would protect you.”

“I wanted you,” I thought, no longer trying to keep him out.

I stopped fighting him and lay limply in his arms, feeling emotionally wrung out. Andor held me tighter and pressed his face into my hair.

“I will do whatever it takes to regain your trust, love. Please give me another chance.”

I closed my eyes and seriously thought about my options. I could kick him out and tell him to go to hell and return to my depressing existence of living for the job. I didn’t even feel it anymore. The job no longer fulfilled me. My other option was what? To be with Andor in shifter lands? I didn’t even know where he lived.

“Anywhere you want to be, Alexia. I have homes in three different cities including Circe. We can live anywhere you want in FNT or even another continent. The choice is yours.”

If the thought of leaving CHS was frightening, leaving the continent was down right terrifying. I knew that wasn’t going to happen.

“Whatever you wish.”

“Where’s Emily?” I asked out loud to avoid the intimacy of him in my head.

“She is recovering in the north. Sandulf put her in his stronghold after he questioned us. He is convinced she may still be vulnerable.”

“Castor is dead,” I replied.

The old man hung himself with his bed sheets shortly after being imprisoned. There were only a handful of mourners at his much-publicized funeral.

“There are others who think as he did. And even among the animals Emily may be hunted for her fertility. As I said before, we are a dying species on the verge of extinction.”

I started to squirm and this time he let me go. I stood and walked back to the window, once again looking toward Circe. I heard him move behind me and felt his presence at my back, but he kept his hands to himself.

“And if I’m...pregnant?”

I heard his breath shudder and felt it on my neck.

“Then nothing on this earth will keep me away from you, Alexia. Not even your fragile emotions. I’ll admit that while I cared for Emily, I considered staying away. There are many obstacles we must face and I wasn’t certain of your feelings for me. But I am positive of mine for you. I want you, and

only you for the rest of my days. Whether you carry my child or not...I love you.”

I heard the emotion in his voice and felt it in my head as he broadcast everything into my mind. He wanted me unconditionally and without reservation, and he was willing to do anything to make it happen. Now it was up to me. Did I want to go with him into shifter lands for good? Was he worth giving up everything I'd fought for in the past few years? Had I changed that much in the matter of weeks to even consider it?

I closed my eyes and searched my heart for the answers. I thought of Hank and our beautiful baby boy, both moved on to wherever we go once this life is over. He would've wanted me to live on in whatever way made me happy. I knew it heart and soul because he'd loved me that much. My chest hurt to think of them but I knew this wasn't a betrayal because Andor wasn't the animal he thought himself to be. Hank would've liked Andor. He would've respected him and might have considered him a good replacement.

I took a deep breath and thought about my life as it was and realized I had no life. The work I lived for no longer fulfilled me as it used to and I no longer lived for the kill. I didn't even carry my sword anymore and my gun hadn't been used in weeks. I was a changed woman and it was because of

the shifter—No, the man behind me. The one who wanted me just as I am, flaws and all.

I felt his hands on my shoulders and my heartbeat sped up. The thrill of his touch filled me as he turned me around to face him. Without a word he raised my chin with a finger and lowered his lips to mine, taking my mouth in a savage kiss that told me he had missed me as much as I missed him. Our movements became hurried as we stripped clothes off each other and stumbled onto the bed. Andor loomed over me for a moment before kissing a path down my body. I felt like crying again, but this time out of the sheer joy of having him in my arms. I plunged my hands into his hair as he froze over my stomach.

“Andor?” I whispered as I felt his tongue lave a warm, wet trail around my belly button.

His hands tightened on my hips as he inhaled the scent from my navel.

“Sweet, sweet, baby,” he whispered against my skin and I felt warm droplets telling me he was crying.

“Andor?” I asked a bit louder, sitting slightly to look at him.

I was feeling an edge of panic at the thought of him being driven to tears.

“It’s all right, precious. You carry my child. I can scent her in your womb. My child’s within you.”

“Oh,” I replied numbly.

I felt my own tears spill over as he continued to kiss my stomach and whisper words in another language to the miracle within me. I was truly shaken at the thought of having another baby. Images of Michael played through my head and I smiled. I felt Andor’s warm presence in my mind before I realized he was kissing me again.

He made love to me slowly, our earlier fervor cooled enough to allow for a sensual experience beyond anything I’d ever known. He kept kissing my stomach and I fell asleep with him spooned behind me, one hand resting protectively over our child. When I woke he was still there and I couldn’t hide the relief I felt. It brought him pain and I turned to him with a question in my eyes.

“I wish to have your trust again, darling,” he replied. “I hate having you doubt me.”

I looked away and felt his arms tighten around me.

“It’s early yet. Sleep, my love.”

I drifted off as he rubbed his lips over my neck. Only slightly curious about how I now sensed his emotions.

I woke to the feel of Andor rubbing his body against mine with a slow determination that made me moan. He growled low in his throat and made me moan again as he began to

thrust into me. There was intensity in him that had been missing during our previous trysts and it made me gasp in anticipation. He held me to him with one hand as the other snaked around and slid between my legs. He began to rub my most sensitive spot, driving me quickly to orgasm.

My climax triggered his and he growled my name in my ear as his warmth filled me. We both lay breathless, panting and holding onto each other. I was shaking from my unexpected release while he rubbed his hand over my stomach.

“You’re mine, Alexia. You know that don’t you? I love you and you’re truly mine.”

His voice held a roughness I’d never heard from him before and I sensed emotional turmoil rolling off of him through our mental bond. I reached behind me to touch his face and immediately found myself on my back with him over me. He began kissing me and I wrapped my arms around his neck.

“I love you, Alexia. I love you so much.”

I began to wonder at the intensity of his emotions when it dawned on me I’m a complete idiot. In the days following his departure I had searched my soul for what seemed like an eternity. I quickly came to the realization I fell in love with Andor regardless of his species and accepted that truth. Unfortunately, Andor was blocking me at the time and had no

clue what I felt for him. Since his abrupt return I'd exhibited about every emotion humanly possible, but I had yet to say the words he obviously needed to hear.

I grabbed his face and pushed him back enough to look into his eyes. I saw the uncertainty there and cursed myself for it, even if he had done the same to me.

"I love you, Andor Olavson, more than I ever thought possible. Don't doubt for a second that I'm yours."

He smiled, and it was the most beautiful sight. Then he gently pressed his lips to mine and left my arms slowly.

"We need to get dressed, love. We have company."

Within five minutes of me stepping into my clothes there was a knock on the door. I looked at Andor and he smiled, looking only slightly guilty as he sat fully dressed on my bed. I walked out of the room with him on my heels and reached for the doorknob. Andor grabbed my hand.

"Don't you even ask who it is?" he asked with a frown.

I sighed and shook my head, but released the doorknob.

"You obviously know who it is," I replied in irritation.

"But you don't, and still you plan on opening it blindly."

I frowned and faced the door.

"Who is it?" I nearly shouted.

"Lance. We need to talk, Lex."

I raised a questioning brow to Andor who gave a slight bow of his head before turning away. I waited until he was seated on my small sofa before opening the door.

Lance filled the doorway, looking even more imposing than usual in a solid black uniform. It wasn't one I recognized and had no markings to identify it in any way.

“What’s up, Lance? What the hell are you wearing?”

He grinned as he stepped past me into my living room and took a seat in a chair across from Andor. I shut the door and noticed the space felt even smaller with these two men in it. They looked as if they were sizing each other up, but I felt no aggression from either of them.

“Andor,” Lance said.

“Lance,” Andor replied.

“Where’s Emily?”

Andor raised a brow but remained silent as Lance seemed to tense.

“That is none of your concern, Gavin.”

It was Lance’s turn to raise an eyebrow as I remained confused and ignored by both of them.

“Know my name, do you? I guess it was inevitable. That’s fine. Now answer my question, eagle. Where is she and is she okay?”

“*She* is my daughter, hawk, and as I said, none of your business.”

I felt Andor beginning to tense and Lance looked ready to go for his throat. Not one to be ignored for long, I decided to put in my two cents as I silently took my place beside Andor on the sofa.

“All right, guys, enough. Lance, Emily is fine. She’s recovering in the north and well protected. Now, why don’t you tell us why you’re here and why Andor called you hawk.”

I felt Andor’s eyes on me but chose to ignore him as I stared Lance down so he wouldn’t argue. Lance finally nodded stiffly and sat back in his chair. He watched me for a second as if he would answer, but then looked back at Andor.

“How long have you known about me?” he asked.

Andor shrugged and I began to feel suspicious.

“I had my suspicions from the first, but you’ve been successful with even the strictest DNA scanners so I wasn’t certain,” Andor replied.

Lance chuckled and I frowned as I looked him over from head to toe.

“You should know better than anyone, old man. Those scanners aren’t all they’re cracked up to be. The humans rely too heavily on them.”

That caught my attention and apprehension grew in my veins.

“Lance, what the hell is going on?” I asked.

Andor put his arm around me, for comfort or control I'll never know, and he began to massage my neck in a soothing manner. Normally I would've melted, but I had a bad feeling I wasn't going to like Lance's answer. Lance looked at me and grinned.

"Did you know Gavin is a Scottish name? It's actually my first name but I hate it, therefore I go by my middle name, Lance. I'm a half-breed, Alexia, like Emily. I'm the child of a hawk shifter and human coupling. I've been undercover for FNT for the past two years keeping an eye on things from this side of the wall—"

"You asshole," I yelled as I sprang from the sofa intent on wrapping my hands around his traitorous neck.

Lance jumped to his feet and I felt Andor grab me from behind, holding me against him.

"I never betrayed any secrets, Alexia. I simply kept watch and reported anything out of the ordinary to Sandulf. I'm the reason they knew about the missing shifters and Victoria Glass. I only reported what I thought would affect both sides."

"Oh, that makes it okay for you to be a lying bastard."

Lance ran a hand over his face and took a deep breath.

"Look, Alexia, I didn't come here for forgiveness. This isn't over yet and I'm neck deep in it. I need to know what you're going to do."

I shrugged out of Andor's grip and he let me go, but I felt him ready behind me.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Lance looked at Andor then back at me, seemingly unsure of what to say.

"I can't leave yet until all of the missing shifters are found, but we're close. I know what's going on between you two and I need to know if you're heading for FNT. I could use another ally who knows who I am on the other side."

I walked away from them and got a cold drink out of the refrigerator. Both men were still standing in the exact same spots when I returned.

"I won't betray my country, Lance," I finally replied.

"I'd never ask you to, Alexia, I swear. Just tell me if I can count on your help if I need it. I probably won't but you're both good in a fight."

"Alexia will not be fighting any time soon," Andor cut in.

I frowned at him as he looked pointedly at my stomach. I unconsciously rubbed a hand over it before realizing Lance caught the implications of both our actions.

"Congratulations," he said quietly. "This is certainly an unexpected development."

He grinned and I wanted to smack him.

“Thank you,” Andor replied. “I’m sure you’ll understand if we can only offer administrative support on our end for a while.”

“Any help would be greatly appreciated. I just need to know I can call on you in a crisis. This thing is bigger than we thought. I’ve already got Sandulf breathing down my neck for answers I can’t seem to find. Now that Castor’s dead I have to find the other players, and it’s going to take some time.” Lance said, no longer looking at me.

I sighed and sat back on the sofa, curling my legs beneath me as I took a long drink.

“Sure, Lance, whatever. I’ll be going with Andor, but I don’t know where yet. We’ll be staying in Circe for a couple of weeks while we work it out.”

Andor looked at me in surprise and Lance nodded before heading for the door.

“Thanks, Lex. I know you might not believe it, but I’ve always considered you a friend.” He stopped and turned back, digging in his pants pocket and pulling out a small vial of clear liquid. “I think you might decide you’ll have some use for this,” he said as he tossed the vial to Andor.

“What is it?” I asked.

“The fountain of youth. That idiot Castor was able to isolate one of the shifter genes related to our longer life span and created a serum for humans. According to his files, it’s

been thoroughly tested and can prolong a human's life by at least three hundred percent. That should give you two more than enough time to get sick of each other.”

Lance's grin widened while I looked at Andor in shock. He studied the vial for a second before looking up at Lance.

“And the side effects?” he asked.

Lance shrugged. “A few restless nights and maybe some aches and pains as her internal organs regenerate. But after a few days she'll begin to feel better than ever. She may even gain enhanced senses. That happened to a few of the test subjects, but not all.”

“How many were there and over how much time?” Andor asked.

Lance looked at the ceiling as if seeking the answers in his mind. “About a hundred and fifty subjects over twenty years. Apparently, Castor was at it before any of us realized who he was. He was actually the first test subject. The man died at the age of ninety-eight.”

I gasped as I remembered what Castor had looked like. I'd thought he was in his late fifties.

“Again, thank you. We'll help you when and where we can,” Andor replied.

Lance nodded. “You're welcome and I appreciate the help. It's been an interesting ride being so close to Death.”

He grinned at me and shook his head before walking out the door and closing it silently behind him.

I continued to stare at the door as I ran over various encounters with Lance and tried to remember anything out of the ordinary. I came up blank as I felt Andor sit beside me.

“You’ll come with me?” he asked quietly.

I looked at him and smiled, taking his hand into mine.

“Yes, Andor, I will. I might be crazy and life will definitely be interesting, but I’ll come with you.” He smiled and leaned over to kiss me. “Do you want me to take that?” I asked, nodding toward the serum in his hand.

He sighed and considered it for a moment, before shaking his head. “Not yet. I’d like to ask around about it first and see the test results for myself. Until I know you’ll be safe, and especially while you’re pregnant, I’d rather not risk it.”

“Okay. I can’t argue with that logic.”

He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me into his lap. I sighed in contentment, feeling better than I had in weeks. I began to consider the future and all the changes I would be facing.

“Will Sandulf care if I’m in his territory?” I asked.

I couldn’t hide the fear in my voice so I didn’t even try. Andor ran his fingers down the side of my face.

“He and I came to an understanding where you’re concerned and he knows to expect you soon. He wants to

“speak with you. But I’ve received an oath of honor from him that he intends no harm.”

“Oh, really? And what if I had refused your offer, birdman? You seem awfully sure of yourself.”

He chuckled and held me tighter, cuddling me against him like a child. I’d never felt so loved, so cherished, and I knew I’d made the right decision.

“Sandulf asked the same thing and you know what I told him?”

“Hmm?”

“I said I wasn’t worried because only one thing could possibly tame Death herself and I had it in abundance.”

“What’s that?” I asked breathlessly.

“Love, my sweet Alexia. I have an overabundance of love for you and our child. Together we’ll overcome any obstacles, I swear it.”

And the strangest feeling came over me as I realized without a doubt, and no matter who or what he was, I believed the shifter in my arms. I loved him heart and soul enough to cross over the wall without looking back and the thought didn’t even scare me.

About the Author

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She has the cure. He has the means. Together, they just might have a chance.

Wolf Rain

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After a well-intentioned experiment goes horribly wrong, a new breed of wolf Shifter takes over the night.

Diana has the cure, thanks to research she carried on after her father's death. But in her increasingly dangerous world, there's no one she can trust. Allowing anyone close could be the death of her—and of any hope the cure will reach those who need it.

Harm has the means, but lacks the cure. For years, he's worked for an elite government force, using his superior half-Shifter abilities in the battle to keep the streets safe. Now the Shifters are mutating and there's real fear that mankind is on its way to extinction.

When Diana and Harm's lives collide, they have only one chance to save the human world.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Wolf Rain:

They came out of the dark, their eyes shining and their heads bent as they glared at her. A pack of them, four in all, were stalking towards her, deadly intent in every move they made. They inched forwards stealthily, their padded feet

muffled against the hard asphalt. She couldn't take them all. She would maybe get one shot off before the others were on her. She tried not to panic, instead relying on her father's lifelong teachings. Find the alpha. Take him down. The others would still attack, but one might stay behind to protect the fallen leader. The rest wouldn't be nearly as fast or as strong, and there might be a chance...

She took a deep breath and silently demanded her muscles to be steady. She knew what to do to give herself at least some slim chance of survival. And if she was going to die, she sure as hell was going down fighting. She searched the wolves that were only a few feet away, zeroing in on the white-haired animal as the alpha. He was slightly larger, just a fraction of an inch in front of the other creatures. He would be the first to pounce, and the others would follow. He was her target.

She took her stance again, bracing her legs slightly apart, gripping the wolfsbane in her fist. The world began moving in slow motion as the leader crouched slightly, the muscles in his legs tightening. She narrowed her eyes and waited—and nearly gasped when the wolf was thrown to the other side of the alley, his thick body smacking against the brick wall.

The others immediately turned and began barking and snarling, racing towards whatever had taken down the alpha. She stood for a few beats, blinking as she stared at the fallen creature. Blood was slowly seeping out of his side, matting the

white fur with its scarlet color as the jagged corner of a cracked rib stuck through the pliant flesh. The Shifter's head was turned at an awkward angle, his eyes open and unseeing, his tongue lolling from between his sharp teeth. *Dead*, she thought, and was stunned. Her logical mind told her to run, to use the distraction to get the hell away from the Shifters. But the other part of her brain was filled with blinding curiosity, a curiosity that overrode every other thought. Suddenly she, too, was running, following where the other wolves had gone. She had to see what had done this.

She stopped abruptly a few feet into the side alley, staring in amazement as another wolf was flung past her, landing like a rag doll on the hard, wet ground. There was a shadow in the mouth of the alleyway, a dark visage that looked strangely like a man. She watched, mesmerized, as he pushed another wolf away then kicked at the fourth. They weren't down, though—she could still hear the dual growling of the furious creatures.

They bounded at the same time, launching themselves at the stranger with more strength than grace. He didn't so much as flinch when they jumped. He simply opened his arms wide, waited a split second and crushed their skulls together. They fell to the asphalt with a muted thud, splashing into a puddle.

She didn't know what to do, what to say, and she wasn't sure if she had the words anyway. It wasn't possible—at least it wasn't supposed to be possible. A human taking on a pack

of werewolves, it was too much like an urban legend. Managing to escape them, certainly, but actually taking them down... Impossible. To her knowledge it had never been done, though her father had conjectured about how it might be possible.

“You should go home.”

His voice was deep, slightly sharp, the gravel in his tone strangely soothing and electrifying all at the same time.

She couldn't stop the snap of her words as she pocketed her spray. “That's where I was headed. I certainly wasn't going clubbing at this time of day.”

She could have sworn she heard a chuckle before he replied. “You should let your boyfriend walk you everywhere.”

“I don't have a boyfriend.” She stared at him a moment, trying to decide if he'd just given her a horribly cheesy pick-up line, or if he was making assumptions. From his expression, she decided he wasn't trying to scope her out. “Besides, I've seen most grown men scream and run when they're confronted with Shifters. I could do without the hysterics.”

“True, but two are less likely to be attacked than one.”

“And one shouldn't even be attacked at five in the afternoon. They shouldn't be shifting until moonrise.”

There was a soft whoosh of air as the shadow shifted his weight. “You have a good point. They shouldn’t be able to... Come on, I’ll walk you home.”

He turned and took a step into the watery light of day, pausing as he waited for her. She stared at his wide shoulders and decided his offer had to be one of the most interesting proposals she’d ever had. She wondered if he ever thought of hiring himself out as a bodyguard. She knew she’d be one of the first in line to pay for his services.

“You shouldn’t walk home alone,” he repeated, his back still to her.

Sighing, she shrugged and made her way out of the alley, carefully stepping over the lifeless bodies of the wolves. She knew that in the next hour, their tissue would begin to break down and their bodies would shift back to human form, leaving them naked and mangled. There had been a time when she’d pitied them, but she had been very young then.

In the soft light, she could easily see the muscled physique and proudly held body of her rescuer. His dark brown hair was worn in a severe crew cut, a look that hadn’t been popular in the civilian sector for years. She noted his urban camouflage, from his broad shoulders all the way to his large feet, and felt suspicion crawl up her spine. There were two guns strapped to his side, and she was sure each was filled with wolfsbane bullets. If the bullet itself didn’t kill the

animal, then the concentrated liquid at its core would poison the blood as well as cause excruciating agony. Only certain government-sanctioned agencies were allowed to carry such things, though she knew civilians had ways of purchasing the bullets underground.

When she finally reached the stranger, she stopped directly in front of him, determined to see the face of the man who had saved her life. Government or not, she had to concede she owed him more than she could ever repay. What she saw when she finally laid her eyes on him sent her back a quick step.

He was gorgeous. There was no way around it. This man was a fine specimen of the male species. From behind she could see that he was well muscled, but a nice body did not an interesting face make. And his face was more than interesting, it was enthralling.

A powerful attraction is the last thing these arch enemies need. Or is it?

The Trouble with Curses

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Selena Tremayne is different. For one thing, how many vampires do you know faint at the sight of blood? Despite the problems her “differences” cause, she’s grateful. It means she’s not an all-out-evil killing machine. It also means she can’t afford to let anyone get too close. And a guy like Rafe, delicious as he is, is to be avoided at all costs.

Rafe Hunter is a vampire slayer, an odd job thrust upon him by dint of birth. And with his augmented abilities, no one else does it better. Those abilities run into a major short-circuit, however, when he meets Selena. The mysterious beauty clouds his every instinct—something he can ill afford in his line of work. Because of her, his quarry has somehow slipped out of his grasp. Twice.

Coincidences are piling up, and he can’t help but wonder if simple lust is the culprit. Or if it’s something deeper—with dangerous repercussions that extend beyond anything either of them imagined...

Enjoy the following excerpt for The Trouble with Curses:

“Okay, Rafe. I know you’re back there. You may as well show yourself.”

Nothing.

“I have no intention of letting you find out where I live, so you have nothing to gain by following me. I’ll wander around all over town all night long before I’ll show you where I live.”

A dark shadow separated itself from the wall. “How did you know I was here?”

His rich, deep voice shivered down her spine in its usual intoxicating way. “I have a sixth sense about these things.”

“Has to be something like that because I’m damned good at what I do. No one’s ever caught me tailing them before.”

She threw him a quizzical look. “You do this often, do you?”

He chuckled. “Actually, I do. I’m a private investigator.”

Well, that explained it. If she hadn’t *felt* him behind her, she wouldn’t have known. “Just my luck.”

“I didn’t intend for you to ever find out I’d followed you home tonight. I was just going to make sure you got in safely and leave.”

That would have been great except he’d still have found out where she lived. “That’s really nice, but I already told you that I’m fine. I don’t need you checking up on me.”

She heard rather than saw him shrug. One of the perks of having amazing hearing.

“Sorry. My father always taught me that you took care of a lady. Made sure she got home safe and sound.”

“But I wasn’t your date, so I’m not your responsibility.”

“Doesn’t matter. Look, Selena, whether you like it or not I like you, and I want to get to know you a helluvalot better. I won’t give up on you anytime soon, it’s just not my way so you may as well give in and give me a chance.”

“And I have no say in the matter?”

“Yes and no.”

Despite herself she laughed. “Meaning?”

“You’ve already decided. Your heart and body have already said yes. It’s only your mind that refuses to give in.”

“Unfortunately for you, it’s my mind that’s got the deciding vote.” The second the words passed her lips she wished them back. She’d as much as admitted to what he said.

He shook his head. Stepping closer, he reached out and cupped her cheek. “No, it doesn’t. *This* is the real deciding factor.”

She felt his sweet breath on her face just moments before his lips gently brushed across her own. They were feather-light and warm, at first coaxing, then growing more insistent as her response became evident.

She knew she should push him away, but she couldn't seem to make herself do it. She'd been fantasizing about kissing Rafe from the moment she'd first heard his voice trickle over her senses. Now that it was happening, the last thing she wanted to do was stop him.

Her hands developed a mind of their own. Happily, they explored everything they could reach, from his hard biceps to his strong neck and finally ended up clutching his tight ass for everything she was worth.

She was right in her initial assessment—he was most definitely sex-on-legs. And right now, with his erection nestled between their bodies, she wanted nothing more than to traverse the very path that led to what felt like his very impressive sex.

She moaned into his mouth and ground her hips against him, feeling him return the exquisite pressure. Their tongues danced along each other, questing, exploring, enticing. Her breath caught. Blood pounded in her ears, all but igniting in her veins. She tried to tell herself it was just a kiss, nothing more, but who was she kidding? She'd never felt anything that came close to this kiss before.

Everything about him struck a chord with everything she was, and everything she wanted for herself, but was too afraid to take.

With an answering groan, his mouth started eating at hers, their tongues now melding together.

Tasting.

Needing.

Wanting.

Oh Lord, how she wanted. She wanted it all with this guy. Sex without a doubt, but the terrifying thing was she wanted more than that. She could deal with just the physical. In fact, Anne was probably right that all she needed was a good, long night of hot and heavy sex.

But with Rafe, she found herself dreaming of the happily-ever-after, and there was no happily-ever-after for her. There couldn't be because of what she was.

Pushing him away with a determination she didn't even know she possessed, she stepped back. Did she have the same stunned expression on her face he did? With disgust, she realized she must.

Neither said anything. They couldn't. Both of them were breathing so hard you'd have thought they'd been running for their lives. Then again, maybe they had. Rafe, because he was chasing after her. Her, because she was striving to get away from his magnetic attraction.

The whole thing was ridiculous.

"Why can't you just leave me alone?" Damn her voice's quavery betrayal.

He reached out and skimmed his thumb across her lips.
“Because I can’t.”

She shook off his touch and his hand dropped away.
“That’s not an answer.”

“It’s the only one I can give you.”

Selena threw her hands up in frustration. “What am I going to do with you?”

An utterly wicked chuckle erupted from him. “I can think of a few things.”

“I’ll just bet you can.” So could she, although she’d never let him know it.

Despite her resistance, he pulled her into his arms and held her close. “Stop fighting this, Selena. At least give us a chance.”

It felt so good to be held in his arms. She felt warm, secure and cherished. She nuzzled into his shoulder and inhaled his comforting scent.

How was it possible to feel so comfortable with a man and yet be so turned on you wanted to screw him senseless at the same time? It didn’t make sense.

She sighed and snuggled in closer. “You need to go away.”

His arms tightened, drawing her even closer. “Whatever you say. Just as soon as I see you home.”

“You’re not going to give in on this, are you?”

He kissed her forehead. “Nope.”

“Bastard.”

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