

A romantic close-up of a man and a woman about to kiss. The man is on the left, shirtless, with a large, detailed tattoo on his right shoulder depicting a woman's face. The woman is on the right, with long blonde hair, her hand resting on the man's face. The background is dark and moody. The title 'Claiming the ALPHA' is overlaid at the top.

Claiming the
ALPHA

ADRIANA HUNTER

Claiming The ALPHA

BBW PARANORMAL ROMANCE

Claiming The Alpha BBW Paranormal Romance Wild Obsession (#2)

By Adriana Hunter

Copyright © 2013, Adriana Hunter – All Rights Reserved.

Connect via Twitter @

<http://twitter.com/spicytales>

Join Adriana's private mailing list at
<http://www.SpicyTales.com>

All Rights Reserved. This book contains material protected under International and Federal Copyright Laws and Treaties. Any unauthorized reprint or use of this material is strictly prohibited. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or any information storage and retrieval system without express written permission from the

author/publisher.

This is a work of fiction. All names, characters, locations and places are solely the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, including events, areas, locations and situations is entirely coincidental.

Table Of Contents

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[About The Author](#)

Chapter One

She was still there. He'd told her he was a werewolf and as close as she'd come to bolting, yet she'd stayed.

Nikki was curled up on the bed, her head resting in his lap, the blanket pulled over her body. He stroked her hair softly, marveling at a girl who could hear the man she loved was something other than human and stay with him. It took his breath away.

"Nikki..." She'd been quiet a long time and he wanted to be patient, let her

think about what he'd said, but he wasn't succeeding. What was she was thinking and feeling? He wanted to know everything that was going through her mind.

She turned, looking up at him. "Yes?"

"You have questions, you know, you can ask. I know it's a lot but I want you to...I want to say I want you to be comfortable with this, but I'm not sure that's possible right now. I guess I just want you to talk to me."

"Yeah. I know. It's mostly just all a big mess in my head right now." She rolled onto her back, her head still in his

lap.

“Does it hurt? When you change, I mean. Is that the right word?”

He nodded. “It is. Yeah, it does. But only for a second or two.”

“Do you like being a...werewolf?”
The word came slowly to her lips and a brief frown creased her forehead.

“I do. It’s what I’m meant to be. This human form is...sort of temporary, I guess. But for one night a month, I change. And it’s when I feel the most free.”

Her frown deepened. “Do you kill

people?”

The frankness of her question startled him for a minute, but this was Nikki, and he really shouldn't have been surprised.

“I have, but a long, long time ago. It's not something I enjoyed, but in that case it was necessary.”

“Why?”

“It was a wolf hunter, someone out to kill me.” Jax didn't want to go into detail about his kills now, but he wouldn't withhold answers to her questions. It would just be easier if she didn't ask *those* kinds of questions, at

least not right now.

“Do you live forever then? Or will you die, like the rest of us?”

“I’m not immortal, but we have the ability to heal quickly, in either form. Bec, my brother, was bitten that night in the alley. He was the other wolf, the yellow one. You met him here...when he came into my room after that first night together. His wound has already healed, just a faint scar is all that’s left. And that will soon fade.”

She laughed, a brief harsh sound.
“Yeah, I remember him. I get the feeling he doesn’t like me too much though.”

Jax sighed. “It’s complicated...it’s more me that he doesn’t like at the moment. You’re...peripheral. To him, not to me.”

He looked down at her. “You’re the center of my life right now, Nikki. Nothing can change that.”

Nikki sat up and knelt next to him, the blanket slipping from her shoulders and pooling around her legs. “You’re important to me, too, Jax. More than I’ve ever let anyone be.”

“But? I sense something else.”

“Just be patient with me, okay? I want to try to make this work, but...no

promises right now.” Her eyes searched his.

He reached for her, pulling her against him. “It’s okay. You’re still here and I think that’s pretty amazing.”

Jax slid down in the bed, pulling Nikki down with him, cradling her against his body. “Nothing else has changed, Nikki. Nothing. I still think you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. I still love you...before and after. That all stays the same.”

Nikki nodded, her eyes solemn. “I know you do.” She reached for him, kissing him softly but with urgency.

She broke away briefly. “Say it again, Jax...tell me you love me. It’s the one thing I can hold on to right now that makes sense.”

“I love you, baby. And I’ll tell you as many times as you need me to.” He kissed her hard, claiming her lips with his. She returned his kiss with just as much passion, just as much intensity.

After a long moment he lifted his head. “And I’ll show you as many times as I can, as many times as it takes.”

Nikki wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him back down. In the soft light of the room, she looked so vulnerable and maybe even a bit afraid,

and his heart ached with wanting to make this easier for her. But all he could do now was hold her, not push her.

Be patient...I just need to be patient.

She was moving on the bed, shifting so her body was beneath him. Silently he followed her lead, settling on top, his legs between hers. Her hips shifted, her legs sliding along his thighs and up his torso.

“Jax, make love to me...please.”

He took her slowly at first and she was languid and slow, but it wasn't long before she started twisting beneath him, her movements becoming rough and

aggressive. He braced himself on his hands, looking down at her, her face twisted in a grimace.

“Nikki? What is it?”

“Harder, Jax. I don’t want to think about anything for a while, I just want to feel.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t. Make me forget, just for a minute.”

He pulled away from her abruptly, turning her over onto her stomach after a brief tangle of legs. She tried to rise up on her hands and knees, to spread her

legs. But Jax pushed her flat, his hands on her hips, lifting her up. He propped her ass up in front of him, his legs spread, holding her legs together with his knees.

She looked at him over her shoulder, breath rasping from her throat.

“Yes, oh god...yes, Jax.”

He took her quickly, the weight of his body giving him momentum, his thrusts hard and fast. She cried out and he grabbed a handful of her hair, tugging her head back. Nikki spread her arms, grabbing the sheets, her hands curled into fists.

Each thrust brought him closer, drove him further into her warmth and wetness. He gritted his teeth, holding himself back, waiting for some kind of sign from Nikki she was close. He didn't want to deprive her again, and he sensed she needed this, needed the force of his thrusts to drive all conscious thought from her.

When she came, it was hard and fast. Her body convulsed from her center, her hips jerking forward, pulling him down with her. He braced his knees on the bed, still thrusting as she cried out beneath him. The contractions of her body around his cock grew stronger and every cell in his body screamed for

release. His breath tore from his throat, the fire in his lungs matching the heat in his balls, flooding up the shaft of his cock, inevitable and unrelenting, and utterly beyond his control.

Then there was no holding back for Jax. Everything spun out of his control and he thrust hard into a gasping Nikki, short sharp jabs as his body took over, his hips finding an erratic rhythm of their own. Her cries faded as his growls increased, as he tipped his head back and shouted his ecstasy.

When there was no more left in him, he collapsed on top of her, his sweat-slicked chest pressed against her back,

his cock sliding out of her heat and wetness. He pressed himself against the soft giving flesh of her hip, his hips still flexing forward, his body not yet ready to relax.

His arm was around Nikki's shoulder and slowly her begin to shake beneath him. He moved to her side, rolling her back against his chest. She looked up at him, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Nikki. Are you okay? Did I hurt you?" His chest tightened at the thought, and his eyes traveled over her body, not sure what he was looking for.

She shook her head. "I...I'm okay. You didn't..." Another sob shook her. "I

think I just need a good cry.”

She curled against his chest, her sobs deepening. He held her, rubbing her back and stroking her hair, at a loss as to what to say. There was nothing he could do but wait for this storm to pass.

Nikki’s sobs trailed off to occasional hiccoughing breaths and then sometime later she was still. Her breathing deepened and Jax realized she was asleep. Gently, trying hard not to wake her, he pulled the blanket over their bodies. She stirred briefly against him, looking up at him with sleep-dreamy eyes.

“Shhh, go back to sleep.”

“Thank you, Jax. I really do love you.” Her eyes were closed again before he could ask what she was thanking him for.

*

Nikki watched Jax sleep for a while, his face relaxed, one arm curled loosely around her waist and she carefully slid from beneath him, sitting up against the head of the bed. The sun was shining through the window and Jax’s hair caught the light, so black it looked

almost blue.

He stirred and opened one eye, looking up at her.

“Hey. Morning.” He stretched, the sheet falling away from his chest and arms, revealing smooth skin over taut muscles. It was hard for her to imagine him as anything but the Jax she knew, even though she’d seen him as a wolf.

“You okay?” He reached for her hand, kissing it and then sitting up next to her. He wrapped an arm around her and she rested her head on his shoulder.

“Yeah. I think so. Last night was...

odd. Hard to understand.
Overwhelming.”

He hugged her briefly. “I know. And I’m sorry. There’s no easy way to explain all that I am, but you deserve to know the truth. I want you in my life, but I couldn’t keep what I am a secret and have you, too.”

“I know. And I’m glad you told me... really. It’s more than I get from most guys, and when they’re honest, it’s usually to tell me they’re married.” She laughed softly. “This was by far the strangest thing I’ve been told, by any guy.”

“I’m sure it is. Are you okay... otherwise? Did I hurt you...the last time?”

She could hear the concern in his voice and she shook her head. “No. I’m fine. The tears...I have no idea what that was. But it felt right, at the moment. There’s a word...I’m not good with big words...for something that’s like cleaning out all the yuck inside your head.”

“Cathartic.”

“Yeah. Big word. Not a word a high school dropout uses.”

They were silent for a few minutes, Jax idly playing with a strand of her hair.

“Did you drop out after your parents died?”

“Yeah. It was right at the end of my senior year. I tried to keep going, but it was too hard. Well, it wasn’t hard. There was no one to keep an eye on me. We ran wild, Lori and I. She finished school, barely. I’d crashed at her house all the time and then pretty much lived there after the landlord showed up with an eviction notice at my apartment. After she graduated, she found the club and got us jobs. I got my own place and the rest is history.”

Jax was quiet beside her. She took a deep breath and then hesitated. She wanted to go on, continue with her story, but she wasn't sure how he was going to react to all of it. But hell, he'd just told her he was a werewolf. Nothing she could tell him would be any worse. At least it was normal stuff, in comparison.

Jax reached over and took her hand, winding his fingers through hers. "Remember what I said before? You can tell me anything, anytime. No judgment from me. Nothing changes how I feel about you, okay?"

She nodded her head, squeezing his hand. "Yeah. I know. It's just...it's hard.

I never talked about this stuff, try really hard not to think about it even.” She tilted her head, looking up at him. “But I want to tell you, even though it’s not a pretty picture.

She settled back against his chest, looking down at his big hand holding hers. It was almost a relief talking to him...not quite easy, but it loosened up something inside of her, let off a tension that’s she’d never really noticed until it was gone.

“I’ve been doing okay on my own. Better than some...better than Lori sometimes. She’s got her head on straight now, but she got mixed up with a

lot of shit after high school. Some heavy drugs, really bad guys...the whole cliché you'd expect from a stripper. I managed to avoid all that, at least the drugs. The guys...not so much."

Jax still held her hand, rubbing his thumb over her knuckles. She was relieved he didn't feel the need to say anything, just let her ramble on. She sighed and kept talking.

"If you dance for men, for money, the creeps are pretty much an occupational hazard. A lot of the guys who come to the club are married, looking for a little something on the side. I never got mixed up with those guys, didn't want to be

part of screwing up any more families. And it's never been about the sex, at the club, I mean. Just a way to make a living. But...I managed to find my own bad guys though. Even thought some of them loved me, found out different... after."

"So you broke your own rules in my case?" She heard the smile in his voice, even without looking up. She knew just what it would look like, one side of his mouth turned up, the glint in his eye.

She smiled, sliding down in the bed beside him and he turned to her. She was right, the smile was there. A little sultrier than she'd imagined, which

suited her at the moment. Giving up so much about her life was hard, harder than she'd thought. The rest could wait.

“You broke the rules first, remember? You touched me, got me all distracted. I should have had Mack toss you out on your ass on the sidewalk.”

Jax was beside her now, propped up on one elbow. His hand rested on her stomach, sliding slowly north, up over the curve of her breast.

“I’ve never been one to follow the rules.” His voice was low, smooth...and she shivered.

“I get that.” His fingers were caressing her now, slowly working their way over her skin. She looked down, watching as he brushed her nipple with the back of his hand, gasping as it drew up, hard and instantly sensitive.

Everything Jax did to her after that blended into one long sensation-fueled experience. His hands and mouth seemed to be everywhere, lighting a fire inside her, fanning the flames with his kisses, his tongue against hers, his lips sliding along her skin.

It all peaked, waves of arousal crashing through her, Jax moaning against her neck, his body giving as

much as taking from her, in some complicated equation that balanced out perfectly. She held him against her, their bodies slicked with sweat, breathing hard and fast, until they were both spent.

The sunlit room gradually receded. The only thing she was conscious of was Jax's weight and warmth next to her, his breath in her ear, and of sinking into the bed. And then that receded too.

Nikki woke with a start. They'd drifted back to sleep and she had no idea what time it was. Scrambling upright, she threw back the sheet. The clock on the bedside table said well past noon.

"Shit." She swung her legs over the

side of the bed. “Fuck.”

Jax sat up as she fumbled around on the floor for her clothes.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m late for Ryan’s and I need to go home and change.” She was on her hands and knees, searching for her shoe beneath Jax’s bed. She sat up as he leaned over the edge.

“I’ll call you a cab.” He disappeared from her view as she dived back under the bed.

“Why the hell don’t you have a car?” She got up from the floor and sat on the

edge of the bed, fastening her bra and pulling her shirt over her head.

“Never had a need for one, I guess. I just walk where I need to go.” He had his cell phone open and spoke briefly. She heard him say the address and then he flipped the phone shut.

“You walk everywhere?” She stood and shimmied her hips, tugging up her skirt.

“Yeah, pretty much.” Jax pulled on a faded pair of sweatpants, coming to stand barefoot in front of her.

“You want something to eat, to take

along in the cab? Bagel, coffee?”

She scowled as she pulled up the zipper on her skirt. “Either...both. Coffee first. Is there time for coffee?”

“There’s always time for coffee.” Jax was already out the door and down the hall and she followed, hopping on one foot as she put on her other shoe.

Chapter Two

Jax had sent Nikki off in the cab, with a cup of coffee and a toasted bagel. He chided himself for falling asleep, knowing she had a job to go to. But they'd been awake until the early hours and Nikki must have been exhausted, after her emotional roller coaster the night before. If she was late, maybe Ryan would fire her and she wouldn't be working in that seedy little shop. Shaking his head at the errant thought, he poured himself a cup of coffee. She needed the job and as much as he wanted her with him, he didn't think she was

ready to commit to living with him.

Finn and his mate, Angela, were still in the kitchen when he came back in. They'd been eating breakfast when Nikki came down. They'd been guarded but pleasant to Nikki, who had eyed Angela with open curiosity. Their conversation had been brief, with no mention of killings or murders and nothing at all from Finn or Angela that would have hinted that any of them were werewolves. They may have suspected Nikki knew what Jax as, but until he'd told them differently, she was just another human who didn't need to know what they were.

Now, Finn's ever-present bowl of cereal was finished, both of them sitting with a cup of coffee. Jax poured his own cup and sat down at the table.

“Jax, a few of Bec's pack who came back last night. They're in their old rooms. They wanted me to let you know, feel out the reception, I guess.”

“Like I said, they're welcome back, no questions. They can come find me if they want, or I'll find them.”

Finn nodded. “There's no new murders since the last. Bec...” Finn hesitated.

“Go on.” Jax took a swallow of coffee.

“Bec’s going to take the rest of his pack out on a scouting trip tonight, back to the scenes of the other murders, see if they can find any clues.” He pushed the cereal bowl away.

Jax shook his head. “What the hell is he thinking? Or not thinking. That thing isn’t something to mess with, and in mortal form, it’s suicide.” He pushed away from the table, setting his cup in the sink.

“Any idea where Bec is now?”

Finn shook his head. “No. He’s not back at his place and no one’s seen him here either.”

“Great. A renegade wolf-thing and a renegade brother. Couldn’t ask for a better start to my day.”

Jax took the stairs two at a time. Bec was out of control and finding him...*and stopping him*...was what he needed to do. The last thing he’d ever imagined doing as alpha male of this pack was tracking down his own brother and bringing him to heel.

If the wolf-thing were a lycanthrope, the only way to kill it would be to sever the head from the spine. The traditional

methods of killing werewolves, shooting them with a silver bullet or impaling them on a silver knife, had no effect on lycanthropes.

Even though they resembled werewolves, lycanthropes were different. Besides being more powerful and larger, they had the ability to change at will. They weren't bound to the cycle of the moon and it freed them, sometimes making them more dangerous, if they'd gone feral and out of control. And that usually happened when they'd eaten human flesh and grew to like it.

Jax dragged his thoughts back to the present, to the thing that was killing

people in his city, the thing that had attacked Nikki. And to his brother. Things were getting too far out of control and Jax needed to get control of his brother, and his pack, before it all spiraled away from him. He'd been too passive as a leader, too passive in dealing with Bec. Maybe he'd been too passive in letting his deserter pack members back without a fight. It was time to get tougher, stop trying to please everyone. And he'd start with finding Bec and finding a way to kill the lycanthrope.

He detoured away from his room, climbing the stairs past the third floor and up the narrow back stairs to the attic

space. There were all kinds of junk packed in the attic. Whether the thing was a lycanthrope or something else, there might be something useful somewhere in the cluttered confines of the fourth floor.

The smell hit him almost immediately after he opened the door, the now-familiar fetid, sickish smell from the alley. It was strongest in the back corner, near the boxes that held his father's belongings. Some of the boxes were torn open, their contents strewn across the floor. He didn't recognize any of the items tossed about and quickly stepped over them as if they were toxic.

The attic was stuffy, dust motes swirling around him as he moved through the crowded space. He wrinkled his nose, disgusted at the stench. He finally found the box he was looking for, shoved against the back wall and he pulled it beneath the oriel window and took off the cover. Beneath a sheaf of papers he found the book, dark and heavy, the cover heavily embossed leather.

His father had kept a sort of diary, a journal, of important events and this was it. The book smelled like his father and he closed his eyes, breathing in memories before forcing himself to open the book.

There were births and deaths, mates' and members' names added. Sometimes there were entries about significant events. Jax remembered sitting on the floor as his father made entries in the leather-bound book, but he'd never really paid much attention. At the time, it had seemed cumbersome and old-fashioned, a waste of time. But maybe whatever his father had left behind might now prove to be very useful.

The sight of his father's angular handwriting brought a rush of memories, of sitting beside his father, watching him write by lamplight in the study downstairs. Trying to understand what it meant to be an alpha male, listening to

other pack members come and go, telling him their problems and listening to his father dispense advice, logic and, most of all, enforcing rules and discipline.

That's what was missing. Jax shook his head. He had no idea how to discipline anyone, including his own brother. He could give advice, solve problems, but he had yet to learn how to deal with conflict. And now Bec was running wild, out of control, and it was Jax's fault.

The book was dusty, the pages brittle. He flipped through, scanning the dated entries. Most were straight records of pack members, but there were also

several longer entries dealing with specific events. As he glanced down the page, one entry, in particular, stood out.

His father's careful writing deteriorated to scrawls across the page. Jax read quickly, slowing down as he came to one passage, squinting in the dim light at the sloppy handwriting.

When he finally set the book aside, he had his answer. The wolf-thing wasn't a lycanthrope, it was something else. Bec had been right about that. But by being different, it was potentially more dangerous.

Because the wolf-thing was family.

*

She'd thought about asking the cab to wait at Lori's apartment, but Nikki didn't think she had enough cash to be that extravagant. Besides, she needed a shower and change of clothes, and Lori would be there and would probably want a blow by blow of her night with Jax. So she reluctantly let the cab leave.

Sure enough, Lori was waiting and by the set of her shoulders and thin line of her mouth, something was wrong. Nikki got the distinct impression Jax was not

going to be the topic of conversation.

“Where have you been?” Lori was sitting at the tiny cluttered kitchen table, a forgotten cigarette teetering on the edge of the ashtray.

“I left you a note...I was with Jax.” Nikki headed down the hall to the bathroom, kicking off her shoes and pulling off her shirt, tugging at the zipper on her skirt as she walked. It occurred to her she could have just left Jax’s house wrapped in a sheet and save the wear and tear on her clothes.

“Yeah, I get that part. But you’re supposed to be at Ryan’s, like now.”

Lori followed her down the hall and leaned against the bathroom door. Nikki turned, scowling, pulling her hair back up on top of her head. No time to wash and dry it now.

“I know. And I’m trying to get ready, so...if you don’t mind.” Lori stepped back into the hallway, her frown deepening as Nikki closed the door.

Nikki turned on the taps, waiting for what seemed like an eternity for the water to get hot before finally giving up. She danced briefly through the lukewarm stream, trying hard not to get her hair wet and was back out of the shower, wrapped in a towel, in a matter of

minutes.

When she opened the bathroom door, Lori was still standing there, cigarette in hand.

“So, why are you late?” Lori followed Nikki down the hall to the bedroom.

“Why are you so interested in my life all of a sudden?” Nikki rummaged through one of the drawers she’d stuffed her clothes in, pulling out panties and a bra. Lori perched on the edge of the bed, watching Nikki.

“And do you mind? I’m trying to get

dressed.” Nikki held up her clothes.
“Can this wait?”

Lori rolled her eyes but stayed where she was, only turning her head. Nikki scowled, blowing out a sigh of frustration. She didn’t have time for whatever had pissed off Lori. She dropped the towel and pulled on panties and bra, grabbing her jeans and a t-shirt from the floor.

“Fine. I’m dressed. What’s got you so mad at me?”

Lori turned around, blowing out a puff of smoke. “Just that I got you this job, which you really needed, and you’re blowing it off for some guy.”

“So you’re still upset that I’ve got a serious thing going with Jax and you’ve got a revolving door on your bedroom? We’re not in high school anymore, Lori. I think we’re past that, don’t you?” Nikki tore the band out of her hair and started brushing it furiously.

“I’m way past caring if you’ve got a fuck buddy. Who you bang is your business.”

Nikki winced. Lori got bitchy sometimes, but this had crossed a line somewhere and Nikki had no idea how to back this thing up.

“So what is bothering you? Spill it, because I’ve got a job to get to.”

“Yeah, now the job’s a big deal. Like I said, I got you this job, put myself on the line for you...”

Nikki stopped brushing her hair, watching Lori closely. Lori stubbed out her cigarette and sat on the bed, arms folded across her chest. Nikki recognized the look in her eyes; she was hiding something.

“Put yourself on the line how? You said Ryan was looking for someone. You never said it had anything to do with you, besides passing along his business

card to me.”

“It’s complicated. Let’s say I owed him a favor and you were the pay off.” Lori got off the bed, striding to the door.

“I don’t want to make you late...more than you already are.” She walked out and Nikki heard the apartment door slam.

Her face felt numb and her hands were shaking. Fighting with Lori was something she avoided at all costs. It left her feeling raw and unsteady, like the only post holding her up had suddenly been chopped at with an axe.

She was way past late now. The only

shoes she could find were a pair of old sneakers and she slid her feet into them, the laces untied, threatening to trip her as she hurried down the hall. She tucked the laces inside the shoes, found her purse and keys and left.

Nikki pushed open the door to Ryan's shop, out of breath from practically running all the way from Lori's apartment. It was so quiet that she was sure he was gone, but when the damned bell above the door clanged, he was out from behind the beaded curtain. Nikki slid behind the table that served as her desk, dropping her purse on the top.

"About time you get your ass in here.

Do you know what time it is?” His voice was rough and shrill and Nikki instantly went cold inside, her hands clutching her purse. He was practically vibrating, hands shaking, whether from anger or something else, Nikki didn’t know.

“I’m sorry, Ryan. I...overslept.” It sounded lame, even to her own ears. But it was the truth.

“I don’t give a shit. Invest in an alarm clock. But don’t be late again.” He was back through the curtain, the beads swinging violently, before she could answer.

Still shaking, she sat down on the

kitchen chair behind the table. She took a few deep breaths, waiting for her racing heart to calm down. He was right, she'd been late. He had every right to be upset. But the tone of his voice, his posture, everything about the few sentences he'd barked at her brought back a flood of images of dinner with her parents, the accusations, the shouts and insults.

But this wasn't dinner with her parents, this was her job and Ryan was her employer. Even if he was a druggie sleaze bag. He still held her paycheck and she still was supposed to show up on time and do her job.

She grabbed the appointment book on

the table, flipping the page over for that day. There was one name penciled in for about an hour from now. She read the name, tried to remember it so she could at least pretend to greet the guy. But she knew whoever it was probably wouldn't even give her more than a nod and a wave, before heading back through the beads to take care of whatever business they had with Ryan. She thought the tattoo business wasn't a very good cover, if Ryan wrote down people's actual names, if they were coming to buy drugs.

The appointment book was old and tattered, pages going back for almost a year. She idly flipped through the book,

stifling a yawn. She could have slept for hours more, curled against Jax, his warm solid body a safe refuge. It had been a strange night indeed, amazing sex followed by true confessions followed by more amazing sex.

And the biggest truth of all. Jax was a werewolf. In the mad dash out of his apartment and then the mad dash out of Lori's, she hadn't had time to even think about Jax. But now, with nothing ahead of her but hours sitting here, she could take her time and work through what he'd said, all that it meant for him to tell her and all that it meant to their relationship.

He'd been in the alley, he'd been the wolf she'd touched. If she hadn't seen that with her own eyes, touched his silky fur with her own hand, none of this would have been believable. As it was, she still saw it through a slightly drunken haze.

But the wolf was real, and Jax was that wolf. She thought about what it would be like watching him change. He'd said it hurt, but just for a second. Was he naked when it happened? It was hard to imagine that sexy body turning in to a four-legged wolf. The only things that seemed to be him were the jet-black fur and the silver eyes. And yeah, now that she thought about it, those were

Jax's eyes, glowing silver in the moonlight.

Nikki jumped as Ryan pushed his way back through the beads, cringing slightly as he came across the room.

“Hey, sorry for yelling, but you know, like, this is your job.” His voice had his usually mellow distant tone, the slightly stoned hippy reemerging.

“I know. I'm sorry. It won't happen again.”

“Yeah. Don't let it. Lori said you were good for this and I trust her. She and me go a long way back and I

wouldn't want anything messing up the good thing we got going here."

Nikki nodded, everything Ryan said confusing her completely. Lori had never said she knew Ryan that well or for that long. Something wasn't adding up here, but Ryan was the last person she wanted to ask about it and Lori probably wasn't ever going to speak to her again.

"Okay, far out. I got a, um...client... in a few minutes. I gotta go get some cigarettes next door. Have them wait in the back, okay?"

Nikki nodded but Ryan was already out the door. As soon as she could, she was going to start looking for something

else, some other dancer job. As much as she hated it sometimes, dancing was at least something she was good at. She didn't need to think about it, just move to the music, which she liked to do anyway. The guys, well, she'd dealt with creeps and sleazy guys longer than she could remember. And at the club, there was usually someone to look out for her, the bouncer or Mack or someone would come running if she called for help. Here, she was on her own with Ryan.

She turned back to the book, flipping through the pages, reading the names. There were some names repeated over and over, pretty much in a pattern. Made sense, if he was selling.

And then she saw Lori's name penciled in. Lori didn't have any tattoos. Nikki flipped back further. Lori's name was there, every week, for weeks.

That made it pretty clear. Ryan had been Lori's dealer for a while. Whatever was between them probably had to do with drugs or a deal gone bad. And Lori owed him something. She'd been clean for a really long time so the debt must have been pretty old.

The bell above the door jingled and Nikki quickly flipped the appointment book closed and pushed it away. There was a short guy standing in the room, looking at her through thick glasses

smearred with fingerprints. It was amazing he could even see Nikki to talk to her. But he did.

“So you’re Ryan’s new girl. He said he had a hot piece behind the desk and he sure wasn’t lying. So, you’re a stripper? Yeah, and you’re, like in the business now, with Ryan, right?” The guy moved closer to the table, leaning forward, peering at her closely.

“Yeah, real hot. I think we should have a talk soon...”

His sentence was mercifully cut short by the sound of the bell again. Nikki looked past the guy, almost relieved to

see Ryan in the doorway.

“Hey, dude. Sorry, I was getting cigs from next door. Come on back.” Ryan was in the doorway to the back room, holding the beads aside.

The short man gave Nikki one more lascivious look, licking his lips, resembling nothing more than a near-sighted lizard.

“You and me.” He pointed his index finger at his chest and then waved it between them. “Later, okay, beautiful?” And then he winked.

Nikki’s throat convulsed as she swallowed, and she made a retching

sound. She wanted another shower to wash away the lingering effects of the guy's eyes crawling over her body, leaving behind almost a palpable coating of pervert slime.

As far as Nikki was concerned, quitting time could not come soon enough.

Chapter Three

Jax was dressed, downstairs in the living room, the members of his pack assembled. He had the journal in his hands and the weapons he'd found upstairs on the coffee table. The guys were milling around and he patiently waited a moment for them to settle. But they were restless and then all pretense of patience went out the window.

“Sit down.” His voice was louder than he'd anticipated, but it was strong and deep. The pack members were instantly quiet, slipping into chairs and

onto the large couches.

“I’ve made a discovery about what’s been killing people in the city. I found my father’s...Luca’s journal...” He held up the book. “And I’m pretty sure I know who...and *what* is doing the killing.”

Finn started to speak but Jax held up his hand. “Not until I’m finished.” Finn sat back, a faint scowl in his face, but he remained quiet.

“There’s an entry here from my father, and his brother, Arden. In that entry, my father describes a fight Arden had with a lycanthrope. A fight in which he was injured. The fight...and the injury

happened just at sunrise, as Arden was changing, so he ended up with a mortal injury in human form, more or less. According to the journal, his throat was almost completely torn out, leaving a huge gapping wound and massive blood loss.”

Jax noted briefly that the group was completely silent, all eyes fixed on him. *Good. About time they paid attention to what he had to say.*

“My father tried to take care of his brother’s wound, but Arden was caught mid-change, between werewolf and mortal, and apparently the lycanthrope bite kept Arden from returning to mortal

form, or returning to a werewolf. It also kept my father from healing him in any way.

“They’d brought Arden back here to the house and sometime during the next few hours, he disappeared without a trace. They suspected he’d crawled off to die, but there was no proof. They never found a body. The only thing they did find was matted gray hair on a broken window ledge and a...” Jax opened the journal. “A ‘rotting foul stench that permeated the room and the bedding.’ Apparently they packed Arden’s belongings in a box and stuck it in the attic, where I found this.” He held the book up by the spine.

“The attic smells like the stench in the alley, like the wolf-thing we encountered. Arden’s belongings are dumped all over the floor up there.” Jax paused, meeting every eye in the room.

“I think it’s Arden. I think he’s come back from wherever he’s been for all these years, and for some reason, he’s on the attack. And I think he was here, in this house, looking for something of his.”

There was a stunned silence in the room followed by a nervous murmur. Finn cautiously raised his hand. Jax nodded at him.

“And do you think Arden is a

lycanthrope? That's what he became?"

"I don't know if he became a lycanthrope, or some aberrant cross between that and a werewolf. It's clear from the journal that he never fully changed back to human form, which may account for the deformed appearance. But it's not clear what form he was in when he disappeared. The last anyone saw of him, he was dying in an upstairs bedroom, half werewolf, half human."

Jax noticed grimaces on the face of many in the pack. To be caught mid-change was a horrible thought. To endure that kind of pain, to not be able to shift back to either human or wolf, was

almost unimaginable.

The pain alone would be enough to drive someone insane. Combined with being trapped in a body that was neither human nor werewolf while severely injured and on the verge of death and it would push someone...anyone over the edge.

“So how do we kill it...him.” The voice came from the back, from one of Bec’s reengage pack members, lurking in the shadows.

“Depends on what it is. Lycanthrope, sever the head from the spine. Werewolf, you know the drill, silver bullets or

silver knife...all of the things we avoid. I have the weapons needed.” He paused, pointing to the table in front of him.

“If it’s something else, we improvise. But most importantly, we do not take this thing on ourselves.”

“But Bec said...”

Jax held up his hand, his eyes fiercely fixed on the man who spoke. “Bec is not the leader of this pack. I am. And if you’re in my house, you’re in my pack. If you don’t agree with what I say, you’re free to leave.”

He met the eyes of each member of the pack in the room, men and women

alike. They all held his gaze for a moment before dropping their eyes in respect and obedience.

“So, this is the plan. We scout it in groups of no less than three. We do not do this alone. Head out, after dark. And those of you who are still in contact with Bec’s pack, tell them this. If they go after it alone, for the kill, they are asking for death. They need the packs with them. Plain and simple. I know what I saw and I know what that thing is capable of. This is not the time for heroics.”

“And if you do find it, find me. If it’s from my family, I want to take care of it myself.”

The group remained for a while longer, asking questions, Jax doing his best to answer them, before he broke them into smaller groups. They eventually drifted out of the living room, heading upstairs or outside. The mood was subdued and there was residual tension in the air. It was never easy hunting down one of their own, for whatever reason. And if it was family, if it was Arden, it made it extra hard for Jax.

The study had been where Jax's father had written in his journal. Jax went there, taking a seat at his father's desk. He'd avoided this room since he father had been killed. It held too many

memories and reminded him that he wasn't nearly as strong as his father had been, and that he wasn't leading this pack the way his father would have wanted him to.

But he sat at the desk and opened the journal, reading further back through the entries his father had made about him and Arden. It was many hours later when he raised his head, rubbing his eyes in exhaustion. What his father had described between him and his younger brother Arden was so similar to Jax's relationship with Bec. The constant sniping, the challenges, the one-upmanship from his younger brother, always to prove he was capable of being

alpha male, capable of leading the pack.

And then further back he found something else. A description of an incident between Arden and Luca, something that happened shortly after Luca became alpha male. Not a physical fight, but over a woman, a girl Arden brought to the pack, with the intent of making his mate. But something had gone wrong, horribly wrong, when he tried to change her and she ended up dying. Luca's entry explained that no one understood what had happened, but Arden somehow blamed Luca for her death, for not being able to save her. Her name had been Nichole, and she had been the love of Arden's life.

Jax closed the book, running a hand over his face. The journal explained a great deal. But it left almost as many questions as it answered. But if the thing killing was Arden, and he strongly suspected it was, killing him was going to be a challenge. And it was going to take more than just him and his pack. He was going to need his brother.

Explaining that to Bec though might prove to be almost as difficult as killing Arden, but Jax hoped Bec had enough sense to listen to him. He'd have to track his brother down and make him listen. Force him, if necessary. He only hoped it didn't come to that.

*

Ryan's client finally left, leering at her again on his way out. Nikki shuddered involuntarily, hoping the guy was a one-time customer and not a regular.

The rest of the day dragged on, nothing happening, no one else coming to see Ryan. It was early evening when Nikki ventured a peek behind the curtain. She expected to find Ryan...doing something. But he was lying on the tattoo table, mouth open and snoring softly,

sound asleep.

“Fuck this,” she muttered beneath her breath. He’d never know if she was gone. She got her purse and left, walking down the steps into the soft twilight.

She couldn’t remember the last time she’d walked out on a job, other than quitting the club. But that was different; Mack had pushed her into a no-win situation. She wasn’t quitting Ryan’s shop, not yet at least. But it was only a few hours till the shop closed and Ryan could make it without her.

The twilight was soft around her, the sky muted pinks and soft blues, glimpses of white clouds visible between the

buildings. It was actually a nice night for a walk and she slowed her pace, breathing in the air. Even with the gas and car fumes, cigarette smoke from the guy she passed, the garbage in cans in front of the row houses, the air smelled fresh and faintly green. It had never occurred to her to think about things like how the air smelled or the phases of the moon, at least not before she'd met Jax.

She shook her head. Maybe she was going soft, losing her edge, whatever edge she thought she had. Lori was the tough one, able to take care of herself, sometimes taking care of Nikki. Images from the alley came back suddenly, of Lori covering her with her own body,

shielding her from whatever the hell that thing was that wanted to tear them apart. Only Lori would try to mace a wolf and think she'd come out on the winning end.

The thing in the alley. She and Jax hadn't had a chance yet to talk about what that thing was. Was it a werewolf, like Jax and Bec? It didn't look like them and if that's what smelled so bad in the alley, then it didn't smell like them either. She'd have to remember to ask Jax about it, if he knew who or what it was.

She didn't see him until he was almost on top of her and she gasped, hand to her mouth, heart leaping into her

throat.

“Jax! What the hell? You scared me.”

He had her in his arms and against his chest in a heartbeat. “Sorry, Nikki. Really. I thought you saw me, but apparently you were a million miles away.” He held her a minute before kissing her, sending a little thrill down her spine.

“I was.” They’d fallen into step, Jax holding her hand as they walked. They were almost to Lori’s apartment and she pulled him across the street and up the stairs to Lori’s apartment.

“How did you know I was done with work?” They climbed the stairs and she fumbled for her keys in her purse.

“I didn’t. I was going to stop by, kiss you senseless and invite you back to my house later. But there you were, walking down the sidewalk. My lucky day.”

She turned, smiling up at him as she opened the door. “Lori’s already gone to work. We have the place to ourselves, until a hell of a lot later.”

He had her back in his arms before she finished the sentence, his lips on hers, gentle and sure and sending all kinds of tingles through her body. She

wiggled against him, winding her arms around his neck.

“You’re in a good mood,” he said. He nuzzled her neck, breathing deep, like he always did.

“Do you like my hair because it’s mine or because of some kind of wolf-fur fetish thing?”

“ ‘Wolf-fur fetish thing’?” His voice was muffled in her hair and he lifted his head. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“You’re in love with my hair, you’re always sniffing it and you told me not to cut it.” Nikki looked up at him, loving

the contours of his face, the curve of his mouth, the raven hair pulled back in a smooth ponytail.

“Oh...well, I like how it smells, I guess. And the color...” His eyes played over her hair, his fingers picking up a thick strand.

“It’s like...spiced rum and fire, but it smells like cloves and roses. Rich and mysterious and...”

“And?” He looked at her with those gray eyes and a little flame ignited low in her belly.

“And it makes me feel things I’ve

never felt before.” He held her hair to his nose and closed his eyes, inhaling slowly. “Scent is one of the most primitive senses. It’s tied up in our brains with memory and emotions. And for me, it’s one of the most sensitive. When I smell your hair, or you, it brings up a whole wave of feelings. It turns me on, makes me love you more, makes me want you. And it makes me happy.”

He slid his hands down to her hips, pulling her sharply against him, his hips rubbing against hers. “It makes me want to do things to you I’ve never done with any woman before.”

“Other women? How many other

women?" She bit her lip. Would he answer? They'd never talked about any other women in his life.

"Other women aren't important right now. You are...just you. Only you." He kissed her hard, the flame inside her growing stronger as his lips moved across hers. Screw the other women; none of that really mattered anyway. The only thing that mattered to her now was Jax, here with her.

"Show me, Jax. Show me what you want to do to me."

He held her just a moment longer and then his mouth descended on hers,

devouring her in a kiss that took her breath away. His tongue skated along her lower lip, teasing and playing with her. She opened her mouth to him, her tongue dancing with his, shivers of excitement racing through her body.

His hands were in the waist of her jeans, working the snap and zipper and before she could react, his hands were sliding against her skin, fingers against her ass, groping her curves.

Her own hands were working the snap and zipper of Jax's jeans, the bulge of his erection making things a bit difficult. She finally had enough room to slide her fingers beneath the fabric, to

find his cock, hot and hard. She stroked him slowly, holding him against her body. He moaned against her mouth, flexing his hips forward, forcing himself against her hand.

“Do that again...touch me again.” He broke away, his voice husky as he looked down at her hand on his cock. She pulled him free of his jeans, and he watched as she stroked him, her fingers wrapped around his shaft. He was breathing hard, his plundering of her ass and mouth momentarily forgotten. After a long moment he spoke.

“God, I love you, Nikki.” He took her face in his hands, his mouth on hers

again. This time he turned her, backing her against the kitchen table. Something fell, glass breaking. Nikki braced her hands on the edge of the table.

Jax had her by the hips again and lifted her with ease, setting her ass on the tiny Formica-topped table. She leaned back, hands on the table and he grabbed her jeans, pulling them down her legs.

“How much do you like this shirt?” He stood between her knees, eyes almost glowing in the darkened apartment.

She shook her head. “Not at all. I think it’s Lori’s...”

He grabbed the front of the shirt and in one motion, tore it cleanly down the front, neatly revealing her bra-covered breasts. He reached for the bra and she covered herself with her hands.

“Not the bra. That’s mine and these things aren’t cheap.”

He smiled and slid his hands behind her, deftly undoing the clasp on her bra while his mouth nibbled her earlobe. She worked her way out of the torn shirt and bra and watched as Jax looked down at her, his eyes slowing moving over her naked body.

“God, I want you...” He met her eyes

and she gasped. They glinted silver, almost molten with lust.

“I want you too...very much.” She reached for him, hand on the back of his neck, pulling him down to her. He went willingly, his mouth on hers, his hands on her hips.

Then he was pulling her to the edge of the table, fingers on her hips. She spread her legs, opening herself to him, wanting him so badly that she whimpered against his mouth in anticipation. His cock brushed against the inside of her thigh, hot and hard and silky all at the same time and it drove her wild.

Jax looked down at her, his forehead resting briefly against hers, his breath already rasping from his throat. Before he took her, he slid one hand between her legs, fingers moving slowly over her, probing her wet folds. She closed her eyes, head tipped back, the sensation of his fingers moving inside her, teasing her, driving her further over the edge. Her gasps and moans only fanned the fire he'd already lit.

She moaned as he pulled his hand away and opened her eyes. He was looking down and watched as he slid his cock into her body. He made a sound somewhere between a groan and a sigh, and she joined him, a soft cry escaping

parted lips as he slid into her.

“That feels amazing.” He looked up, meeting her eyes as she spoke.

“Yeah...you do.” He leaned forward, one hand behind her neck, and kissed her gently. He began moving slowly, gradually pulling her forward with his other hand, until her ass was resting on the edge of the table. Without breaking his rhythm, he slid an arm beneath her leg, moving her about until her calf rested on his shoulder. She brought the other leg up, tipping back on the table. Jax shifted once more, cradling her body with his arms and hands, and she relaxed, letting him hold her weight,

suspended as he thrust into her.

It all seemed so easy, so effortless. She was held secure, weightless, feeling every stroke and thrust he made, right to her core. There was nothing she needed to do but relax and let Jax take her on this ride.

And it turned from a gentle slow ride into something more, something wild and fierce and primal. Jax thrust hard into Nikki, his breath rasping from his throat, nuzzling her neck. She had her arms around his neck, her nails digging into the taut skin of his shoulders.

At that moment, Nikki wished she could see them, watch what they looked

like moving together. To see Jax as he thrust into her, see how his thighs flexed and the muscles bunched, carrying his weight and hers, what his shoulders looked like with her legs draped over them. She'd never been into those guys who filmed themselves having sex, but right now, she had the fleeting desire to have a camera running somewhere.

Then everything was driven from her mind as her body took over, the building heat inside her spilling over into a climax that took her breath away. She beat against his back, bit his shoulder, cried out and thrashed beneath him. But he held her tight, contained the raging fire that threatened to consume her.

And then he joined her, his body on overdrive, slamming into her over and over, filling her with a heat that matched hers but was so different. Everything was rushing noise and things falling to the floor, the table banging against the wall. She was vaguely aware of an answering knock behind her, dimly realized it was the neighbors, but didn't even care.

Jax was dripping sweat, his head still on her shoulder, face against her neck. He was breathing hard, his breath stirring the hair by her ear. She held him against her body, feeling his heart beating against her chest, and she turned her head, her breath mixing with his, her

mouth on his.

He finally, gradually, pulled away from her, slowly relaxing. One leg was released and she stretched, then the other, the tension of being held letting go in a delicious flow of loose limbs. She would have slid from the table if he hadn't had one arm still wrapped around her waist.

"You okay?" His voice was honey, and dark spiced rum, murmured in her ear. She breathed a deep sigh that started from somewhere around her toes.

"Yeah. More than okay. Beyond okay." She looked at him, his heavy-

lidded eyes, still hot, still carrying a heavy load of passion.

“Good.” That one word hit her deep, a small wave of happiness expanding outward from her center.

“Bed?” He pulled her upright and she realized they were still in the kitchen in Lori’s apartment, on the table. She’d had sex on uncomfortable surfaces, tables among them, but this had been so all consuming she’d lost track of where they were.

“Yeah. Until Lori comes home. Or we could go back to your place.”

“I think I’d like to ravish you in my own bed, at least one more time tonight. And then again tomorrow. As much as it might be boring to always be there, at least I know no one will wake us up, wanting to kick us out of their bed.”

“But no sleeping late, no more late to work, okay?” Nikki was searching under the table for her clothes, belatedly remembering there was no underwear involved this time.

“Look, I need some other clothes... like a shirt. I’ll be right back. Make yourself at home for a minute.” She left Jax in the kitchen and headed down the hall to the bedroom. She unearthed a t-

shirt of her own and grabbed a couple clean pairs of panties and headed back to the living room.

She jammed the panties into her purse. “Okay. If you’re ready, we can call a cab, since I know you didn’t drive here.”

“Already done. They should be here in a minute.” Jax looked around the apartment.

“Are you planning to stay here? Or are you going back to your apartment?”

Nikki shrugged. “I don’t know. After what happened, with Mr. Feldman, I’m not really interested in being by myself

yet. This..." She waved her hand around the tiny cluttered apartment. "It's not where I want to be forever, but for now, it's okay." She took a deep breath, meeting his eyes.

"I don't want to be alone."

Jax was looking at her and she wasn't sure exactly what his expression said. But then the look passed and he was steering her toward the door.

"But you did remind me. There's some stuff at my apartment I want. But I don't want to go alone. Would you come with me?"

“Sure, yeah. We can go there now, if you want.”

She nodded, breathing a sigh of relief. “Yeah. I would. Thanks. It’s just...too creepy to think about Mr. Feldman, and my apartment...and all of it.”

A blaring car horn interrupted Nikki. Jax had his hand on her back and he guided her out the door. She locked it behind them and they headed out to the street.

“Jax, I have a question.”

“Anything. Just ask.” He opened the

cab door, waiting for her to get in. She hesitated on the sidewalk, looking up at him.

“That thing...in the alley. Do you have any idea what it was?”

Jax stopped, looking down at her. “I think I do, but that’s a conversation for another time. We’ll talk about it later.”

She climbed into the cab, wondering exactly what he would possibly tell her.

Chapter Four

The cab ride to Nikki's was brief. Jax's body still tingled from being with Nikki, from taking her there on the kitchen table. She was so incredible, so insanely arousing. No other woman had ever made him feel this way. It was clear to him, so very clear, that she was the right woman for him, as a mate and as the partner he wanted for the rest of his life.

Besides the killer sex, she touched a part of him no one else had, opened him up, made him care, made him want to

protect and cherish her. He took her hand in the cab, almost overwhelmed by the love he felt for her. She held his hand, trusting and honest. His throat tightened for a moment, the sting of tears in his eyes. But he brushed them away. This wasn't the time or place for this; there would be plenty of time to tell her how he felt, to show her how much he loved her.

He had the cab wait. As they climbed the steps to Nikki's apartment, Jax could feel her fear rising the closer they got to her door. There was a bright white envelope taped to the faded and scarred wood and Jax ripped it off, stuffing it into his pocket while Nikki fumbled with

the lock. When she dropped the keys, he bent over and picked them up, unlocking the door for her.

“Still locked. Like you left it.” Jax turned the doorknob, Nikki standing behind him. He pushed the door and it swung open, thudding against the interior wall.

The faded miasma of the wolf-thing washed over him. Even though it wasn't exactly a fresh scent, the hackles still rose on the back of his neck, the hairs on his arms bristling.

“Nikki, let me go in first.”

“Gladly. I’ll let you get my stuff, too, if you want.”

Jax took a few cautious steps into the apartment. He ran his hand along the wall, flicking on the overhead light. The apartment was small, which hopefully meant nothing very large would find a hiding place.

“What do you need? Where would it be?”

“Bedroom, maybe some stuff from the bathroom.” She stepped out from behind him, walking first to the kitchen. She opened the refrigerator, leaned forward, then took a step back, grimacing, before

slamming the door.

“Nothing here, that’s for sure. It’s all rotten.” She scanned a small shelf above the table, picking up a small round object that she stuck in her purse.

“Bedroom next?” Jax tilted his head and she nodded. He walked down the short hall, flipping the light on in that room, stopping in the doorway, his arm barring her from coming in.

“It looks like someone trashed this room, Nikki. You should wait...” But she pushed past him.

“No, that’s how I left it.” She stood in

the center of the tiny room, looking at the chaos around them. Sheets were torn off the bed, a pillow was on the floor and clothes dragged across the carpet.

“Oh...okay.” He caught the look she gave him and he shrugged. “It’s kind of hard to tell.”

“I wasn’t expecting company the last time I was here and I made it worse when I came back.” She had her hand on the closet door, opening it, and had turned to look at Jax as she spoke.

“There are just a few things...” Suddenly she was stumbling back from the closet, her face ashen. The stench hit

him immediately, sickly and pungent, and very fresh.

“Nikki, back up. Now.”

He stepped forward quickly, colliding briefly with Nikki as she backed away from the closet. He took her by the shoulders, turning her away and pushing her toward the door.

The closet was empty. He could see that immediately. It was far too small to hide anything. But what he saw on the floor sent a shiver down his spine. Jax could only call it a nest. Several articles of Nikki’s clothing had been gathered into a rough circle, packed down and obviously slept on.

Jax knelt, feeling the clothes. They were cold, so at least whatever had been living here...and Jax was pretty sure he knew what that was...was no longer around. He ruffled through the clothes and then picked up something that fell from the tattered fabric.

He turned, holding it out to Nikki. She was sitting on the bed, chewing on a thumbnail. She pulled back, cringing, visibly disturbed by what he held.

“What the hell is that?”

“It’s matted fur...matted with blood, by the looks and...” Jax held it to his nose, inhaling. “And the smell. Not fresh

though...old blood.”

“It looks like that...thing from the alley. Is it? Was that thing living in my closet?” Her eyes went wide and if anything, her face grew paler. Jax frowned.

“Yeah. I think it is...was...I don’t know for how long. But I’d say it’s been here long enough to feel at home.”

“But how...the door’s been locked... oh, shit.”

Before he could answer, she slipped off the bed, heading for the bathroom. He heard another muffled “oh, shit” and he

crossed the room in just a few long strides, almost colliding with her as she came back out of the bathroom.

“The window to the fire escape’s in there...and the window’s broken. There’s more of...that...” She pointed to the stringy mass of fur in his hand. “...on the broken glass. And some blood.”

She shivered and pushed past him to her bedroom. “I don’t think there’s anything I want from the closet anymore...just...”

Jax watched as she pulled the drawer from the bedside table, dumping it out on the bed, adding to the chaos. She rummaged through papers, finally

coming up with an envelope that she shoved into her purse.

“That’s it. No clothes, no way. I can buy what I need...I’d rather spend the money than try to deal with that.” She nodded to the closet floor. “Nothing in there interests me in the least now that something’s been living in it.” Her face contorted again in a grimace.

“Okay. Here. This was from the front door.” He handed her the envelope. She looked at the outside, pulled out a sheaf of papers and snorted.

“I’m being evicted. For not paying the rent and because the neighbors are

complaining of the smell.” She read through a few more pages and then sighed, stuffing them all into her purse.

“I guess that’s it then. No use hanging around, in case that thing decides to come back. And if it’s decided to live here, it can pay the rent.” Nikki grabbed her purse and walked past Jax into the hallway. He followed her out into the living room and locked the door, giving her back her keys.

“You’re going to stay at Lori’s then?”

They were on the sidewalk before she answered. “I don’t know. We...had a fight. A bad one. There’s something

going on between her and Ryan, and I think I got put in the middle of it.” She shrugged. He opened the door of the cab and she climbed inside.

“I guess as long as we don’t see each other, get in each other’s hair, we’ll be fine. And as long as I can pay my way.”

He glanced at her, the frown line between her eyes deepening. “Is that a problem?”

“Ryan’s not so keen on paying, from what I can tell. He said I’d get paid at the end of every day, but he’s blown me off now every day.”

She took his hand. “And no, before

you say it, I can handle it...and him.”

It was dark now and he couldn't see her face but he sensed a smile lurking behind her words.

“I'm that predictable?” He shook his head.

“Yeah, when it comes to things like this, with me, you are. You'd be all up in his face, demanding my pay. But that's not your fight, Jax. It's mine to deal with. I'll take care of it. And no...you can't lend me any money either.”

He laughed. “Fine. You have it your way. But I'm here if you need me.”

The house was bright with lights as the cab pulled up. Nikki got out as Jax paid the driver. She was staring at the house when he climbed out.

“Are you having a party or something?” Her voice held an edge of anxiety and he realized she’d never really met any of his pack, besides Finn and his mate, and the unfortunate incident with Bec barging into his room.

“No. This is pretty normal. You’ve always been here when everyone is out or asleep, I guess. Pretty much like this most nights. It is a big house, with a lot of guys who live here. And their mates.”

She hesitated on steps and he put his hand on the small of her back. “It’s okay. No one bites. At least not tonight.”

He heard her nervous laugh. “I get it. Werewolf humor. Funny.”

They walked through the front hall to the kitchen. “You hungry? I can fix you a sandwich or something.”

“Yeah, just a little something. That... thing in my closet kind of ruined my appetite.”

Nikki sat at the table while Jax rummaged in the refrigerator. He pulled out roast beef, a Vidalia onion and held up a jar of horseradish. She nodded, and

he added a dark loaf of pumpernickel bread to the items on the counter.

“So, the thing in my closet. You think it’s the same from the alley?”

Jax spread a layer of horseradish on the bread, adding thin-cut beef on top. He picked up a knife, thinly slicing the onion.

“Yeah. I do.” He added the onion and another layer of beef. He set the finished sandwich in front of Nikki. “Beer?” He held the refrigerator door open, letting her look inside.

“Anything but that stuff I had last

time. Little too thick for my tastes. I like to be able to see through my beer.”

Jax smiled, grabbing a bottle and opening it for her. “Guinness isn’t for everyone. You’ll like this better.”

He sat down across from her, watching as she bit into her sandwich and then laughing as her tears sprang to her eyes.

“Holy shit, Jax. What the hell is in this?” She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

“Horseradish...really good horseradish. Do you like it?” He bit into his sandwich, the sharp sting making his

own eyes water.

“Yeah. I think. When I recover, I’ll let you know.” She took a long swallow of beer, setting the bottle back on the table with a thud.

“What?” She caught his look and they laughed.

“I like a girl who enjoys her food. A two-fisted eater.” He took a swallow of his beer, the cool liquid sliding down his throat.

They ate for a minute before Nikki broke the silence. “So...the thing. What is it?”

“I think it’s a lycanthrope.” He caught Nikki’s bemused look and went on. “Not a werewolf, although at first glance, I guess we look the same.”

“But it was different...bigger, and it smelled.” She pushed her empty plate away.

“There’s something wrong with it... and I think I know why. I found a journal my father kept, when he was alpha male. There’s an entry about his brother, Arden, who was bitten by a lycanthrope. Apparently the bit happened just as Arden was changing back to human form. Something happened, went wrong, and he wasn’t able to change back.”

Nikki grimaced. “Oh, my god. That’s horrible. What happened to him?” She took a swallow of beer.

“They brought him here and my father tried to do something to help, but Arden was stuck between wolf and human, and nothing seemed to work. Near as I can tell, being between left him weak, with almost no regenerative powers. At the moment we change, we are completely vulnerable. It’s usually only for a second. But Arden was stuck in that state.”

Nikki was silent, watching him with large eyes. “And then...he didn’t die?”

Jax shook his head. “No. They were

going to watch him, try to figure some way of helping him, but he disappeared. Climbed through a window. They found hair and blood on a broken glass.”

“Like at my apartment?”

“Yeah. Like that.”

Nikki’s eyes went wide. “But wait. How can it be a wolf when there’s no full moon? That doesn’t make sense.”

Jax nodded. “Lycanthropes can change at will. They’re not bound by the cycles of the moon. If he’s somehow become lycanthropic, he must have the ability to change at will. Or he’s not able to change at all and is always in some

kind of wolf form.”

Nikki shuddered and Jax wished there was some other way she could learn all this, without having it dumped on her, especially so soon after learning what Jax was. He watched her closely, still expecting her to throw up her hands and bolt from the room. He didn't know many humans who would be able to hear all this and not think he was crazy...or that they were losing their grip on their own sanity.

“But why is it at my place? What's the attraction?” The anxiety in her voice was palpable and he wished there was some other answer he could give her.

Jax was silent, trying to find the easiest way to answer Nikki's question. But there was only one he had at the moment, a hunch, based on something he'd read in the journal. It was an idea that chilled him to the bone, if he was right. It put her dead center in this whole thing.

"I think he's taking revenge for something that happened between him and my father, a long time ago."

"Revenge? For what?" She picked at a piece of bread crust left on her plate, fingers nervously shredding the dark brown bread into crumbs.

"For a girl...for something that

happened to Arden's mate, or the woman he'd chosen to be his mate."

"But why me? I don't have anything to do with him, or the pack. And I'm not your mate, or his...I'm not anyone's mate."

"No. We know that. But, right now, he doesn't. You're here, you're seen with me, most of the time. I think he assumes you're my mate. That you're the alpha female of what was his pack."

"So he wants to kill me because he's taking revenge? I'm confused." She pushed the plate away.

Jax shrugged. “I’m not sure if he’s out to kill you or if he’s fixated on you. Or, using you to lure us out in the open, to kill us.”

Both ideas sent a fresh wave of anxiety through Jax. In either case, Nikki was in serious danger. Jax knew he could take care of himself.

“What’s the story with the girl though, the potential mate? What happened to her?” Nikki’s body was a study in tension. She’d pulled her knees up, arms around her legs. In classic prey mode, she’d unconsciously made herself as small of a target as possible. And she was sitting Jax’s kitchen, where she

should have felt the safest.

“Arden had a girl he wanted as his mate, a human. Somehow there was a fight between rival packs, my father and Arden included, and she was killed, before she could be blooded into the pack. According to the journal, Arden believed my father killed her. But my father wrote that it was an accident, she was killed by the rival pack.”

“What does blooded mean?” The beer was now forgotten as well, her eyes locked on Jax.

“If a werewolf chooses a mate that’s human, and that person wants to become

a werewolf, they need to be blooded, or changed. It involved being bitten, usually when we're in werewolf form. But I've heard it's possible to turn someone by biting them while the wolf is in human form."

"So werewolves were human once?"

Jax shook his head "No. Well, probably back at the beginning. But now, if two wolves mate, the child will be a werewolf. If one parent is a wolf, one human, there's a fifty-fifty chance the child will be a werewolf."

Noise at the kitchen door made Jax look up. Finn walked into the kitchen with Angela. "Finn, you remember

Nikki. Nikki, this is Finn, from this morning, and Angela, his mate. Things were a bit rushed earlier.”

Nikki nodded to them and Finn grabbed two bottles of beer from the refrigerator. Finn was reserved, not his usual talkative self, his eyes guarded.

“Something going on, Finn? Anything new happening?”

Finn glanced at Nikki and then back to Jax. Angela hung back, not speaking.

“Nikki knows, Finn. About us, about everything. It’s okay. She’s the one that thing tried to attack, in the alley. We just came from her old apartment. Whatever

it is has been living there.”

Finn’s eyes went wide. “No shit. Fuck. Oh, sorry.” He tipped his beer in Nikki’s direction. She smiled, shaking her head.

“It’s okay.” Nikki waved her hand. “I’ve heard worse...probably said worse.”

Finn pulled out a chair and sat down. Angela stood behind him, hands on his shoulders. Jax glanced at Nikki, caught the look on her face. She was watching Angela and Finn, studying every movement between them. She must be wondering what it was like, being the mate to a werewolf. It might be good for

her to talk to Angela sometime. But Finn interrupted his thoughts.

“So does this mean we can start the hunt for it there? At the apartment?”

“Probably. It seems the most logical place, the last known bolt hole its had. It’s been coming up the fire escape at the back, through a broken window. It sleeps in the closet in the bedroom. We might have spooked it by coming back, but maybe not.”

“Does Bec know?”

“No. We just got back from there. I still haven’t tracked him down.”

“Got it. So we hold off...don’t go hunting for it tonight?” Finn took a swallow of beer. Angela’s grip had tightened on Finn’s shoulder and he slid one hand up, covering hers.

“No, not yet. You can scout if you’d planned to, but no hunting it to ground. But we will need to move soon. The apartment’s not going to be vacant much longer. If a mortal stumbles on that thing while it’s there, it could be a disaster.”

Finn rose, sliding an arm around Angela’s waist. “Okay. Let me know when you want us ready. And I’ll send the word out through the ranks. And to let Bec know...” The unspoken question

hung in the air.

“Yeah. Bec. He’s my responsibility. I’ll find him.”

Finn and Angela left the room, Nikki’s eyes following them, watching as Finn jostled Angela through the doorway, pulling her against him. Her clear laugh floated back to them in the kitchen before they disappeared into the living room.

Nikki stifled a yawn behind her hand. “You must be exhausted. This has been rough day for you, following a pretty rough night last night.”

“It’s...a lot to take in. You’re a

werewolf, there's a real life monster living in my closet that may want me dead. I'm being evicted and my best friend is angry at me. Oh, and my boss won't pay me. Yeah, rough pretty much describes my life right now." She gave him a rueful smile. "But I'll survive because I have you."

"You sure do." Jax chuckled. "You want to head upstairs?" He held out his hand. "I promise, no more secrets."

She took his hand and stood, letting him pull her off the chair. "Yeah, you've already told me you're the big bad wolf. I'm not sure there's much else you could tell me that would shock me now."

He pulled her against him, kissing her forehead. She laid her head on his chest and they stood for a minute, the sounds of the house surrounding them.

She drew a deep sigh, pulling away to look up at him, still in the circle of his arms. “Bed sounds like a good place to be.”

He led her quietly up the carpeted stairs and down the hall to his room, the sounds of the house fading away as he closed the door. Nikki sat on his bed, kicking off her shoes.

“So, how many people actually live here?”

Jax pulled out the desk chair, toeing off his boots. “It’s usually between ten and fifteen guys and mates, give or take. With Bec...” Jax ran a hand over his face. “It’s been less, since Bec left. He took some members with him, but some have come back.”

Nikki curled up against the headboard and patted the bed beside her. “Come sit.”

He rose, climbing up on the bed and he arranged the pillows behind them and then settled down next to her, arm around her shoulders.

“This thing with Bec, it’s hard for you, isn’t it. Lori’s almost like a sister to

me and when we fight, it tears me up inside. Must be worse when it's family."

"It is. He's...I think he's having a hard time with me being alpha male and him still being my little brother. He wants me to be both, I guess." Jax leaned his head against the wall, absently rubbing Nikki's arm.

"Does he want you to treat him differently? Give him favors or cut him some slack because you're in charge?"

Jax frowned at the ceiling. "I don't think so. I just can't act like I did before, can't go off half-cocked. With this Arden thing, we'd have been in it together,

shoulder to shoulder, doing what our father said but competing to see who'd do it better, like a game. But with me giving the orders...it's not so easy for him to accept, I guess. He can't do better than me...because I'm not playing the game anymore.”

Nikki was quiet for a minute. She reached for his hand, winding her fingers through his. “Jax, you’ve never told me how your father died.”

Jax drew a deep breath. It still hurt to think about it and the mere thought of discussing it had his stomach in knots. But this was Nikki, and she'd already shared so much of her life with him. He

owed it to her to at least try.

“They were...my parents were... killed by a rival pack. It was a long time ago...although it seems like it just happened. The pack, everyone except Bec, seems to have adjusted. But he took it the hardest.”

“How was it for you?” She squeezed his hand and he rubbed his fingers across the back of her hand.

“Hard. Very hard. I was close to my father...and mother. Everyone knew I’d be alpha one day, but it happened so fast, so abruptly...and so brutally...no one was prepared.”

“How many rival packs are there?”
The shock in her voice was evident. “Up till just yesterday...was it yesterday? I had no idea your kind even existed and now there’s rival packs.”

“There aren’t that many, maybe only a handful now...there were more, but over the years we’ve stopped being rivals and banded together...worked together. It was one of the things my father had really started, cooperation between rivals and less fighting. There aren’t as many of us as there used to be and fighting just made it worse.”

“So where are all the other packs?”

“Scattered around. Mostly out here, in the suburbs...what used to be considered outside of the city. There are a few in the inner city areas, our urban cousins. Some further out, in the countryside.”

“And you’re alpha because you’re the oldest?”

Jax nodded. “It’s passed down, through the family. Bec could challenge me, if he really wanted. But he doesn’t really want that and I don’t...the pack wouldn’t either. Right now, it would only divide the pack. Bec left, not long ago, with a few guys, to start his own pack. But most of them have returned. I

get that he wants to be alpha male, but he's not ready. Someday, maybe, but not right now."

Nikki lifted her head, looking up at Jax. Her eyes were soft in the dim light. "You're under a whole lot of stress here. Why add me to the mix? Why now? I can't be the easiest thing in the world to add to your life."

Jax ran his fingers beneath her chin, tilting her face to his. "You're the only thing keeping me sane these days, Nikki. Really. Without you, here...I'm not sure I'd be able to hold it together."

He kissed her softly and then she snuggled back against him, her head in

that now-familiar spot on his shoulder. It felt good having her there, her body warm against his, everything else forgotten for the moment, in the bubble of contentment that surrounded them.

“Why me? And why so quickly, without knowing me at all. You’re not a secret romantic under all that wolf fur, believing in love at first sight? Are you?” He heard the smile in her voice.

“I trust my gut. If you call that love at first sight, I guess that’s what it was. When I saw you for the first time at the club, it was like something hit me full force, knocked the wind right out of me. No other woman has ever done that.”

“There’s been other women?” She was teasing him, even though the question was serious.

“You asked me that before. Yeah, a few, over the years. I’m a werewolf, not a hermit. I’m just like any other guy, you know. I like women, like being with them. But none were serious, at least the ones before my father...before I became alpha male.”

“But it’s different now?” In any other woman, needing this much reassurance would have come across as needy, but with Nikki, knowing where she’d come from, he didn’t mind.

“The stakes are a little higher, I guess. An alpha needs a mate, an alpha female. So, I’ve looked at women a little differently, a little more long-term, I guess.”

Nikki went still in his arms, a not-so-subtle tension creeping into her body. He could almost read her mind. He’d never mentioned wanting anything serious with her. He held his breath, waiting. It might have been too much, too soon, spooking her. But the words were already out of his mouth and there was no taking them back.

“So, you’re saying I’m long-term for you? Like how long-term?” Her voice

was low, her words measured, as if she were testing each one as she said them.

“For as long as you’ll have me, Nikki.”

“You’re putting an awful lot of trust in someone you basically just met, you know. I could be after you just for your money.”

Jax had no choice but to laugh. “You can have it all, Nikki, if it makes you happy. But I don’t have that much.”

“Seriously though. You’d want to spend...the rest of your life with me?”
The disbelief in her voice was palpable,

and his heart clenched.

“Yes, I would.”

He could feel her heart beating against him, faster than it had been. He waited, his own heart skipping a beat, almost holding his breath. And then he couldn't wait any longer.

“Would you, Nikki? Would you spend the rest of your life with me?”

“As your mate?” Her voice was barely audible in the room.

“Yes. As my mate.” Jax closed his eyes, trying to get his breathing under control. It was suddenly shallow and

fast, and he was lightheaded.

Nikki moved in his arms and he opened his eyes, half expecting her to be sliding off the bed and out of the room. She shifted around until she was kneeling beside him, at eye level.

“You look like I feel.” She was smiling. That was a good thing. And she wasn’t climbing off the bed, yet.

“How do you feel?” His throat was suddenly dry and the words came out sounding rough.

“A little sick to my stomach, a little dizzy.” Her smile grew. “And really

happy.”

He cleared his throat. “Happy makes you dizzy?”

“Hyperventilating makes me dizzy and the man who loves me asking me to be his mate makes me hyperventilate. So, yeah, I guess happy equals dizzy.”

“So is the answer yes?”

“Yes. The answer is yes.”

She held his gaze for a moment longer and then leaned toward him, lips brushing against his, softly at first and then with a force that surprised him.

He sat forward, hands moving up to her shoulders, guiding her down onto the bed. He broke away from their kiss, looking down at her.

“I love you, Nikki. I always will.”

She held his face in her hands, meeting his gaze. “And I love you, Jax. For as long as I can, I will. And I’ll be your mate.”

He’d just claimed her mouth again, his tongue sliding along her lower lip, when she made a startled noise and pushed him away from her.

“What is it? Is something wrong?”

She was looking up at him, a slightly panicked look in her eyes. “When you say mate, exactly what do you mean? In what form?”

Jax propped himself on his elbow next to Nikki, resting his hand on her stomach. “Either. Whatever you want. I’m not asking you to become like me... right now.”

“But you’d want me to, at some point?” A faint frown line appeared between her eyes.

“If you want. I’d like it if you would...but I can’t force you.”

“But I’d have to be like you to be an alpha female, right?”

Jax rolled onto his back, hands behind his head. Nikki sat up, her hand on his chest, watching his face.

“Yes, to lead a pack, you’d have to be like me, a werewolf. And to have children who would be like me, yes, you’d have to be a werewolf.”

“Oh.” The frown line deepened.

“You don’t have to decide tonight. I’m not going to pressure you to change. We have pack members who have human mates. Finn, for one. Angela isn’t a

werewolf. She's a human, like you. She's accepted who and what Finn is and isn't ready to change. I think she will, when they're ready to have a family. But they're not quite ready for that yet."

"And you want kids? Little cubs? Like you?" The frown had left Nikki's face, but she still wasn't smiling.

"Yes, I would. I'd like a son, someone who'd be alpha male someday." Jax sat up, meeting Nikki's gaze, hand to her cheek. "But right now, I want you. I want to make love to you and hopefully, make you happy."

“You do make me happy. And really, really confused.” She laughed, lying back on the bed. “There’s so much to think about, to decide.”

Jax leaned over, kissing her softly. “There’s nothing to decide tonight. Just having you here right now is all I want.”

And Jax did his best to make Nikki happy, taking his time with everything he did, every touch, every kiss. He’d lost track of time, the room growing darker as he made love to her. She finally cried out, twisting beneath him, her body finding release, as he took his own.

She’d fallen asleep soon after that, tucked against him, her soft breathing

soothing Jax, lulling him into his own deep sleep.

A soft knock woke Jax. He slid out of bed, tugging on jeans and padding silently across the floor, quietly opening the door. Finn was in the hall, worry creasing his face, tension in his stocky frame.

“Bec was out with a scouting party tonight and someone came back to say he’s found the thing. Wants to kill it. Thought you should know.”

“Thanks. I’ll be down in a minute.” He closed the door quietly. When he turned, Nikki was sitting up in bed in a

pool of yellow light from the bedside lamp.

“Something with Bec? I heard his name.”

“Yeah.” Jax pulled a t-shirt over his head. “He found the wolf-thing and is going to try to take it on single-handed. I should go find him, at least have his back if he’s going to go through with this.”

He sat on the edge of the bed, pulling on his boots. “You’ll be fine here, right? Go back to sleep. I should be back before sunrise. Stay. Please.”

Nikki nodded. “I’ll be here when you

get back.” He leaned toward her, kissing her softly. Then he left the room.

Chapter Five

She turned off the bedside light, listening to his footsteps receding down the hall. It was very late and the house was quiet, but there was movement, as if the house was restless and unable to go back to sleep.

The pillow next to her smelled like Jax and she took it, switching it with the one she'd been sleeping on. His rich masculine scent rose up and she inhaled deeply. What would it be like, living here, being his mate?

Would she want to be a werewolf, like Jax? She knew what he looked like, but what would it feel like to actually be a wolf, to lose control of yourself for that one night each month. Would it hurt? Or would it be somehow liberating?

She loved him, knew that in her very bones, in her heart. It was scary at first, to hear him say the words, to ask her to be his. He'd been just as scared, almost. His heart had been racing, his breathing just as fast as hers. He must have thought she'd say no or run screaming from his room.

But it was much less of a shock than learning he was a werewolf in the first

place. That had been pretty overwhelming. So much that she'd only wanted him then, hard and fast, the almost-pain of rough sex wiping out her thoughts.

It hadn't really taken away all her thoughts, just distracted her for a little while. Enough to get her bearings, get her head on straight.

Nikki yawned, pulling the blankets over her shoulder. Ironically, Jax was probably the most normal guy she'd known in a long time. He loved her and she loved him. And that seemed like such a simple thing, now that she'd finally given in to it. Being in love didn't

seem all that complicated, once she'd gotten past letting him into her heart.

*

Jax had come back to the house with Finn and the others, just before dawn, leaving Bec angry with him for tracking him down...*checking up on him*, had been Bec's exact words.

He'd found his brother at Nikki's old apartment, ghosting his way up the fire escape, just on the verge of climbing in through the broken window. He'd tried to stop Bec, but then followed him and the other pack members as they

cautiously advanced through the tiny bathroom, into the bedroom. But the closet was empty, the clothing still scattered on the floor where Jax had left it. Nothing else had been disturbed and the scent was fading, nothing fresh.

They'd managed to finally agree, after a terse exchange of words, not to do anything else that night. And Bec reluctantly agreed to meet at the house later to at least talk about some kind of strategy, some kind of plan, so they could work together rather than be at each other's throats.

Nikki was still sleeping when he entered his room. The sun was just

lightening the sky, turning the gray to a dirty pink, the promise of rain heavy on the air. He'd stripped off his clothes and climbed in beside her, nuzzling her neck. She'd immediately rolled into his arms, drowsy and waking slowly.

But he'd kissed her softly, gently, at first, her body sensuous and languid beneath his, both of them moving to a rhythm that carried them along slowly, every move and every thrust deliberate and exquisitely erotic. Jax lost track of time, of everything around him except the rising heat in his body and Nikki's warmth surrounding him.

She'd come beneath him, arching up

in silent ecstasy, her body tense and taut for one prolonged moment before he felt a rush of heat envelope him and then he joined her, holding himself buried inside her, wave after wave of pleasure coursing through him as he came. He finally exhaled against her, the last shudders of his orgasm working their way through his body as he held her tight against him.

He rolled onto his side, a slight space between them, his hand resting lightly on the full curve of her hip. Her skin was warm satin beneath his fingers and he thought again about what she'd be like as a wolf, all her curves transformed into a sleek and powerful lupine form.

If she decided that's what she wanted to do. But right now, that wasn't a conversation he wanted to have with her. It was too soon, all too new for her. He just wanted to lie here, sated and relaxed, breathing in the rich musk of their lovemaking and watch Nikki drift off to sleep.

He made sure he didn't fall asleep again and he woke her gently, with soft words and softer kisses. She showered and dressed and left, not wanting a repeat of the previous morning. He kissed her, standing on the front porch, lips lingering on hers and then she was gone. So much had happened to them in such a short time and Jax was still

amazed by all of it, and by Nikki.

*

Nikki was early, through the door to the shop a good fifteen minutes before she needed to be there. No reason to give Ryan the chance to say anything to her today. She was sitting at the table, the appointment book turned to the current day, when he came through the door from the back.

“Hey, Nikki. Good to see you here, on time and all pretty and stuff. Like, you’re

taking what I said yesterday seriously. I like that.” He leaned against the table and a wave of unwashed body smell stung her eyes. He was wearing the same clothes he’d had on yesterday and she wondered if he’d just woken up, when he heard her come in.

She blinked, trying hard to stifle a gasp and started breathing through her mouth. She looked up at him caught the dilated pupils, the twitchy behavior and knew he was probably high. She didn’t know him well enough to know how he was going to act and she tensed, expecting the worst.

“Yeah, so...you know...I want to talk

about your job here.” Ryan pulled a folding chair up to the table, resting his elbows on the top, a frown line appearing between his eyes.

“Like I said, Ryan. I’m sorry...”

“Yeah, you said.” He cut her off and she went completely still, watching him closely.

“So, like, I owe you money. I know I told you I’d pay you at the end of every day, so we’re all square and even. But, business has been slow. You know how it is.” He spread his hands, with the dirty bitten nails, on the table.

“Yeah, I get that. You can owe me until...” Nikki sat back in her chair, arms folded across her chest. Something about Ryan changed. He was suddenly all kinds of friendly, an oily smile spreading across his face, and it made the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

“Well, I got an idea. If you want...” Ryan stood, moving around behind the table. He perched on the edge, so close Nikki could smell unwashed clothes and unwashed hair. She tried hard to suppress a grimace, only partially successful.

“We can take it out in trade.” He reached out, his fingers tracing along her

cheek.

“Trade? How? I don’t want a tattoo.” But she knew what he meant...what he wanted. It was as plain as the bulge forming at the apex of Ryan’s thighs where he thought this was going. She shook her head.

Ryan winked, distorting his face for a second. “Trade what you got for what I owe you. Do each other a favor.”

Ryan slid closer on the table, pinning her in the corner behind the table. “Should be no big deal, for someone like you.” His voice was low and she imagined he thought it sounded seductive. But Nikki’s muscles tightened

and she clenched her jaw so tightly she thought her teeth would crack.

“ ‘Someone like me’? What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

His laugh sent a wave of disgust through her, made her skin crawl. “You’re a stripper, Nikki. A cheap one, at that. You all put out...all the time. You dance for men, for money. What the hell do you think I mean?”

“I think you got it wrong, Ryan. I don’t know what Lori told you, or what you think I am, but I don’t put out for money. Never have.”

“You expect me to believe that?” He reached out, grabbing for her breast. She slapped at his hand and then slapped him hard across the face. He flinched, his head jerking to the side, but his hand was still on her breast, fingers digging into her flesh.

“You bitch.” He grabbed her by the shoulders, pulling her up out of the chair. “You don’t know what the hell you’re messing with.”

Spittle flew from his mouth, his face contorted into a grimace of fury. Nikki twisted in his hands, but they were like steel, digging in to her shoulders.

“You’re playing with fire. I could tear you limb from limb if I wanted, tear your throat out. Want to see?”

He opened his mouth and Nikki watched in horror, her heartbeat thudding in her ears, as his teeth extended into fangs. There was sudden pain where he held her and she looked down at his hands, watched as his bitten nails suddenly grew into talons. The scream building in her throat was cut off as he grabbed her by the neck, pinning her against the wall, lifting her easily until her feet no longer touched the floor.

“Do you know what I am, Nikki?”
His voice was a deep growl, flecks of

spit hitting her cheek. “Do know what I could do to you?”

She struggled weakly against his grip. Then suddenly he let go and she slumped into the chair, breath rasping from her throat. Ryan stood in front of her, blocking her exit. Scattered mats of fur had appeared on his arms and as she watched, they slowly receded. She dragged her eyes up to his face, expecting to see the face of a wolf, but he stood with his eyes closed, jaw clenched, breathing deeply.

He opened his eyes, looking down at her. “You almost made me give it all away, bitch. And now you know too

much, know what I am.”

She shook her head. “No, I mean...I won’t tell. You’re...it’s not something you can control. It’s okay...I mean...I won’t tell.” The words spilled out of her and she heard herself talking nonsense, knew she was rambling. But whatever he was, Ryan was back under control, more or less.

And that didn’t make sense. It wasn’t the full moon; they’d just had one and Jax had changed. He’d told her werewolves were bound by the cycles of the moon. So what the hell was Ryan, if he could change...and then stop and change back?

“You’re not surprised by this...you know something, don’t you? Lori already told you, didn’t she? Bitch.” Ryan smacked the table with his hand. “She promised me, no matter what, she wouldn’t tell. Not even you.”

“She didn’t tell me anything, I swear. Look, just...let’s call this even. I leave, I don’t say anything, you don’t owe me any money. Deal?”

Nikki’s heart thudded in her chest, her breathing shallow. Ryan watched her, a terrible predatory glint in his usually unfocused eyes. It unnerved her completely, sending a thrill of fear along her spine. She wanted to run, but fear

made her stand still, waiting.

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, he backed away. “Say anything, and you’re dead. Got it?”

Nikki shook her head. She grabbed her purse and slipped past him, bolting out the door and down the front stairs, tripping and stumbling down the sidewalk into the pouring rain.

*

Jax walked through the room, a hush

falling across the pack members. Everyone was in the living room, including Bec, standing sullenly in the back of the room, arms folded across his chest. Jax caught his eye and Bec looked away. They'd had almost no conversation since the night before.

“Most of you already know the thing has been tracked to an apartment, where it's apparently been living, at least for the past few days. It wasn't there last night...but that doesn't mean it won't come back. I think it wants is the girl who lives there, either to kill her or it's fixated on her as some kind of obsession. There's no way of knowing.”

There was a murmur through the pack and then Bec stepped forward. “The girl you’ve been sleeping with? That girl?”

Jax clenched his jaw, brows drawing together in a frown, meeting Bec’s disapproving gaze. “Yeah, Bec. Nikki’s apartment. You know that, you were there.” Jax looked around the room at the rest of the pack. Finn and Angela were the only members not staring open-mouthed at him.

“This wasn’t where or how I wanted to announce this, but I’ve chosen a mate. Some of you have met her.” The murmurs grew louder, a few members smiling at him from around the room.

Finn nodded from his seat and Angela smiled broadly, giving him a thumbs up. But the mood quickly returned to all business as Jax spoke.

“And Bec, this is my pack and my meeting. If you can’t keep quiet, then you’re free to leave.”

Jax looked at Bec, their eyes locked for what seemed an eternity. But Jax wasn’t about to back down again. His little brother was out of line and Jax had had enough.

It was Bec who finally looked away, turning his head and dropping his eyes.

“Fine. Then here’s what we’re going

to do. Tonight a group of us goes back to the apartment, do a thorough search for any trace of the thing. And then we track where it's gone from there. The scent isn't fresh, but it's so unmistakable we should be able to find where it's gone."

The members grew animated with the promise of a hunt and a clear directive. It's what they wanted, what they craved and what he'd been lacking in giving them. Especially now, with this creature out there.

Jax answered questions, keeping an eye on Bec. He remained sullen, standing in the back of the room. Jax didn't want to feel sorry for Bec, but it

was hard. He was still his younger brother, no matter what, and he still wanted to look out for him, to protect him. But that wasn't going to do either of them any good. He had another idea.

The pack was starting to filter out of the room, guys going off to do whatever they needed to do to get ready. They'd head out just after dark, in just under an hour. Jax worked his way through the pack, finding Bec.

"I want you to come with me tonight."

"Checking up on me again? Keeping me under your watchful eye?" Bec's voice dripped with scorn.

“Far from it. I want the best with me. You hunt like no other. If we’re going to track this thing and corner it, I want you with me.”

Bec had sometimes been easy to manipulate, but every so often he saw through the ruse. Tonight, he lapped up the praise. It was true, no doubt. Bec was an excellent tracker. But Bec was also right; Jax did want to keep him under close supervision.

“Meet me here in an hour, okay? I’ve got an errand to run. And then we’ll head out.” Jax slapped Bec on the back and strode out of the room.

Jax wanted to find Nikki, make sure she was back here at the house before they left for the hunt. He'd make sure the pack kept her safe. There would be mates left behind and Jax had no doubt they were just as capable as the guys in taking care of Nikki.

And with any luck, they'd find their prey and this nightmare would end, once and for all.

*

Nikki wanted to be with Jax, more

than anything, but Lori's apartment was so much closer. And maybe she could bum cab fare from Lori and get to Jax's house, if Lori wasn't still mad at her from the argument the other day.

She ran through the rain, her shoes soaked, slipping on the wet sidewalks, splashing through puddles as she crossed the street. She bolted up the stairs of Lori's building, breath rasping in her throat, heart thudding in her chest. When she finally got the door open she darted inside, locking the door and fumbling the security chain in place.

"What the hell?" Lori came out of the kitchen, hands on her hips. "Someone

chasing you?”

Nikki stumbled into the living room and collapsed on the couch. It was a minute or so before she caught her breath, before she could speak.

“Ryan...he’s...there’s something really wrong with him.”

Lori dropped into the chair by the couch, lighting a cigarette. “Yeah. He’s kind of sleazy.” She blew out a stream of smoke, her eyes on Nikki. “Did he offer to give you a tattoo for free? I hope you turned that shit down.”

Nikki shook her head. “No. Not that. Much more than that. And you know

what he is, Lori, he said you knew.”

Lori sat back, crossing her legs.
“Oh.” She breathed out a frustrated sigh.
“Bastard. Can’t keep a secret, can’t control himself.” She took a long drag from the cigarette.

“So did he hurt you or just scare you?” Lori’s voice was way too calm for this and it set Nikki’s teeth on edge.

“What the hell difference does that make? You sent me to him...
this...*creature* of a man. A sick, twisted man at that... wanted me to put out in order to get paid before changing into a beast... right before my eyes! And you

knew, Lori. You knew all about him.”

Lori looked away, tapping her cigarette into the ashtray. “Yeah. I knew some of that...not all.”

“What do you mean, not all? Let’s start with what you didn’t know about Ryan and work our way backward.”

“I didn’t know he would try to get you to put out rather than pay you. That’s low, even for Ryan.” Lori was quiet for a minute, brow furrowed. “He’s never been interested in sex, as far as I knew. Always more interested in getting high. Must have expanded his horizons lately. Or, he’s obsessed with you.” Lori

regarded her for a minute. “I bet it’s you...he did say you were the best dancer at the club, the one he always remembered. Maybe he thought he had some chemistry with you or something.”

“But you knew about the rest? That he’s a...*lycanthrope*?”

Lori hesitated a moment, eyes locked with Nikki. “How do you even know what that is?” She leaned forward. The suspicion and mistrust in Lori’s voice, her posture, the look she gave Nikki, cut her right to the bone.

“Did Jax fill you in on the details? Or...shit...” And then Lori’s eyes went

wide, her face going pale.

“Did you tell Jax about Ryan? Holy shit, if you did...” Lori’s voice was panicked and Nikki could see the pulse beating at the base of her throat. She was spooked, either scared of Ryan or of Jax. Nikki suspected Ryan; she didn’t think Jax was much of a threat to Lori. A pissed off lycanthrope would have to be more dangerous than just some guy Nikki was sleeping with.

Nikki shook her head, frowning.
“Huh? No. Other way round.”

“So...your wolf told you about lycanthropes?”

It was Nikki's turn for wide eyes, for her heart to skip a beat...skip several beats, and her stomach drop. "How the hell did you know about Jax?" Her voice was barely above a whisper.

"The wolf scent is all over him. I could smell his scent from a mile away. Powerful...very, very powerful. I knew from the first time I saw him, back at the club." Lori shrugged. "I thought he would be all kinds of bad for you, just a wolf in a man's clothing. Maybe I was wrong. He's at least better than some of your boyfriends."

"His scent? You said, way back when, that he smelled divine."

Lori snorted. “Yeah. Well, I’ll while we’re hashing out secrets and lies, let me share one of my own.” She leaned forward, stubbing out her cigarette, staring at Nikki through a haze of cigarette smoke. Lori held Nikki’s gaze for a moment and then she smiled.

Nikki recoiled, pulling her legs up beneath her, scooting back into the corner of the couch. Lori had fangs, sharp canine teeth, top and bottom, extending up from the rest of her teeth. Long and white, and very wolf-like. She held up her hands, her fingernails curved and sharp claws.

“Lori...I...why? How long?” Nikki’s

heart resumed beating, very fast, the sound of blood rushing in her ears so loud she was sure Lori could hear her. And, judging by the evidence in front of her, Nikki was pretty sure Lori could hear her heart pounding away in her chest.

Lori sat back, the nails and teeth slowly receding. “Seems like forever, but sometime after high school, after you moved out and got your own place.”

“Who did this to you?” Nikki tried to breath, tried to let some of the tension out of her body. But her mind was racing in a million directions, her thoughts shattered like glass. This was someone

she'd known since they were little. Someone she'd trusted, who knew her. And it turns out, was a complete stranger herself. Hell, Jax telling her he was a werewolf was nothing to hearing from her best friend that she was a lycanthrope.

“Ryan did it.” Lori shrugged. “He was my dealer, for a long time. And then one day, I almost overdosed. Was seconds away from death, bright white light, the whole thing. And he changed right there and bit me... to save me, I guess. So here I am.”

Every emotion she thought she could have coursed through Nikki. She felt pity

for Lori, angry with Ryan, sad that she'd never known this, regret for not being there for her friend. But most of all she was just confused.

“Save you? ...But you've never... I've never seen you change.”

“I don't usually. And never in front of anyone. Sometimes I get restless and go out at night, but not often. I don't have the need, anymore. But when I was using, it was harder. I couldn't control myself...” She tilted her head, regarding Nikki. “You remember. You used to call me a hellion, tell me I was a loose cannon.”

Nikki nodded. At the worst times when she was using, Lori had disappeared, sometimes for just a day or so, but sometimes longer. She'd never told Nikki where she'd gone or who'd she'd been with. Nikki assumed she'd just holed up somewhere with her dealer or some druggie friends and spent the time high. It broke her heart to imagine Lori, as a wolf, out on the street, doing whatever it was wolves did.

“I got off the drugs because of this... it's almost impossible to control this thing if you're using. Ryan's all fucked up now, in more ways than one. He was probably high today, if he started changing in front of you.”

Nikki nodded, the image of Ryan coming back. “I think he was. He was talking about the sex for pay thing and... then he just went off, grabbing at me, pawing me...and I slapped him.”

Lori winced. “Yeah, that’d set him off.”

She got up, walking into the kitchen. “You want a beer? I think you could use one.”

“Yeah. I guess. So...” Lori came back and handed her a cold bottle, sitting down on the couch. Nikki took a swallow, watching Lori.

“So, Ryan’s a lycanthrope. He bit

you, you're one like him."

"Um-hum." Lori took a drink from her beer. "Pretty cut and dried. Not much intricate detail. They bite, you're one of them."

"And you knew Jax was a werewolf all along?" Nikki shook her head. "I can't believe you kept that secret, that you didn't tell me."

"Not my place to tell you. I didn't want you to fall in love with him...I never wanted that. You know, I can't decide those things for you."

"But you said he was a good guy."

Nikki frowned. “But you don’t like him?”

“I did think he’s a good guy, still do. But he’s still a werewolf and for one night each month, he’s something totally different than what you know now. There’s no going back from that.”

Nikki was quiet for a long moment. She couldn’t keep any more secrets, didn’t want to hold back now that everything else was out on the table. “He asked me to be his mate.”

Lori almost choked on her beer. “You’re kidding? Really? Jesus...you told him no, right? Tell me you left him, got the hell out.”

Nikki didn't answer, didn't need to. She read everything in Lori's face, watched her eyes narrow, saw the disappointment in their blue depths. "You can't become a werewolf, Nikki. It's not what's good for you. Trust me on this."

"But I love him." Why couldn't Lori see how much this meant to her? Why was her best friend the one putting up roadblocks to her happiness?

"And it'll be the hardest thing you ever do, if you stay with him. You don't want that." Lori shook her head.

Nikki frowned at Lori. "You don't

know what I want. I don't think you even know me anymore...and I," she paused only briefly contemplating whether to say it before going forward, "I certainly don't know you at all."

Nikki set her beer on the coffee table and stood up. "I'll come get my stuff later. Just put it all in the duffel, leave it in the hall if you want."

"Where are you going? Back to Jax?" Lori stood, holding her bottle of beer.

"Yeah, I am. Back to Jax...the best thing that's ever happened to me."

Nikki walked down the hall to the apartment door. She stopped with her

hand on the knob and turned around. Lori was leaning against the wall, arms folded across her chest, her face set in hard lines.

“I do care about you, Nikki. But you’re making a mistake. A serious one. I’m looking out for you, like I always have.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t need you to look out for me. Not anymore... not ever again.”

Nikki turned the doorknob and stepped into the hall, closing the door softly behind her. The crash of the bottle hitting the door and the shatter of glass

made her jump, but not as much as she thought she would. Lori had a mean throw and Nikki guessed right about now, a trail of beer was running down the other side of the door, pooling among the broken shards of glass on the floor.

She sighed, headed down the stairs and turned toward the corner. She had no money, and if she remembered correctly, the bus stop she wanted, the bus that would take her to Jax, was two streets over. At least the rain had stopped. She should count herself lucky.

*

Jax tried the door to Ryan's shop, but it was locked. He peered through the rain-streaked glass in the door, but the room was dark. His knocking brought no one.

He turned, trudging back down the damp sidewalk, flipping shut his phone in frustration. Nikki wasn't answering her cell; she wasn't at Ryan's. The only place left was Lori's apartment.

Lori wasn't first on his list of people to see right now, but he cut through the alley behind her building, scaling the low wall that separated a trash filled courtyard from the street. He took the

front steps two at a time, the guys with the bottle, who seemed to be a permanent fixture, missing today. Probably driven inside by the rain.

He knocked on Lori's door. There was a muffled curse from inside and then the sound of locks opening. The door opened a crack and Lori peered out, accompanied by the strong scent of beer.

“Where's Nikki?”

“She's not here. She left...to go back to you.”

Jax looked at Lori closely. Her eyes were red-rimmed. It was hard for him to imagine she'd been crying, but that's the

impression he got.

“She’s not answering her cell. When did she leave?”

“Wait.” The door closed, the sound of the chain being pulled back muffled and then Lori opened the door.

“Watch the glass.”

Jax looked down, stepping around a puddle of beer and shards of a bottle, staying near the door. Lori called over her shoulder to him as she walked down the hall. He frowned. She was barefoot and there was an imprint of her right foot in blood in the hall.

“Here.” She was walking toward him, holding something in her hand.

“Lori, you cut your foot. You should be more...”

“Careful?” She made an unpleasant sound that might have been a laugh. “Here. Take this. It’s Nikki’s cell. Must’ve fallen out of her purse when she was here.”

He took the phone, sticking it in his pocket. “You okay?”

She waved her hand. “Yeah. Fucking great. Like always. You should go...find Nikki. She’s had a bad day.”

“Bad day how?” Lori’s whole demeanor bothered him. He remembered Nikki had told him she and Lori had a fight. Was this still the aftermath of that?

“Guy she works for, he’s just like us, one of the creatures of the night.”

Jax’s stomach dropped. Nothing Lori said could have been further from what he was thinking. And what she told him was unthinkable. “Ryan’s a werewolf?”

“No, not quite. Lycanthrope. You know, the ones who can change at will. The ones who are making your life difficult at the moment. Although he’s not your guy...never has been. I can vouch

for that.”

Jax opened his mouth, one of a hundred questions on the tip of his tongue. But Lori cut him off.

“That’s enough truth for one night. Don’t you have some place more important to be, knowing all that?” She advanced toward him, her eyes over-bright, either from tears or anger at him. He wasn’t sure and he didn’t want to find out. Not with Nikki in potential danger.

He backed down the short hallway, his boots crunching through the glass. Lori leaned against the open door, her face hard.

“One of us has to look out for her. She’s picked you, so, go. Go look after her.”

Jax turned as she slammed the door in his face. He heard the bolt being shot home and the chain and a muffled curse. And then it was quiet. He turned and walked down the stairs to the sidewalk, heading for home.

Chapter Six

The bus stop was down the block from Jax's house. It was dark, the street dimly lit and she hurried toward the big house and the welcoming porch light. The front door was unlocked and she pushed it open, hesitating just inside. The house was oddly quiet, no boisterous guys watching television, just a few voices in the kitchen. She thought she recognized Finn's voice and she headed toward the back of the house, passing through the large living room.

"Hello?" Her voice seemed small in

the large room. There was a noise behind her and she jumped.

“Nikki. What are you doing here?” It was Bec, standing by the window, the streetlight casting a dim glow over his form.

“I was...looking for Jax. Is he here?”

“No. He’s... out. But he should be back soon.” He took a few steps toward her, coming out of the shadows. Everything about him was so similar to Jax, except the blonde hair. And the look in his eyes. They were cold, so unlike Jax’s glowing silver eyes. Bec’s eyes were ice blue, his gaze so intense she

took an involuntary step backward.

“Have a seat. Get comfortable and you can wait for him.” He motioned to an overstuffed chair. “Anything I can help you with?” He sat down on the leather couch, still watching her.

“I was going...I wanted to talk to him. Something happened.”

“You can tell me. I’ll see him later. Or, maybe I can help.” He leaned back against the couch and Nikki decided she could trust him with this. It was important and someone should know what she’d found out about Ryan, that he was a lycanthrope and he’d attacked her.

Jax told her she was the target

“I think I know who the lycanthrope is. The one who’s been attacking people. Jax thought it was obsessed with me, and, well, something happened today.”

Bec leaned forward, his eyes locked on Nikki. “Who is it? Where is he?”

“It’s the guy I work for, Ryan. He’s got a tattoo shop close to where I live. He changed today... right in front of me. He’s a dealer, probably high, and...well, I slapped him. And he attacked me.” Her words were rushed, a furious breath of air escaping her lips as though the faster she told him the better she felt.

The change in Bec was immediate. Every muscle in his body tensed, his eyes almost glowing. He sat up and Nikki leaned back in her chair. He was intimidating and she had a flash of him as the wolf in the alley with Jax. He'd stood his ground with the thing, putting himself between it, and her and Lori.

“Can you take me there? Show me where he is?”

Nikki nodded. “Yeah, I can.”

*

Jax bounded up the stairs. The house was quiet, almost too quiet. He found Finn in the kitchen with Angela, sitting at the table. They both looked tense, Angela's face drawn. Finn sat hunched over, arms resting on the table. He looked up as Jax walked in.

“Where's Bec, the rest of the pack?”

“Most are upstairs, waiting. Bec was here, but he left with Nikki, just a few minutes ago.”

“Left with Nikki? Why? Where did they go?” Why the hell would Nikki leave with Bec?

“I don’t know, something about her workplace.” Finn’s voice was low.

Jax ran his hand over his face, lost in his thoughts. He left the house quickly without further word to Finn, heading back to where he’d just come from, hoping to hell he got there before Nikki and Bec. Nikki was wrong, but Bec didn’t know that.

*

“There. That little house in the middle.”

Nikki and Bec were across the street from Ryan's. The shop was dark, the sign out front turned off. Something was off, but before she could say anything, Bec was pulling her across the street.

“Where does he live? Above the shop?”

“I don't really know. I think there's a stairway in the back room that goes upstairs. I really haven't been anywhere but the front room.”

“Fire escape? Anything like that?”
Bec was looking at the front of the building, sizing up the windows on the first floor.

“Don’t know. Like I said, never got passed the front. But I think...”

She stopped, the sound of breaking glass cutting off her words. Bec had jammed his elbow through the glass on the front door. He waited a moment and when no sound came from inside, or any of the neighboring buildings, he carefully reached through the opening and grabbed the knob, opening the door.

“Come on.”

Nikki looked over her shoulder as Bec pulled her into the cramped front room. It was just as it was when she’d left, one of the chairs on its back on the

floor. Bec was prowling around the small space, moving behind the beaded curtains.

“This? What is it?” His voice was barely audible and she strained to hear him.

“Where he...does business. Tattoos, if he did them. Sells drugs.” She trailed after Bec as he moved further into the room.

“That’s the door upstairs.” Bec pointed and Nikki saw the open door, the first few stairs visible, the rest disappearing into the darkness. Bec turned to her, something shiny in his

hand. She backed up, stumbling over a box on the floor.

“Here, take this.” He pushed something into her hand. She looked down; it was a knife, long and shiny and very heavy.

“What the hell is this?” She stared down at the knife, the intricate carvings on the handle, the heavy blade catching the light.

“It’s silver. Works on werewolves, not so much on lycanthropes. It might slow him down, if you’re attacked.”

“But I’m not going up there...no way

in hell. I didn't sign on for this, just to bring you here. You're the hunter, I'm just the.... I'm not going up there."

Nikki backed out of the room, Bec's eyes locked on hers. The anger in his look was almost palpable and she was suddenly almost as afraid of him as she had been of Ryan. She didn't think he'd hurt her, but suddenly none of this seemed like a good idea.

She turned, wanting to go back out to the street. But before she was through that damned beaded curtain, an arm wrapped around her neck, pulling her back. She instantly recognized the smell of unwashed body and dirty hair. It was

Ryan, in human form...more or less.

The lights in the tiny room came on suddenly, blinding her for a moment. There was a shout, Bec's voice loud in her ear and then another voice, a woman. It was Lori.

Against her neck she could feel Ryan changing, fur replacing skin, talons digging into her neck. His chest heaved and twisted beneath her back and she was suddenly lifted off the floor, her feet dangling. She wanted to scream, but the hold he had on her, and the fear she felt kept her from making any sound.

"Let her go. She's not who you really want." Lori's voice was cold, her words

clipped. Ryan spun around, Nikki's feet swinging like a puppet's, as he turned to face her.

“You...bitch. You fucked me over with this one, didn't you? Ruined everything.”

His hot breath rasped against her cheek and for a moment, Nikki thought she would vomit from the stench of his breath. He kept talking but his words grew garbled, changed into grunts and barks and then snarls. His teeth were dangerously close to her cheek and she tried to pull away. But his grip was like steel and there was nothing she could do.

Suddenly something warm sprayed

across Nikki's face and she found herself on the splintery wooden floor, gasping for breath. She ran a hand across her face, horrified when it came away red with blood.

The bellow behind her told her it was Ryan's blood. She scrambled away on all fours, heading toward Lori. She sat down finally, looking over her shoulder.

Bec lunged at Ryan with a large silver knife, much larger than the one he'd given Nikki. With practiced ease he swung at Ryan's neck. But Ryan raised one hairy limb, deflecting the blade, knocking the knife from Bec's hand.

"Shit..." Bec spat out the word,

crouching low as Ryan advanced, swiping long front legs tipped with razor sharp claws at Bec. He lost his footing, falling back on his hands, crab-crawling away from the raging Ryan.

Nikki looked up at Lori, crouched in her own feral stance. And made a decision.

“Lori, here!” Nikki thrust the knife at Lori. Lori looked down for a second, then grabbed the knife, leaping toward Ryan. Bec was on his back on the floor now, arms up, waiting for Ryan to attack.

Lori sunk the blade between Ryan’s shoulders, the blade going in to the hilt. Bec was instantly on his feet, looking for

his knife.

“Get her out of here!” Lori was twisting the knife as Ryan flung his arms behind him, desperately trying to dislodge the knife. But Lori held on to the blade, teeth clenched, not giving an inch.

“I said get her out...”

There was a crash from the outer room and Jax was there, pulling Nikki out of the room. The last thing she saw was Lori, covered in what Nikki hoped was Ryan’s blood, both hands clasped around the handle of the knife.

She met Nikki’s eyes for a moment,

held her gaze and for an instant Nikki knew everything was good between them. There was a hint of a smile on Lori's face.

Then Ryan tossed his head back, hitting Lori in the forehead. She staggered, the knife coming loose. In that instant, Jax pulled Nikki out of the room. He practically flung her down the front steps, pushing her to the sidewalk.

"Are you hurt? Is this your blood?" He was peering at her in the dim light from the lone streetlight down the block.

Nikki shook her head. "No, I think it's all Ryan's. Jax...Lori's in there. Help her."

Jax looked back up the stairs. “Bec is there too. Stay here. Do not move.” He kissed her quickly and then was gone, up the stairs into the shop and out of sight.

Nikki stood on the sidewalk, fidgeting, shifting from one foot to the other. It had started to rain again and she was soon soaked to the skin. Her teeth began to chatter and she hopped up and down, trying in vain to warm herself.

The sound behind her made her blood run cold, chilling her even more than she already was. When the smell washed over her, she froze. Her heart thudded painfully in her chest and without turning she knew exactly what was behind her.

She was paralyzed, wanting to run, wanting to scream for Jax or Lori or Bec. But her throat clicked, her mouth suddenly dry.

The click of a claw on the sidewalk sent her in motion. She turned left, almost running into the creature. It skidded sideways and she finally found her voice, a piercing scream coming from her lips.

Jax was in the shop and she wanted him, but the wolf-thing was between her and Jax. She didn't think she could outrun this thing for very long, if at all. But the only other place she could think of was Lori's apartment. Nikki spun

around, adrenaline flooding her body. She ran faster than she'd ever done in her life, ducking down the alley that ran next to Lori's apartment.

She was too afraid to look behind her, all her concentration on not slipping on the wet pavement. The dark opening of the alley appeared and she ducked into it, knocking over a garbage can. The booming sound sent her heart into over-drive and her chest felt like it was going to explode.

And then she saw it. The wall at the other end of the alley. She'd assumed it went straight through, to the street. But some asshole had built a wall. She was

trapped, in a garbage-strewn courtyard a stone's throw from Lori's apartment.

Nikki jumped at the wall, but it was too tall for her to get a handhold. She looked around frantically for something to stand on, dragging over a box. But the rotten wood gave way as soon as she stepped on it, sending her sprawling on the dirty wet cement.

She heard the wet slobbery growl of the creature before she saw it. Lying on the pavement, looking up, it was horrific, yellow fangs; the neck covered in matted fur and dried blood. She could see what looked like gaping wounds, old and crusty, but still oozing blood.

It was Arden, still caught between death and life. And now he was apparently intent on ending hers.

He lunged and she rolled, landing on her side, his fangs biting the air where she'd just been. As she lay on the pavement, he stood on his hind legs, lifting his deformed muzzle to the sky. The sound he made was far from anything Nikki had ever heard.

With lightning speed he swept his arm forward catching her under the waist with his forearm, his long claws cutting easily through her jacket and shirt, the pain searing her skin. She cried out and then she was flying through the air.

The crash knocked the breath out of her, the pavement gritty under her face. She took a breath, but nothing happened. She tried again, her lungs refusing to work. The world faded to gray and then even that disappeared. The last thing she heard was the sound of the thing, a sound like a laugh. But that couldn't be right. Laughter was the wrong sound. But then even that was gone.

*

“Go! Find her!” Lori was screaming at Jax. Nikki’s scream still echoed in his

head.

Ryan was still fighting Bec and Lori, both of them covered in Ryan's blood. Bec had finally gotten his knife, driving it repeatedly into Ryan's throat. But Ryan was still incredibly strong.

"Go...we've got this." Bec was waving him off, twisting the knife. Jax took one last look and then turned, bolting down the stairs and out into the street.

Nikki was gone and his heart stopped. Then he heard the faint sounds of a fight, a body hitting the ground and a sound that turned his blood cold. The sound of laughter.

He knew exactly where she was and he took off at a dead run. The alley was there before he realized it and he skidded into the narrow opening.

Nikki was on the ground, the creature standing over her. She wasn't moving but Jax had no time to do anything but hit the creature with all his force. It took both of them down, Jax rolling over with the creature, its stench washing over him.

There was nothing he could do for Nikki except kill this thing. With more strength than he thought possible he threw the thing off of him, jumping to a crouch. Instantly he went for its neck,

digging his fingers into the matted fur, finding the wound inflicted so many years ago.

He dug his fingers into the creature's neck, twisting, feeling fresh blood spurt from the torn jugular vein. The thing made a horrible gurgling noise, twisting feebly beneath him, waves of blood running over the ground, covering everything in a scarlet sheen.

It was over, more quickly than he'd thought possible. He sat back, looking down at the ruined creature beneath him. The matted fur was wet, with rain and blood. Its chest drew one last shallow breath and then was still.

Jax stood up, casting one last look over the thing. And then he ran to Nikki. She was breathing, but barely. He gently turned her on to her back, easing her upright. Her eyes opened and she looked at him.

“Jax...” Her voice was just a whisper. “I knew you’d find me.”

“Shhh...don’t talk. We need to get you to a hospital.” He tried to pick her up but she shuddered in his arms, her eyes rolling back in her head.

“No! Nikki...” He shook her gently. “Come back to me...come on, Nikki. Open your eyes.”

Her eyelids fluttered, but remained closed. He suddenly heard Bec's voice in the alley and then his brother was beside him.

“She's not going to make it Jax. You've got to blood her, now. You've got no choice, brother.”

Jax looked at Bec, crouched next to him, soaked in Ryan's blood. “I...I can't.”

He looked back at Nikki. Her eyes were open and she was looking at him, her eyes glazing over, her body going limp.

“Jax. I'm ready. Take me...please.”

Jax nodded, stroking her cheek.
“Bec...brother, help me. Hold her steady.”

Bec held her against him and Jax pulled open her jacket and shirt. He'd never contemplated biting someone before. The hunters he'd killed he'd just savaged. This was different. *Very different.*

Gently he turned her head, exposing her neck. He bent toward her, his teeth grazing her soft, delicate skin. With as much care as he could, he bit into her warm flesh. The coppery taste of her blood filled his mouth and he held himself against her a moment, gently

licking the wound.

He sat back, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Bec looked up at him, brows drawn together.

“She should start healing.”

Jax pulled off his jacket wrapping Nikki in it. She was cold to his touch, the rain hitting her face. He rocked her gently, waiting for some kind of sign; anything that would tell him biting her had worked.

After what seemed an eternity she stirred in his arms, her eyes opening.

“Nikki...” Jax ran a gentle hand down

her cheek.

“Jax... am I going to be okay?”

“Yeah, baby, you’re going to be okay. How do you feel?” He brushed a strand of hair away from her face.

“Better. Weak...but better.” She closed her eyes for a moment, then spoke without opening them. “Jax?”

He smiled. “Yes?”

“Can you take me home now?”

“Home?”

“Home...with you. Where I belong.”

Epilogue – Full Moon

The full moon was still several minutes away. Nikki had been pacing anxiously for the last hour, complaining that her bones hurt, her skin didn't fit anymore...all the classic signs the moon was exerting its pull on her, starting the change in her body.

“I know, Nikki. I know. There's nothing you can do. But if you relax, it will be easier.”

Jax longed to take the pain away, to make this an easier transition, but he knew that wasn't possible. Every human who was blooded went through this, their first time. He still went through it, each full moon, but he'd grown accustomed to that moment of pain, when his body was held for that briefest second between human and wolf.

"I want my clothes off." She was pulling at her t-shirt, almost frantic to get it off her body. He took the hem, pulling it over her head. He'd explained she'd need to be naked and was surprised by her sudden modesty. She'd insisted on remaining clothed, telling him she'd brought extra clothes for...after.

She tugged her jeans down her legs, kicking them away in frustration. Jax took off his shirt and pants, the tug and pull of the moon stronger now, the thrill of imminent change running through his own veins.

“Oh, fuck, Jax. This is happening now. I don’t...I’m not sure...don’t leave me.” She was standing in front of him, every muscle taut, eyes wide. He reached out, grabbing her hands.

“I’m right here, Nikki. Look at me, just keep looking at me. Listen to me. Okay? It’s going to be okay.”

And then it started. He watched in

amazement as her body began to shift, his own body mimicking hers, bones elongating, muscles stretching. He saw her fangs extend as he felt the pain of his own tearing through his gums.

Her hands were changing, the fingers contracting, the palms growing larger against his, her soft skin turning into the pads of a wolf paw. Her nails clawed against him, raking over his own leathery-skinned paw.

She was still looking at him, her eyes still Nikki, the last human part of her. She lifted her head, opened her mouth and a sound forced its way between her lips. It was somewhere between a

scream and a bark, and then, as the scream was taken over by a pure howl, she dropped to her knees.

His own pain intensified and Jax threw his head back, releasing his own howl. He dropped on all fours and lifted his head.

Across from him, standing on the carpet was the most beautiful wolf he had ever seen, sable fur touched with fire, amber and ruby highlights winking in the soft light.

*

The pain was unbearable and she thought she was going to pass out. She wanted to scream, cry out, do *something*, but nothing worked. The bones in her arms and legs, her spine, everything was pulling, shifting, becoming something else. The rushing sound in her head grew louder, blocking out Jax's words, blocking out her own thoughts. The only thing she registered was pain, intense and all-consuming. She threw her head back, her throat working convulsively.

There was a sound, sounds, screams and barks and then a howl. It grew

louder and she was dimly aware it was coming from her own mouth. The pain was too much and she fell, dropping to the carpet, expecting...

It was gone. The noise, the pain...the unendurable pain. Gone. She felt... amazing. There was no other word for it. There was a brief instant where she wondered if she had died, but she felt far too alive for that.

She was looking at Jax's room from a skewed perspective, shapes recognizable but different, somehow. Things were gray, but sharp and clear, clearer than they ever had been.

Nikki drew in a breath and blinked in

surprise. Everything smelled, the air even had a scent. She wrinkled her muzzle, trying to take it all in.

There was a noise beside her and she turned. *Jax*. She recognized him instantly, the silky black coat and those beautiful silver eyes. She wanted to tell him how she felt, but the only noise she heard were her own whimpers and whining. She shook her head again.

But then he rubbed against her, his body warm, sleek and powerful. He led her down the stairs, through the darkened house and outside.

And then, in the moonlight, everything was perfect. It was just them, the two of

them. And beneath the moon, they ran.

$$\sim * \sim * \sim$$

About The Author

Adriana Hunter writes stories for those who live to dream. Her stories run the gamut, from romance, fantasy, paranormal to captivating stories of seductive medieval nights, and wild, adult fairytales.

If you are fascinated by unique tales Adriana will deliver on her promise to create spellbinding stories that will tantalize your senses and provoke your imagination.

<http://www.AdrianaHunter.com> &
<http://www.SpicyTales.com>